

'Known unto God'

The story of the 'Bones Wreck'

In early June 1915, a little less than a year after the start of World War One, an unarmed British cargo ship called the SS Armenian with a crew of 174 left the American port of Newport News in Virginia, bound for Bristol with a cargo of 1,400 mules destined for the British army in France. At that time the USA was a neutral country and had not yet entered the war on Britain's side. Most of the crew were African American mule handlers. The hardy mules, a cross between a horse and donkey, played a vital war role as pack animals transporting ammunition and supplies from railway depots behind the front line, to British soldiers fighting in the trenches.



The SS Armenian

The SS Armenian reached the Bristol Channel, off the North Cornwall coast and Trevoze Head when the German submarine U-Boat 38 intercepted it and fired two warning shots from its single deck gun across Armenian's bows and signalled it to stop. The master of the Armenian, Captain Irickey, first tried to ram the submarine and then made a run for it, pursued by U-38 which fired a total of 50 shells, causing severe damage to the superstructure, the engine room and disabling the 'Marconi' radio cabin. Captain Irickey took the decision to abandon ship after losing steering and

power, battering down the hold hatches and emptying the ballast tanks to improve buoyancy before the surviving crew launched those lifeboats that had not been destroyed by the German gunfire. There are unsubstantiated reports that some of the American mule handlers chose to remain behind in the ships holds to try and calm their terrified animals but as the lifeboats pulled away from the crippled ship, U-38 fired two torpedoes into the Armenian, sinking it. Trapped inside the ship's hold, all the mules drowned along with any remaining American mule handlers. For over 90 years the position of the Armenian wreck was unknown until a Newquay dive team working on a TV documentary called 'The Bones Wreck' found it approximately 45 miles away from the location originally reported to the Admiralty by the Armenian's crew. Twenty-nine crew were reported killed including twelve American mule handlers.

The connection with Port Isaac came about because the bodies of nine dead sailors were found in the sea by fishermen off Port Isaac harbour and Port Quin. After jury inquests held by the Bodmin coroner Mr John Pethybridge, the bodies were buried in two graves at St Endellion Church in a shaded corner on the car park side of the churchyard furthest from the church and next to the main road. It is believed that seven unknown sailors buried in a single grave without names - 'known unto God' - were what the inquest described as 'men of colour' - what we would now call African Americans. However, according to a report by the Cornish Guardian newspaper of 16 July 1915 held by the Cornish Studies Library archive, one of them was identified by an insurance card as George Smith of Portsmouth, Virginia, USA. No separate grave has been found for Mr Smith so it is assumed he was buried with six others as unknown or 'Known unto God' in the St Endellion mass grave

THE TORPEDOED ARMENIAN, BODIES WASHED ASHORE.

On Saturday Mr. John Pethybridge (coroner), of Bodmin, held an inquest on the bodies of four sailors which were picked up by the fishermen of Port Isaac and landed. As one of them had a lifebelt with s.s. Armenian upon him, it is believed they belonged to that ship which was torpedoed by a German submarine some ten days ago, a few miles off Trevoze Head. Two of them were men of colour, on one of which was an insurance card bearing the name of George Smith, Portsmouth. The jury returned a verdict of "Found drowned." In the afternoon their remains covered with flags and followed by Boy Scouts under Miss Hyde, their Scoutmaster, carrying bouquets, were taken to Saint Endellion for burial. Since the inquest three more bodies have been brought in at Port Quin close by, and two at Port Isaac.

Mr. A. C. Pomery, deputy coroner, has also held several inquests on bodies which have been washed ashore on other parts of the coast.

The Cornish Guardian
16 July 1915

The official account

An official account of the SS Armenian's sinking is contained in the History of the Great War - The Merchant Navy, Volume 2, Summer 1915 to early 1917 (Part 1 of 2) Chapter 1 by Sir Archibald Hurd



Left hand headstone

St Endellion Churchyard
Seven sailors of the Great War
SS Armenian 28 June 2015
Known unto God

Right hand headstone

Fourth Engineer Thomas Aitchinson Age 40
Sailor Foley

The "Armenian's" Gallant Fight

The Armenian, of the Leyland Line, was on voyage from Newport News to Avonmouth with 1,422 mules for HM Government. Shortly after noon on June 28th, she was steering to pass ten miles north of Lundy Island when she received a wireless message from Crookhaven stating that submarines were active south of the Smalls. The master (Mr. James Irickey) determined to make for Trevoze Head. At 6.40pm, when twenty miles west of this point, a submarine was sighted on the port bow, about three miles away, steaming towards the Armenian on the surface. As the British ship, though unarmed, had a speed of 14½ knots, Captain Irickey decided to make a fight for it.

