

A Torpedo's Toll

Memories of War in Abaco

In Hope Town, those curious enough to wander up the cholera graveyard hill will find a simple stone monument. It stands atop a windblown dune overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and the Elbow Reef, which has claimed countless lives.

A bronze plaque on the monument reads:

"M/V ATHELQUEEN.
DAVID W. FIRTH.
HAROLD JONES.
WILLIAM PROCTOR.
17 MARCH 1942."

The plaque is a tribute to the local war dead – not Bahamians killed on some far distant shore, but three British sailors who died in the waters of Abaco.

It would be easy to think that Abaco was a safe distance away from the fires of the Second World War. But as a shipping lane frequented by Allied vessels, the narrow, deep Northeast Providence Channel was a prime hunting ground for enemy submarines.

Within a 12-day period in March, 1942, three Allied merchant ships – the *O.A. Knudson*, the *Daytonian*, and the *Athelqueen* – were sunk here.

Owned by Britain's Athel Line, the *Athelqueen* was a tanker that carried molasses from Port Everglades (Fort Lauderdale) to the U.K.

On February 22, 1942, after making a delivery in Hull, England, the *Athelqueen* began its return journey to Florida. For the

first leg of the trip, it stayed in the relative safety of a merchant convoy, bound for Sierra Leone. But on February 28, upon reaching the Azores, the *Athelqueen* broke off and headed west across the Atlantic alone.

The first two weeks of her solo crossing passed without incident. But on March 11, when the *Athelqueen* was roughly 600 miles northwest of Puerto Rico, her captain, 33-year-old Charles Roberts, spotted a plane with American markings.

The plane was "circling around and signaling with his Morse lamp," Roberts would later report. "But as we had to look right into the sun to see him at all, we had great difficulty in reading his signal. However, we managed to read 'S.O.S.' several times and he signaled 'S.O.S. Follow me...'"

Aware that a Norwegian ship had been sunk by an Italian submarine near Puerto Rico the day before, Roberts thought perhaps he was being sent to rescue survivors.

"The plane continued flying ahead of us until dark, when it disappeared," he said. "I continued a south-easterly course all night with my lights burning dimly, so that any survivors in boats could see me."

But if there were survivors, Roberts did not see them.

"I was annoyed at having had to steam for 12 hours away from my course and risk the dangers of a night torpedo attack by keeping my lights burning and then not finding any survivors or receiving further directions," he said.

"At daybreak, I altered course to the north-west and steamed back on my tracks only reaching my original position and resuming my course...on the following day, thus having lost a full 24 hours and having accomplished nothing."

Worse, the lost 24 hours had doomed the *Athelqueen*.



A hilltop monument in Hope Town memorializes those who were lost after the *Athelqueen's* sinking.



The M/V *Athelqueen*, a casualty of war, torpedoed in the waters off Abaco. Photo courtesy of the Wyannie Malone Museum.

At mid-morning on March 15, instead of being safely moored in Port Everglades, the ship was still east of Abaco. According to the diary of an unnamed crew member, which would later be displayed at the Wyannie Malone Museum in Hope Town, it was a lovely Sunday morning, with calm seas.

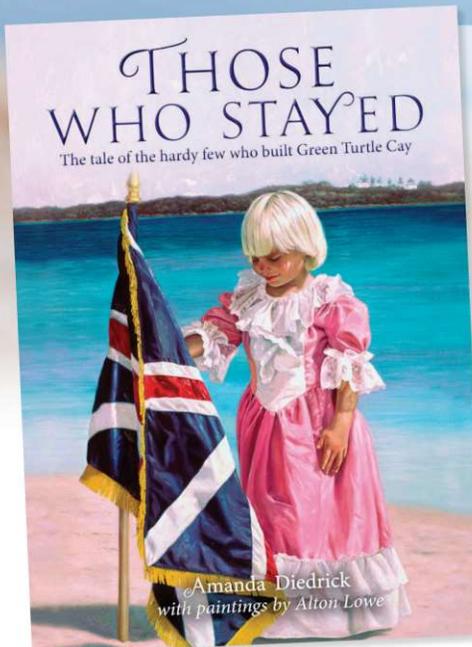
By afternoon, the *Athelqueen* had reached the spot, 80 miles east of the Elbow Reef Light-station, where another British ship, the *Daytonian*, had been torpedoed and sunk by the Italian submarine *Enrico Tazzoli* just days earlier. Members of the *Daytonian's* crew had been lucky. They were rescued by a Dutch tanker, and no lives were lost.

