

HMS EXMOUTH

By R N Baird

The entire crew of 189 were lost when the 1475 ton 1934-built E-Class destroyer *HMS Exmouth* (Captain R.S.Benson), was torpedoed 20 miles off Wick by the *U-22* (KL Karl-Heinrich Jenisch), at 04.44 hrs on 21 January 1940. The German Grid reference was given as AN1684, which equates to about 582100N, 022400W. *Warship Losses of WW2* gives the position of torpedoing as 581800N, 022500W.

The *Exmouth* had met the *Cyprian Prince* (Captain Benjamin T Wilson) off Aberdeen, to escort her northwards to Scapa Flow. Benson signalled simply "Follow us. Speed 10 knots. Course 070". The destroyer was showing "a very bright stern light".

Chief Officer Albert Clark was on watch in *Cyprian Prince*, which was following at a safe distance of four cables astern of *Exmouth* on a course of 330° at 10 knots. Both vessels continued to steam northwards as night fell. The sea was calm, and visibility good. The *Exmouth's* stern light was still in sight of the *Cyprian Prince* at 04.44hrs when Clark heard one explosion, and thinking *Exmouth* was dropping depth charges, called Captain Wilson, who was in his bunk, to the bridge. Wilson had arrived on the bridge when, at 04.48hrs there was a second detonation, which Clark described as "a terrific explosion, much louder than the first", and *Exmouth's* stern light disappeared.

At 04.50, the *Cyprian Prince* stopped her engines to look for survivors. Her helm was turned to port to clear the upturned hull of the *Exmouth*. Voices were heard in the water, and flickering or flashing lights were seen, and at 04.51, she went full ahead and put her helm over to starboard to close the men in the water. At 04.53 she stopped engines again and, according to Marine Gunner Ronald Sheen, about 10 men could be heard in the water.

Captain Wilson had already ordered men to stand by the boats, ready to go and pick up the survivors, but considered that stopping in good visibility to rescue them carried too great a risk of his own vessel being torpedoed. At 04.56hrs he rang down for full ahead and turned to port, leaving the men in the water. *Cyprian Prince* continued northwards alone with its urgent cargo of searchlights, anti-aircraft guns, and mobile units, Scammell trucks, cars and ammunition for the defence of Scapa Flow. (This was less than three months after *HMS Royal Oak* had been torpedoed in Scapa Flow by *U-47* (KK Gunther Prien).

Cyprian Prince's radio operator William Costello, logged at 05.07hrs "Called GKR (Wick Radio), giving secret call sign, "SOS. Sinking in 5818N, 0225W"". Costello then looked out to see two well lit neutral ships which had been following *Cyprian Prince* all night. (These were thought to be the Danish *Tekla*, and the Norwegian *Miranda*). Seaman Cyril Monck in *Cyprian Prince* jumped out of his bunk on hearing the first explosion, and was pulling on his trousers at the time of the second. He went on deck and saw the lights of two neutral steamers on the port beam, apparently heading south. (He would have been confused by the fact that, by then, *Cyprian Prince* had reversed course to close the men in the water).

George Montgomery, Chief Engineer of the *Cyprian Prince*, was asleep in his bunk on the starboard side, just above the engine room. He was wakened by a series of small bangs, which he took to be a door banging in the engine room. He got up to investigate, and shouted down to the engine room "Shut that door!" but was told by the Second Engineer that the door he had thought to be responsible for the banging was securely shut. When

questioned at some length by the Court of Enquiry about the noise that had wakened him, he said he heard three or four bangs which sounded like bangs on the ships side. These were followed two or three minutes afterwards by a very heavy detonation which seemed quite close by.

U-22's Ktb (Kriegstagebuche - war diary) reveals that the U-boat was heading south on the surface on a very dark night. The moon was setting behind the clouds when they saw the illuminated neutral ships heading north west. While Jenisch was looking at them, a blacked-out destroyer, followed by a similarly darkened steamship, unexpectedly moved across his line of sight between the U-boat and the illuminated ships. Had it not been for the lights of the neutral ships, he would not have spotted the darkened ships at all. Caught by surprise, Jenisch accelerated to try to get into a good firing position, but was unable to get ahead of the destroyer. After a pursuit lasting almost an hour he fired one torpedo at the destroyer, and a second at the steamship. The first torpedo exploded after 2 minutes 35 seconds, when it hit *Exmouth* in the starboard side at the forward magazine, sparking off a tremendous secondary explosion and producing thick black smoke.

