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Papers of Paymaster Alfred Dutton  
relating to H.M.S. Tara

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## Introduction

Early in 1897 the London & North Western Railway Company placed an order with William Denny of Dumbarton for a quartette of identical Cross-Channel express passenger steamers. The first, the 'Cambria', was completed in December 1897, followed by the 'Hibernia' in February 1900, the 'Anglia' in May 1900, and finally the 'Scotia' in April 1902. They each had a tonnage of 1842 tons and a speed of 21 knots.

Upon the declaration of war on 4th August 1914, all four vessels were requisitioned by the Admiralty, and converted into Armed Boarding Ships. Each ship was fitted with three 6 pounder Hotchkiss guns (two placed forward, and one aft). The cargo holds were adapted to increase the coal bunkering from 80 to 500 tons, and all the vessels were repainted in war-grey. This work was carried out by the Marine Department Workshops in Holyhead, and was completed in ten days.

Provisions for two months were stored aboard, and the ships' crews were doubled in number. The overall command of each vessel was given to a retired Royal Naval Captain, who also had a small staff of naval gunners and signalmen. The peace-time Master was responsible for the navigation and internal organisation of the ship.

H.M.S. 'Anglia' and H.M.S. 'Cambria' joined the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow in Scotland. To avoid confusion with an existing warship, the 'Hibernia' was renamed H.M.S. 'Tara' and was detailed for patrol duty in the northern channel of the Irish Sea, while H.M.S. 'Scotia' patrolled the southern channel. And so, the four 'Kingdom' ships of the L & N.W. Railway fleet went to war.

In April 1915, the 'Anglia' was converted into a hospital ship, and in the July the 'Cambria' was similarly converted, both for service between England and France. Also in July 1915, the 'Scotia' was transferred for service in the Eastern Mediterranean, followed by the 'Tara' in the October.

The newly refitted and painted 'Tara' arrived in Alexandria in October. Here another officer joined the ship, an interpreter called Basile Lambrinidis, who became known as Basil. He was a Syrian-Greek by birth, and spoke many of the local languages. A ship's mascot was also acquired; a little fox-terrier was fished out of the harbour and christened 'Paddy' by the crew. The ship's crew now numbered 104.

Her first patrol lasted eight days. Her orders kept her well clear of the coast to the west of Alexandria for most of the time, but she had to make a daily call at the Port of Sollum. Here was a small British-held garrison, on the frontier between Egypt and Libya. It was over-looked by the Libyan Heights, where thousands of Senoussi Arab tribesmen, trained and led by

Turkish officers, were camped. They were well armed and poised ready for an attack on Sollum, and the British troops could have required evacuation at any day.

Twelve miles along the coast, north of Sollum, was the Turkish-held port of Bardia (also known as Port Sulieman). Here was a land-enclosed bay with a narrow entrance, where, unknown to the British, German U-boats regularly called with arms and supplies, and sometimes with German agents.

For her second patrol, the 'Tara' was detailed to relieve R.M.S. 'Lanka', who was covering the approaches to the Gulf of Sollum, to prevent surface craft delivering supplies to the Turks. She left Alexandria on 3rd November 1915.

On the morning of 5th November 1915 she was approaching Sollum for her daily check on the garrison. She was unaware that the German submarine, U-35, commanded by Kapt. Lt. Kophamel, had been lying in wait for her for four hours. At 10.10 a.m. the mast-head look-out, W. H. Parry, shouted a warning but it was too late and the 'Tara' was already doomed. The torpedo struck her starboard side, and she began to settle. While three undamaged lifeboats were being lowered, the U-35 surfaced about 500 yards away. The 'Tara' opened fire, forcing her to dive for safety. But within eight minutes of being struck, the ship sank, and twelve of the crew were lost.

The lifeboats picked up the men from the water, along with the body of Walter Jackson, Chief Cook. Then the 92 survivors began to row towards Sollum, and safety, some 8 miles distant. However, the U-Boat surfaced about 2 miles away, and with her guns trained on them, she approached and ordered them to pull alongside. The U-35, with the boats in tow, then proceeded to Bardia, where the Commander handed over his prisoners to the Turkish Commander-in-Chief of the Senoussi Army.

In the evening of their first day in captivity the crew buried the body of their shipmate on the deserted beach at Bardia. For the next two days they were made to march inland to the summit of a plateau about 600 feet high, eventually arriving at the ruins of an ancient Roman Settlement. The ship had sunk so quickly that the crew had been unable to gather any belongings, and many had to walk barefoot or with little or no clothing. William Thomas, an elderly Quartermaster, had a badly fractured leg, and had to be carried on a make-shift stretcher.