He accordingly headed for the submarine with the intention of ramming her. The enemy, however, opened fire and Captain Irickey turned his ship stern on to the submarine so as to decrease the target. Several shots fell ahead and astern of the merchantman until the range was found, when the wireless telegraph house was wrecked. Another shell entered the firehold and started a fire. Captain Irickey with his officers and men set to work to subdue the flames, but other fires were caused by subsequent shells. One struck the steering gear, putting it out of action, and another fell on the engine-room hatch, sending debris on to the engines, which were, however, kept at full speed. During this phase of the one-sided action twelve of the crew were killed and others injured. Captain Irickey still held on to his course.

When the unequal ordeal had lasted nearly an hour, the funnel was struck, the shell passing down into the body of the ship. The stokehold was put in darkness and the boilers were so damaged that steam could not be maintained. The master then realised that escape was impossible. He hoisted the white flag and blew the ship's whistle in token of surrender, preparations being made simultaneously to abandon ship. Whether the submarine failed to notice the British signals or was determined to punish to the uttermost so persistent an opponent will never be known. At any rate the shells continued to fall on the crippled vessel, damaging the boats' falls and causing some of the boats to hang by one fall only, with the result that many men were thrown into the water. Eventually all the surviving members of the crew were able to get away.

The captain, satisfied that no one was on board, himself left. But shortly afterwards an improvised raft was seen leaving the Armenian with the chief engineer, the veterinary surgeon, and the purser; they also were rescued. When all six boats were clear of the ship, the submarine approached and, getting into position on the port quarter, fired a torpedo into the Armenian. Under Captain Irickey's orders, the hatches of the lower hold had previously been battened down, the ballast tanks pumped out, and the refrigerator boxes secured, thus giving additional buoyancy to the vessel. Consequently the first torpedo left the Armenian still afloat and another was discharged, this time into the stokehold, with the result that the ship forthwith began to sink rapidly. Owing to the action of the captain, the enemy had to expend about fifty shells, as well as two torpedoes. As she sank rapidly the Armenian, with a length of 530 feet, presented a remarkable spectacle; half her length was reared into the air.

The ship having been dispatched, the submarine - U38 - dived and disappeared. The commander showed, however, a measure of humanity; before diving he rescued three or four men from the water. Captain Irickey's boat being the only one with a compass, the other boats were collected and connected astern. A course was then made for land under sail. At 7 o'clock the following morning the Belgian steam trawler President Stein took the men on board and at noon turned them over to the destroyers Mansfield and Milne, which landed them at Avonmouth that afternoon. The unequal action resulted in the loss of twenty-nine lives, including the fourth engineer and twenty American cattle attendants. The Admiralty marked their appreciation of the master's efforts to save his ship and its valuable cargo by conferring upon him the Distinguished Service Cross. The quartermaster, W A Goss, and two firemen, T Davies and E G Talbot, received the DSM, and the second officer, Mr H O Davies, and the chief engineer, Mr J Crighton, obtained "mentions."

The Bones Wreck

In 2008 the TV production company Mallison Sadler Productions produced a dramatised documentary for ITV West and National Geographic Channel US and the US History Channel about the sinking of the SS Armenian. The programme was called 'The Bones Wreck' due to the vast number of mule bones found in the SS Armenian's holds. Their Newquay dive team located the wreck about 45 miles from the original reported location.



Recognition of the sacrifice by animals like the SS Armenian mules was finally made in 2004 when HRH Princess Anne unveiled the Animals in War Memorial on the eastern edge of Hyde Park, London



one of the mule handlers in the TV programme



The memorial was designed by English sculptor David Backhouse to commemorate the countless animals that have served and died under British military command throughout history