The second torpedo exploded after a run of 4 minutes 7 seconds. This shot had obviously failed - a dud, or a miss, perhaps due to the steamship changing course after the first detonation was heard.

Jenisch tried to chase the steamer, but had to take avoiding action to prevent his U-boat ramming into the ship as it turned to run west towards the coast at a speed of at least 12.5 knots - *U-22's* maximum speed.

Cyprian Prince was actually doing 13 knots, and *U-22* was unable to catch the ship, and had no opportunity to fire any further torpedoes at it.

It would seem that the torpedo fired at the *Cyprian Prince* did not miss. The banging noise that wakened Chief Engineer Montgomery was probably the torpedo hitting several times against the side of the vessel as it passed at an angle without the contact pistol firing. After the torpedo cleared the ship's side it would continue to the end of its run before exploding. German torpedoes were fitted with two pistols, one contact and one magnetic, one of which the U-boat commander selected before firing. It was found that the magnetic pistol was too sensitive and the contact pistol would only work against a straight surface. Against a curved surface, the torpedo could glance off without exploding.

The Admiralty claim the first news of the sinking of the *Exmouth* was when *Cyprian Prince* reached Kirkwall at 13.00hrs. This was despite the fact that Captain Wilson had attempted to send a visual signal by Aldis lamp to Noss Head, Duncansby Head and Muckle Skerry, as he passed each in turn, but had been unable to elicit any response. We also know from *U-22's* Ktb that they heard either the destroyer or the steamship sending at a very rapid speed "SOS. Sinking in lat 58°18'N, long 02°25'W", and Wick Radio (GKR) on the 600 metre waveband repeating "SOS unknown vessel sinking in position 5818N, 0225W".

The destroyer *HMS Sikh*, the minesweepers *HMS Sphinx*, the tug *St.Mellons*, the A/S trawlers *King Sol*, *Loch Monteith*, *St.Elstan* and *St.Cathan*, and the Wick lifeboat *City of Edinburgh* immediately rushed to the area and an air search was made. *St.Mellons* reported large quantities of oil fuel and surface wreckage, but no survivors. One lifebuoy from the *Exmouth* was found floating amongst a handful of orange crates and other flotsam. *HMS Sphinx* picked up the lifebuoy, and the rescue ships also picked up a raft bearing two dead bodies and marked M/S *Maurija*, in 5817N, 0126W.

On 28 January, nine bodies from the *Exmouth* were washed ashore at Wick. They were found by Donald Sutherland, a ten-year-old schoolboy who was playing truant from school. More bodies came ashore at Lybster. A mass funeral took place in Wick on the 31st. Eighteen sailors were buried in a mass grave. One of them was PO Joe O'Brien, a pre-war athlete of note, who had won 200 medals for swimming.

The Admiralty Board of Enquiry spent some time considering the effectiveness of *Exmouth's* Asdic, and found that Benson had not given Wilson clear instructions, and that his signal "Follow me" was wholly inadequate. They also stated that Benson should not have shown a stern light, as this was inviting attack. Normal convoy practice would have been for the escort to take station on the convoy, rather than the other way around. They also debated whether the captain of the *Cyprian Prince* had done the right thing in obeying the Admiralty DMS (Defence of Merchant Shipping) instructions in abandoning the survivors of the destroyer when he might have rescued them, but concluded that his action had been correct.

Captain Wilson was clearly badly affected by the episode and left *Cyprian Prince* after this voyage. He was "not expected to return".

(Note that *Cyprian Prince*, 1988grt, was bombed at Piraeus on 6 April 1941. Four of her 36 crew were killed. The ship was beached near Salamis, and in November 1945 the wreck was found lying at Pesteri (Salamis Island).