This campsite was named 'Caves' after the numerous large holes in the rock face, in which they had to sleep at night. Some provisions arrived by camel, and most of the prisoners were issued with Arab clothing and blankets,

along with a small glass tumbler, a metal spoon and basin, and a few pots and pans for cooking. The daily food rations were 1 1/2oz. rice, 1/4oz. tea, 1/2oz. sugar and one biscuit. Water was limited and only used for drinking and cooking.

By the eighth day of captivity W. Thomas' condition had deteriorated so much that a Turkish doctor, assisted by Doctor Arthur, the Tara's surgeon, amputated the leg. No surgical instruments were available, so the operation was performed using a pair of scissors and without anaesthetic. Unfortunately Thomas died of shock a few hours later and was buried the following day.

After a week at the 'Caves' the prisoners were ordered to march again. This time their destination was the ancient Roman well site at Bir Hakkim Abbyatt, in the Libyan Desert. This trek took eleven days and covered approximately 170 miles, with little food or water. En route, they were joined by four prisoners from the Indian Horse Transport Ship "Moorina", also sunk by the U-35. On one occasion during this march the prisoners were treated with extreme cruelty. After Thomas Owen, a fireman, had escaped, they were force-marched for over forty miles in two days, with no food and only a small allowance of water. Those who fell were urged on with kicks and blows from rifle-butts. Owen was subsequently recaptured and returned to the rest of the crew six weeks later.

They arrived at Bir Hakkim, known Arabic as White Doctor, on 26th November 1915. This desolate and uncharted watering-place in the vast expanse of desert had 2 wells, one of them dry, and a small block-house for stores. In charge of the wells was an old mullah, who was nicknamed 'Holy Joe'. This was their prison camp for the next four months.

The camp was ill-equipped, having only one tattered tent which sheltered about a dozen men, while the rest of the prisoners slept out in the open. The rainy season had begun, and for shelter at night the Senoussi guards forced 78 men into the empty well. This was a small hole hewn out of the limestone ground, large enough for a man to enter, opening into a cavern about 10 feet deep and 16 feet in diameter. With hardly any room to move, the air soon became foul, and some of the men became delirious whilst others suffered from dysentery. They named the well 'The Black Hole'. They had to endure this for four nights until more tents arrived at the camp.

With tents for shelter, the crew organised into messes. This kept morale and discipline at a reasonable level, and also helped with food distribution. During the day their captors set them to work repairing wells at other watering-places some distance from their camp, often a

day's march away.

Their meagre food supply was basically rice, barley-flour, and an occasional meat ration, with a little tea and sugar at first. This was supplemented by snails and herbs which the crew scavenged from the desert. Despite constant promises that proper supplies would be arriving, they never materialised because of the effective blockade of the Turkish-held ports in North Africa by the Royal Navy. Suffering from dysentery and lack of food and medicines, their physical condition deteriorated rapidly. This caused the death of four of their shipmates, who were buried on the perimeter of the camp. They were George M. Cox, Artificer, died 5th January 1916; John Hodgson, Seaman, died 10th January; R.J.S. Williams, Chief Engineer, died 29th January; and Owen H. Roberts, Fireman, died 19th February.

By February 1916, food supplies to the camp had practically ceased, and in desperation to get help, Captain R. Gwatkin Williams, "Tara's" R.N. commander, escaped during the night of 20th February to try and reach the British forces at Sollum. Two days later he was recaptured after covering about 50 miles of the desert. He was taken to the Turkish H.Q. at Gweider before being returned to Bar Hakkim on 29th February. On his arrival back at camp he was severely beaten and imprisoned in a sheep pen.

On 15th March, with only a few days' food rations left, orders were given for Mr L. Dudgeon, Chief Officer, and Basil, the Interpreter, escorted by two Senoussi soldiers and a guide, to proceed to the Turkish H.Q. at Gweider. Here, they were used to negotiate for food supplied from the Italian forces at Port Tobruk. But, unknown to them, their shipmates, whom they had left behind as prisoners at Bir Hakkim had been dramatically rescued and set free on 17th March by the 2nd Duke of Westminster and his armoured cars.

