

Ex-German Destroyer Ashore on Preston Sands and the story of Brixham Life-boatmen's Ordeal

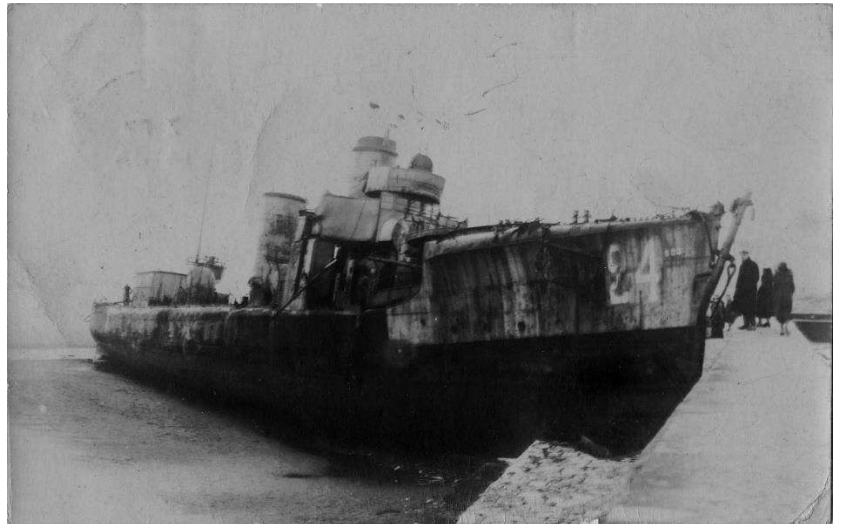
The following is the account given in the "Paignton Western Guardian" of 16 December 1920

"On Sunday (12 December 1920), two surrendered German destroyers, which were being towed from Cherbourg to Teignmouth by the London tug Warrior, to be broken up, put into Torbay for shelter, it being impossible for the tug to make headway up the Channel in the teeth of the gale. The boats had very small crews on board. Anchor was dropped about a mile from the shores of Torquay in what was regarded by seaman ashore in none too favourable a position. Towards evening the wind increased in intensity and heavy snow showers obscured all lights of the craft. About 11 pm the Chief Officer at Brixham Coastguards received telephonic communication that the destroyers had broken adrift. Signals of distress were distinctly heard. The Brixham life-boatmen were summoned by rocket about 11.15 pm and before 11.30 pm the boat was launched under the command of Coxswain W. G. Sanders. The Denaby tug Dencade, also steamed off at full speed to render assistance. The crew of the Board of Trade Life Saving Apparatus, under the command of the Chief Officer of the Coastguards, stood by in readiness for the service until about



12.20 am, when they were dismissed as a telephonic message stated that one destroyer was ashore. The Paignton L.S.A. crew, under C.O. Parvin, rescued the three men comprising the crew after the vessel (*T 189*) had run aground at Roundham Head. The work of the rescue was difficult, as heavy seas were breaking over the wreck. The Dencade was the first to return to Brixham after a thorough search and location of the wreck. The life-boatmen also returned after they had ascertained the other craft was still riding safely at the anchor.

Towards dawn the easterly wind renewed its intensity with snow storm squalls. The other German destroyer (*S 24*) broke adrift and drove ashore at Preston, between Torquay and Paignton. Again the Brixham lifeboat was manned and launched and two Brixham tugs went across the Bay to render assistance while Brixham rocket apparatus was also hurried to Paignton. As there was some difficulty getting a full crew for the Torquay lifeboat, Mr William Brown, a local boatman over 75 years of age, volunteered to be one of the crew. Paignton L.S.A. crew received a second call at 6.30 am and the men on the destroyer were rescued by aid of the breeches-buoy, the work being rendered difficult by the heavy seas. Of the six men comprising the two crews, five are natives of Deal (Kent) and one of Southampton. The Brixham lifeboat reached the vicinity about 8 o'clock.



