

A TALE OF TWO COQUETS.

COQUET 1.

My grandfather, Birtley Botcherby, was Chief Engineer Officer of the British flag steam powered cargo ship Coquet in 1899 and, on October 16th, the ship was steaming eastwards out of the Atlantic in rough weather when, in position about 10 degrees west and 58.05N, i.e. to the west of Lewis, there was a loud knock and the main engine started racing. The engine was stopped and an inspection of the shafting revealed no problem but looking over the counter it was seen that something must have struck the propeller which had lost all four blades.

Despite rigging a jury staysail and a sea anchor the ship drifted north west towards the Faero Islands. On the 20th October they were sighted by a barque the Captain of which provided potatoes and a case of meat and stated he would report the drifting Coquet as soon as possible, this obviously being before the advent of radio.

On 23 October the ship drifted within sight of Monk Rock (Munken), the southernmost point on the Faero's and to avoid foundering the engine was worked in the hope that the remaining stubs of the propeller would have some effect and in conjunction with the sails keep the ship clear of the rocks. The ship just passed the broken water but some sails were lost.

Westerly gales pushed the ship towards the Shetland Islands until 29 October when it was sighted by another steamer SS Berwick which took Coquet in tow using a 3.5" wire rope which broke later the same day. On the 30th the Coquet's crew using oil drums, floated down a 5" wire and two new 6" manilla ropes and a second tow was attached but these ropes snapped the next day. SS Berwick stood by until 4th November whilst carrying out her own engine repairs at which time a third tow was organised using 5" and 3.5" wire ropes. Early morning on 5th November these last ropes parted and the Berwick signalled that she had to leave as she was running low on coal. It was hoped the Berwick could send a tug to the rescue. At this time the position was 61.46N, 0.05E, well north of the Shetlands. Ironically, when the 2nd attempted tow broke on 2nd November, the ships were almost within sight of Lerwick on the Shetlands. The ship drifted further north and east for many more days until 18th November when it was agreed by Captain and crew that they should abandon the ship and take to the two well provisioned lifeboats. A day or so later one of the boats, which contained about half the crew including the Captain and my Grandfather, was found by Norwegian fishermen and brought into Kristiansund where they recovered from exposure before returning to England. The other boat, commanded by the Chief Officer, was never found.

The Coquet continued to drift and was eventually wrecked on the coast at Brakvar and presumably considered a CTL.

Back in England, the owners of Coquet, having not heard from their ship considered she was overdue and presumably lost and had informed next of kin accordingly...

My Grandmother had therefore considered herself a widow and a memorial service to her lost husband had been held in Thornhill Methodist Church, Sunderland. My mother was born on 26 September 1899 and hence was considered orphaned at birth.

However, there was great joy when Grandfather returned home safely and a year or so later, a son was born and christened Birtley Henry Botcherby, the Henry being after the Coquet's Captain who shared Grandfather's ordeal in the lifeboat.

(Birtley Henry, my uncle, became a marine engineer and was eventually Chief Superintendent, New Construction, of Shell tankers.)

COQUET 2.

It would seem that the Coquet's owners, The Mercantile Steamship C. of London, built another ship of the same name in 1904, and this ship of 4396TDW had a sad and eventful end during WW1 when she was passing through the Mediterranean en route to Rangoon with a cargo of salt. Some 120 miles SE of Malta she was stopped by a German U boat whose crew ransacked the Coquet's stores before setting time bombs which sank the ship. The crew in their lifeboats had to surrender all charts and navigating instruments to the U boat save one lifeboat compass and were told not to leave the area and would be picked up later by a small French steamer. The U boat departed and later, in the dark, a vessel did approach. The survivors set off a red flare to attract attention but the ship steamed away presumably fearing a trap. One boat carried Captain Groom and 16 crew including the 2nd officer, 2nd and 4th engineers, plus deck, steward and engine ratings. The Chief officer's boat carried the balance of the crew but in the storms which followed for several days, the boats became separated and the latter was never again seen.

After over 4 days in bad weather, the captain's boat landed on a rocky beach on the North African coast near Benghazi, whose light they had seen during the night but not recognised due to the lack of charts. One of the crew, a Greek fireman, had earlier, worked for the Tripoli police and had the impression that their landing was some 30 miles east of a small port called Marsa Susa so with the captain's approval he and another fireman, a Swede, set out to walk to an Italian army outpost some 10 miles away.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party built a fire and slept amongst the sand dunes. The following morning they heard gunfire and were attacked by bandit Arabs who killed several of the crew, ordered the remainder to march out of the dunes leaving behind Captain Groom and a Negro seaman, both wounded and considered likely to die.

Some time after this the Greek and the Swede made contact with the Italian outpost in the Jabal Akhdar hills and explained the situation. The Italians took them on horseback to the port of Marsa Susa; here the naval authorities dispatched a tugboat to patrol the coast and search for the remaining crew. They found the abandoned lifeboat but no crew until the wounded Captain was sighted. He, the Negro and the bodies of three dead sailors were taken back to Marsa Susa. After recovery in hospital the captain was returned to England via Malta by the end of March.

Meanwhile, the bandits had led their captives to a cave already occupied by regular Senussi soldiers who took over control of the prisoners when they heard of the bad treatment they had received at the hands of the bandits. The Senussi had been fighting the Italians for years but had no quarrel with the British (despite Italy and Britain being allies in WW1) so treated the crew well before taking them on a long march to the town of Djabia which was the HQ of Sheik Idris of Djabia. Here they were detained for some time until they heard news that their captain was not dead but in England and that they would now be taken by camel to Zwedina on the coast; it would appear that some negotiations had taken place between the Sheik and the Governments of Egypt and the UK as a 500 ton steamer flying the Egyptian flag was at anchor. A boat from this vessel came ashore carrying a British army colonel, an RNVR lieutenant and an Egyptian army bey. The remaining crew of Coquet, now only numbering nine, were taken aboard the ship and eventually returned home.

References. New York Times, 30 March, 1916.

"True tales of Sail and Steam" by Shalimar. Oxford University Press, London 1943.