The documents included in this catalogue belonged to Alfred Dutton the paymaster aboard the ill-fated ship and cover the period when the events described happened. They were deposited with the Archives by Mrs Mildred J. Burke, of Holyhead, the daughter of Alfred Dutton.

Official Papers



- 1 1915 Jan. 22 LETTER from J. Bellis at L.N.W.R., Marine Dept., Holyhead to A. Dutton /aboard the Tara?. Hopes that Dutton has not forgotten the pegemoid since the weather is inclement at this time of year.
- 2 1915 Feb. 3 COPY LETTER from W. Thomas, Marine Dept., Holyhead, to Lt. . B. Tanner, H.M.S. Tara. Says that he has cashed the bank draft for £200 and handed the money to a Mr Roberts. He is glad to hear that Mr Dutton is proving a capable paymaster.
- 3 1915 March 26 LETTER from G. R. O. Shaw, Marine Dept., Holyhead to A. Dutton /aboard the Tara?. States that he has not received paysheets 'from your vessel' /the Tara?. for March and would like to have them as soon as possible. Comments on the mess left by Dutton's predecessor and hopes everything from now on will run smoothly.
- 4 1916 March 22 RECEIPTS signed by A. Dutton that he has received ££20 /Egyptian pounds/ from the Accountant Officer of H.M.S. Hannibal.
- 5 1916 March 23 RECEIPT signed by A. Dutton stating that he has received ££170 /Egyptian pounds/ from the Accountant Officer of H.M.S. Hannibal.
- 6 1916 /March/24 LIST of advance payments made to fourteen survivors of H.M.S. Tara.
- 7 1916 April 7 LIST of men who served on the Tara. Written on the bottom 'per Dunluce Castle'
- 8 1916 April 8 LIST of officers and crew of late H.M.S. Tara leaving Alexandria for England.
- 9 1916 April 21 DUPLICATE FORM re requisition for money from the Accountant Officer H.M.S. Vivid to make an advance to the crew of H.M.S. Tara.
- 10 1916 April 24 COPY LETTER from Calthrop at the Grand Hotel, Torquay to Orr at L.N.W.R. Holyhead. Asks that the congratulations of himself and the Directors of the /L.N.W.R.?/ be conveyed to the officers and men of the Tara.
- 11 1916 April 25 LIST of amount of salaries due to certain crew members of H.M.S. Tara and unpaid before and after her loss.
- 12 1916 May 1 LETTER from the Secretary of the Admiralty to Lt. Edward B. Tanner, Marine Dept., L.N.W.R. Holyhead concerning the application for promoting C.W. Birkby to the rank of Warrant Telegraphist.

12 continued

Attached:

COPY LETTER (30 October 1915) from the Secretaries of the Admiralty to the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. Tara. States that the Admiralty are unable to approve the promotion of Cecil W. Birkby.

13 1916 May 2

COPY LETTER from A. Dutton, Assistant Paymaster, late H.M.S. Tara at Holyhead to the Accountant Officer, H.M.S. Victory, Portsmouth, requesting the amounts advanced to ratings of the 'Tara' who landed at Southampton on April 18 1916.

14 1916 May 6

LIST of men from the Tara with particulars of cash advanced to them at Portsmouth.

15 1916 May 6

COPY LETTER from A. Dutton, Assistant Paymaster late H.M.S. Tara to the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen, Tower Hill, London. Asks that certain copies of Discharge Books for seamen and firemen of late H.M.S. Tara be sent to him.

16 1916 May 6

COPY LETTER from A. Dutton, Assistant Paymaster late H.M.S. Tara at Holyhead to the Commanding Officer H.M.S. Pembroke, Chatham. Encloses Medical history sheet of David Williams whom he states never served on board the Tara.

17 1916 May 6

COPY LETTER from A. Dutton, Assistant Paymaster late H.M.S. Tara to the Accountant General of the Navy, London. Refers to a rating [unnamed] who Dutton states was never attached to the Tara.

18 1916 May 6

COPY LETTER from A. Dutton, Assistant Paymaster late H.M.S. Tara to the Accountant General of the Navy, London. Encloses full particulars of cost advanced to the officers of H.M.S. Tara as compensation for loss of personal effects when the ship sunk. Says that list of lost kit will be submitted in due course.

19 1916

LIST of all survivors of H.M.S. Tara who were eligible for compensation.

20 1916 May 8

ROUTE ORDER FORM ordering Hugh Hughes, greaser, and Richard Lewis, fireman to proceed from H.M.S. Victory at Portsmouth to Holyhead.

