

FOR VALOUR (1)

In 1998 I was asked by a friend in Cunard, if – during our next annual visit to Ireland – my wife and I would visit the cemetery in Cobh, County Cork and see if the mass graves of the victims of the sinking of the “Lusitania” were being well maintained.

A few weeks later – on a glorious June day – we found ourselves in a quiet little graveyard high on a hill overlooking Cork harbour and, to our delight, we found that the entire area was being lovingly cared for.

As we made our way back to the car I was reading the inscriptions on the tombstones. Many of the graves were those of seafarers lost during WW1 and one, in particular, caught my eye. The inscription:

Mr. Fredrick Daniel Parslow V.C
Master, “Anglo-Californian”
April 14th 1856 – July 4th. 1915

How, I wondered, did Captain Parslow earn the Victoria Cross?

The “Anglo-Californian” was owned by the Nitrate Producers S.S.Co.Ltd. (The Anglo Line) and was normally engaged in the South American nitrate trade. In 1915 she was chartered by the Admiralty to carry 927 horses – for military use – from Montreal to Avonmouth and she was unarmed. On July 4th 1915 the vessel was some 90 miles SW of Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland when she was intercepted by the U.39. The submarine instructed Captain Parslow to stop but the order was ignored and the ship increased to maximum speed. Parslow’s son – also Fredrick Parslow – was Second Officer of the “Anglo-Californian” and he elected to steer the vessel with his father issuing zig-zag instructions to avoid the fall of shot from the submarine. The uneven contest continued for some 90 minutes but, inevitably, the bridge got a direct hit – Captain Parslow was killed but his son survived. Almost immediately, a flotilla of patrol boats from Queenstown arrived, drove off the attacker and the severely damaged ship limped to her destination.

The Victoria Cross was instituted by Royal Warrant in January 1856 “for acts of great valour in the presence of the enemy by the Royal Navy and the Army”. During the Indian Mutiny (1857-1859) the award was extended to “Non-military persons” in recognition of several acts of great bravery by civilians and, that same Royal Warrant – issued in August 1858 – extended the award to those whose bravery “aboard ship” saved life or public property. Obviously, the Admiralty did not consider that this applied to the “civilian” crew members of vessels belonging to the Mercantile Marine and it was not until 1920 that a further Royal Warrant extended the award to “men and women of the forces of the Empire and the Mercantile Marine”

However, the bravery of Captain Parslow (and his son) was now legendary and to enable suitable awards to be made Captain Parslow was posthumously awarded the rank of Lieutenant, Royal Naval Reserve and his son that of Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Naval Reserve.

Thus it was that some four years after the event – on July 10th. 1919 – in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace, King George V presented the Captain’s widow with the Victoria Cross on behalf of her late husband. He was the oldest recipient of the award and the second Mercantile Marine shipmaster to be so honoured. Many thought that Second Officer Parslow deserved a similar award but, in the event, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Shipping records reveal that the “Anglo-Californian” was bought by Cunard almost immediately after her engagement with U.39 and was renamed “Vandalia”. She continued to trade for Cunard for several years but, in June 1918, she was torpedoed when navigating St.George’s Channel. There were no survivors.

Second Officer Parslow continued to serve with Nitrate Producers and was promoted to Master of the “Anglo-Australian”. In March 1938, on passage from Cardiff to Vancouver, the vessel reported that she was off the Azores – and that was the last that was heard from her; she vanished without trace.

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The “Anglo-Californian” renamed “Vandalia” under Cunard