This same policy of not stopping to pick up survivors from torpedoed vessels was followed many times during the war, as it was considered that such an action increased to an unacceptable degree, the risk of the would-be rescuer's vessel also being torpedoed, leading to additional loss of life, the loss of valuable cargoes, and the loss of further vital cargo-carrying capacity. In addition to naval escorts, specially-designated rescue vessels sailed with many large wartime convoys. Compared to the bulk of the cargo-carrying ships of the convoy, these were relatively small, shallow-draught vessels.

The Admiralty had recorded the approximate position of the wreck as 5818N, 0225W – the same position that was broadcast by *Cyprian Prince's* radio operator. On three occasions towards the end of the war, in January, February and March 1945, a bottom contact was located within a few miles of that position. The vessels involved actually reported very slightly different positions for the contact, and they probably all assumed it might have been a U-boat. For 56 years no-one seems to have realised that it was the wreck of *HMS Exmouth*.

The true position of the *Exmouth* was deduced entirely through meticulous research carried out by Bob Baird and Orkney-based wreck researcher and diver Kevin Heath. The final vital clues came from *U-22's* Ktb, which Kevin obtained from Washington DC, USA. At 0845 CET the navigator made a correction adjustment (*Versetzung*) to the position of the U-boat, putting it about 10nm south of where he had hitherto supposed the boat to be, but the positions previously recorded in the Ktb were not retrospectively amended to take this correction into account. The AN1684 position was obviously incorrect, and the difficulty of keeping an accurate running plot had been exacerbated by the boats continual course and speed changes during the hours of darkness, resulting in a gradually increasing error.

Kevin Heath then asked Mark Reeves and Alex Deas of the European Technical Diving Centre, Burray, Orkney to dive the wreck on our behalf, and gave him the position we had

deduced. Our position was so accurate that they found the wreck within 20 minutes of arriving at the location.

They dived and confirmed its identity on 24 June 2001. Alex Deas described the wreck as an underwater garden of stunning beauty, covered with bright hydroids, anemones and starfish. It was teeming with shoals of large fish, with many lobsters, crabs and sea urchins on the wreck. He said, "It is most fitting that the site has been transformed from one of death and destruction to one of tranquillity and life. I have never seen so much sea life on any other wreck", a point Mark Reeves affirmed, and added "It is clear why the *Exmouth* sank so quickly after the explosion. The torpedo did not simply make a hole, but it literally blew the ship apart. It was evident from surveying the wreck that the *Exmouth* obviously sank immediately. Now it is a very beautiful site, in clear water".

The wreck is lying almost upside down, very smashed up, twisted and corroded. The single 4.7" gun turrets are lying upside down in the wreckage. The "terrific explosion, much louder than the first", described by those on the *Cyprian Prince*, was very likely *Exmouth's* forward magazine exploding, and this would be the source of the black cloud of smoke seen by *U-22*. A magazine explosion would also account for a lot of the enormous damage to the wreck. *Exmouth* obviously hit the seabed bow first, causing the fore end to bend and distort. The wreck was detected by anti-submarine vessels during the war. They possibly assumed it to be a U-boat, and may have subjected it to depth-charging, causing further damage. We now have about an hour of video footage of the wreck.

Various items seen amongst the wreckage match the ship's plans, including her distinctive anchors and propellers, torpedo tubes and guns, and parts of the hull. Large quantities of 4.7" and anti-aircraft gun shells are strewn around. A 4.7" gun shell manufactured in 1937 was recovered. It had reload date stamps of February and April 1938. Her torpedo tubes are loaded with torpedoes – the warhead noses are visible at the front ends of the tubes. Some tubes have the rear end caps in place, but at least one tube has split, and the twin contra-rotating propellers of the torpedo in the tube can be seen. Depth charges are visible at the stern, and the streamlined asdic housing protrudes from the upturned hull. At least one fishing net is snagged on the wreck.

The bell of *HMS Royal Oak* was recovered from the wreck, and it hangs in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, as a memorial to the 833 men who were lost when the battleship was torpedoed on the night on 13-14 October 1939.

We have looked for the bell of *HMS Exmouth*, but it has eluded us so far.

It would seem appropriate to recover the bell and have it hung in an equivalent suitable place in Wick, near to where the ship sank, and close to where the bodies of the crewmen who were washed ashore are buried.

There is a magnificent Church of Scotland in Wick. It certainly looks like a suitably fitting location.