Attached:

- (i) TOBACCO PERMIT
- (ii) CROSS LUGGAGE FORM
- (iii) TRAVELLING EXPENSE SHEET

- 21 1916 May 9 LIST of cash advanced to crew of H.M.S. Tara.
- 22 1916 May 12 LIST of cash advanced to the crew of the late H.M.S. Tara for the day spent at the Naval Barracks, Devonport.
- 23 1916 May 12 ROUTE ORDER FORM ordering Alfred Hughes and William Black to proceed from H.M.S. Victory at Portsmouth to Holyhead for re-engagement.  
Attached:  
TRAVELLING EXPENSES SHEET of Alfred Hughes and William Black.
- 24 1916 May 17 LIST of the survivors of 'H.M.S. Tara' travelling to London from Holyhead, There they were entertained to lunch by the directors of the L.N.W.R. at the Buston Hotel.
- 25 1916 June 8 MEMO from the Accountant General of the Navy at Whitehall to Asst. Paymaster Dutton R.N.R., Marine Depot L.N.W.R. re George A. Wright a fireman aboard the Tara. States that £13.15.0. was overpaid to Wright who says that he had deposited sufficient funds on board the Tara to cover the overpayment, but that this was lost when the ship sank. The Admiralty would like confirmation of this statement.
- 26 1916 May BILL to Lt. E. B. Tunner for £4 re travelling expenses of 10 Officers from Keysham to Holyhead on 22 April 1916.
- 27 1916 June 1 TELEGRAM from Holland at Holyhead to Dutton c/o Mrs R. Oxley, 203 Owlser Lane, Sheffield. Reads 'return not later 10 a.m. tomorrow'.
- 28 1916 June 10 RECEIPT signed by Lieut. E. B. Tanner that £4 has been received from the Accountant General of the Navy re travelling expenses for 10 officers from Keysham to Holyhead on 22 April 1916.
- 29 1916 June 12 ROUTE ORDER FORM ordering H. James, fireman, to proceed from Portsmouth to Holyhead and there to report to the Marine Superintendent of the L.N.W.R. at the Marine Depot.  
Attached:  
(i) TOBACCO PERMIT of H. Jones  
(ii) EXCESS LUGGAGE FORM
- 30 c/1916? DRAFT LETTER from Lieut. E. B. Tanner to The Accountant General of the Navy at Whitehall re tropical clothing allowance.
- 31 1916 June 24 BILL for tropical equipment allowance for various offices of the late H.M.S. Tara.

32 n.d.

COPY LETTER to the Accountant General of the Navy from Tanner? Acknowledging receipt of cheque for £100 being the tropical equipment allowance for various officers of late H.M.S. Tara. States also that the warrant for C.W. Birkley was applied for in October and that W.G. Manning acted as confidential secretary to Capt. R. S. Gwatkin-Williams as well as assistant for A. Dutton the paymaster. Submits therefore that Birkley and Manning should receive the allowance.

33 n.d.

COPY LETTER re tropical clothing allowance for the officers of H.M.S. Tara. Writer encloses receipt from each officer for the £10 allowance.

34 1916 Sept. 29

LETTER from the Accountant general of the Navy to Assistant Paymaster Dutton, Marine Depot., L.N.S.R. Holyhead requesting that Dutton replies to a letter dated 8 June 1916 relating to George A. Wright, fireman, late H.M.S. Tara.

Attached

(i) COPY LETTER (8 June 1916) from the Accountant General of the Navy to Assistant Paymaster Dutton at Holyhead giving details of Wright's case.

(ii) COPY LETTER (not dated) from A. Dutton at Holyhead to the Accountant General of the Navy stating that he has already replied to the query some time ago and that he confirms Wright's statement.

35 1916 Dec. 28

LETTER from the Accountant General of the Navy at the Admiralty to Alfred Dutton, Drury House, Westminster Road, Hoole, Chester requesting whether a statement made by George A. Wright, fireman, on the late 'Tara', concerning an overpayment of £13.15.0. made to him is correct.

Attached

(i) COPY STATEMENT (May 16 1916) of G. A. Wright, 52 Hooper Road, Euston House, London where he states that he had enough money to cover the over-payment while on the Tara, but with the sinking of the ship on November 5 1915 everything was lost.

(ii) COPY LETTER from Alfred Dutton to the Accountant General of the Navy stating that Wright had informed him of the overpayment and that instructions had been received for Wright to deposit money each week to cover the amount. Before the money could be refunded the Tara was sunk and all cash and correspondence were lost with the vessel.