Brixham Life-boatmen's Ordeal

The life-boatmen underwent a terrible ordeal, the marvel being that what occurred passed without fatality. The boat was under full control and acted most seaworthily when, in the white mass of breaking seas, an unfortunate breaker hit her hard on the starboard side and ere the crew had time to realise their peril she was overwhelmed and capsized. Fortunately she recovered herself magnificently with all her gallant crew safe aboard. Second Coxswain T. Blackmore, who was swept beneath the mizzen sail, saved himself by clutching the mizzen shroud and being pulled aboard by Coxswain Sanders. Bowman W. H. Mogridge also had a thrilling escape. He found himself being lifted bodily out of the water by the main mast, the top of which had come in contact with his life-belt and he had to clamber down the mast into the boat. Only three were not thrown out of the boat, the coxswain W. G. Sanders and Messrs W. Pillar and H. Dalley, the latter two clinging to the weather life lines. All the other owe their lives to tenacious clinging to the life lines. The affair was only a matter of seconds, but it was a nerve-testing ordeal. The men were loud in their praises of the exceptionally cool manner in which Coxswain Sanders controlled the craft. He never faltered in his presence of mind to do the right thing at the right moment. The least hesitation might have caused a terrible disaster, as the craft was only a few lengths from the shore. Immediately the Betsy Newbon righted herself, Coxswain Sanders stayed her, and regained control. His **SPLENDID SEAMANSHIP**, coolness inspired confidence amongst his crew. They cannot speak too highly of his excellent seamanship, and it was the most exacting ordeal he had experienced during the 24 years he has been coxswain. He had the fullest confidence in the self-righting capabilities of the Betsy Newbon, and she did not fail at the crucial moment. On the other hand, Coxswain Sanders has publicly expressed his warmest admiration of the excellent discipline and prompt attention to his orders, factors which he declared brought the lifeboat through a turmoil of bursting white seas. That testing has proved that Brixham has a lifeboat coxswain and crew worthy of the finest traditions of lifeboat work, ready to take the fullest risk in the magnanimous work of "The Red Cross of the Sea." Even after her terrible experience, not one man flinched in determination that the Betsy Newbon should be manoeuvred closer to the destroyer to ascertain if any sailor remained on board, the men being determined to take the fullest risk to save where human life showed any signs of existence.

The crew of the "Betsy Newbon" were Coxswain W.G. Sanders; Coxswain T. Blackmore; Bowman W.H. Mogridge; Crew, F. Tucker, W. Pillar, E. Dalley, A. Stamp, W. Coleman, H. Lovell, A. friend, J. Sparks and J. Holland. When the boat arrived at Brixham, in addition to the usual coffee provided, hospitality shown by Capt. J. Churchill and Mr H.F. Browne, was heartily appreciated. The men were allowed to proceed to their homes for dry clothing before getting the boat into the boathouse.

The affair created quite a sensation in the Town. Amongst the fishermen there was satisfaction at the ready manner in which the lifeboat righted herself.

A Lloyd's message states that the two destroyers are the T 189 and S 24. The former has broken her back and lies on a rock bottom. If the present weather continues she will become a total wreck. The S 24 is lying on a sandy bottom, buckled 30 feet from the stern and (*word unclear*) near the stern. She is high and dry at low water."

In its edition of 6 January 1921, "The Western Guardian" reported that "the wrecks of the two ex-German destroyers lying on the Paignton shore were sold by auction by Mr Ralph Dugdall, in the presence of a large crowd of sightseers. Mr H. Shaw of Brixham purchased both, giving £545 for the S 24 (555 tons) lying off the Preston Sands and £100 for the T 189 (646 tons) resting on the rocks at Roundham Head. "



In its edition of 3 February 1921 reported that "the German destroyer that drove ashore at Preston has been salvaged and towed to Brixham Harbour."

On 3 March 1921 it was reported that condemned British E Class Submarine purchased by Mr W.H. Shaw to be broken up was berthed in the Inner Harbour on Thursday by the side of the German destroyer. Both craft are berthed close to the King Street side of the Harbour.



Footnote: the Betsy Newbon II served as the Brixham lifeboat from 1896 to 1922. She was launched on 56 occasions and saved 46 lives. In 1922 she was sold and used as the yacht Zingari. Subsequently she was wrecked.

Our thanks to PHS member, Paul Hope, who transcribed and provided this article for the Newsletter.