- 36 1920 Oct. 7 LETTER from the Admiralty to Paymaster Sub-  
-lieutenant A. Dutton, 28 Forth-y-felin,  
Holyhead. States that a favourable entry  
has been made in Dutton's service record  
on the occasion of the sinking of H. M.  
Tara.
- 37 n.d. LIST of ages and salary bill for the officers  
and crew of H. M. S. Tara.
- 38 n.d. CASH BREAKDOWN of money required for wages  
on H. M. S. Tara.  
3 documents

Personal Papers

- 39 1915 Oct. 21 TELEGRAM from Alfred Dutton at Alexandria to Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead, Reads: 'arrived safely all well fon est love'
- 40 1915 Nov. 5 - DIARY Copy kept by Alfred Dutton while a 1916 March 17 prisoner in the Libyan Desert.
- 41 1915 Dec. 24 LETTER from Alfred Dutton c/o General Houry Pasha, Solua, Egypt to Miss Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead. Says that he is trying to keep well and even though they do not expect much for Christmas they 'will do all we can to cheer ourselves up'
- 42 1916 Jan 27 LETTER from Alfred Dutton, late R.M.S. Tara, c/o Resident Naval Officer, Alexandria, Egypt, to Miss Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead. Says he is keeping fine, but longs to be home.
- 43 1916 March 20 LETTER from Alfred Dutton at Ras-el-Tin Military Hospital, Alexandria to Ethel Hughes, at Holyhead. Says that he and his comrades were rescued by the Duke of Westminster on the 17 March after 19 weeks captivity. Hopes to be home soon.
- 44 1916 March 22 LETTER from Alfred Dutton No 7 Ward Ras-el-Tin Military Hospital, Alexandria, Egypt to Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead. Hopes that she has seen the report of the rescue. Says that he is well and hopes to return home as soon as possible.
- 45 1916 March 26 TELEGRAM from Alfred Dutton at the Union Club Alex/andria/ to Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead, Reads: 'Rescued well reply Union Club Alexandria'
- 46 1916 March 28 TELEGRAM from Ethel Hughes at Holyhead, to Alfred Dutton at the Union Club Alex/andria/ Egypt. Reads: 'Indescribable delight all well love Hughes'
- 47 1916 April 15 LETTER from Alfred Dutton aboard SS Trafford Hall to Miss Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead, Says that he is on his way home and hopes to arrive for Easter. Mentions that 23 survivors were sent home by a Hospital ship.
- 48 1916 April 22 TELEGRAM from Alfred Dutton at Devonport to Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth-y-felin, Holyhead, Reads: 'Arrived here safe and well will arrive Holyhead 9.57 pm today fondest love Alf.'

- 49 1916 April 22 TELEGRAM from Willie at Chester to Hughes, 50 Porthyfelin, Holyhead. Reads: 'Alfred will arrive 4.55 please come by mail'
- 50 1916 April 22 TELEGRAM from Alfred Dutton at Chester to Ethel Hughes, 50 Porth y felin, Holyhead, Reads: 'Alf coming home today 5 ock'
- 51 1916 May 13 LETTER from R. B. Roberts, Holyhead Chronicle, 14 Kings Road, Holyhead, to A. Dutton. States that he is returning the diary and thanks the recipient for lending it.
- 52 1916 March COPY LETTER from E. W. Trott at The Manor House, Saughton, Cheshire to Alfred Dutton at Holyhead. States that the Duke is touched by the wish of the survivors of the Tara to make him a presentation but since the Duke is still under military discipline it would be contrary to rules, and that since this is the case it would be better if the presentation was made after the war.
- 53 1919 Aug. 16 7 TIMETABLE of the visit of Tara survivors to Saughton Grange Cheshire the home of the Duke of Westminster,  
7It was here that the survivors presented the Duke with a silver armoured car mounted on a silver casket.
- 54 1919 Aug. 16 7 NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH taken at Saughton Grange, Cheshire when the survivors of the Tara presented the Duke of Westminster with a silver casket.  
L - R Gwatkin Williams, Duke of Westminster, Capt. E. B. Tanner, Lady Mary Grosvenor.  
7In the background 2nd from left is Alfred Dutton7.
- 55 n.d. PROGRAMME of a concert. 7no other details7.
- 56 1915 - 1916 BUNDLE 712 of envelopes addressed to Alfred Dutton.