Those aboard the *Athelqueen* would not be as fortunate. Unbeknownst to them, the *Enrico Tazzoli* still lay in wait.

Around 3:00 pm, a lookout atop the *Athelqueen's* bridge sounded the alarm. A torpedo, roughly a quarter mile away, was headed toward them.

The second mate quickly changed course and, for a few moments, they thought they had eluded the attack. But, as Captain Roberts would later report, "At 1500 a torpedo struck us in the engine-room on the port side, about 20 feet from the stern of the ship. I was in my cabin at the time... When

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greetings and passed on. Sun very hot. Wind still strong and sea has a bit of a swell... A couple of sailors and bosun are feeling sick. Must be the sun. Broke open a tin of corned beef with hatchet and had high tea with biscuits and water."

That evening, as the sun went down, there was no doubt relief among the men in the boats. "Just seen a light on horizon," the crewman wrote.

That light was the Elbow Reef Lightstation. But in the dark and without charts, the men had no way to know that between them and the lighthouse was the treacherous reef.

"I was ahead of the other two boats," Captain Roberts wrote, "intending to pull round the northern end of the island, when suddenly the boat began pitching and rolling and then grounded on a reef. I shouted to the other boats to pull away out to sea and wait until daylight when I would try and rejoin them.

"We pulled hard to get the boat free but the tide kept sweeping us in more and more on the reefs. The crew were becoming very tired so I decided to turn and pull as hard as we could towards the shore and risk the boat being capsized. The boat suddenly freed herself and we landed."

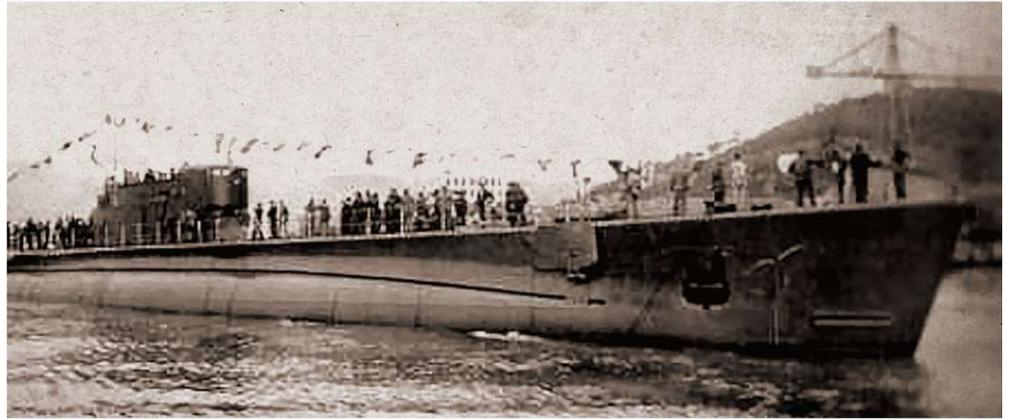
Captain Roberts continued: "Meanwhile, the Third Officer's boat had also reached the edge of the reef, and the first thing they knew was that the boat pitched and hit the reef, violently throwing the Third Officer right out of the boat. The crew – thinking that the boat had been holed and that the Third Officer had jumped for it – got panicky and five of the men jumped overboard and started swimming for the shore."

"The Third Officer managed to climb back in the boat, which was undamaged, but owing to the darkness was unable to see the five men, and decided they must have swum for shore."

Alan Heald was on the Third Officer's boat. "We waited until daylight," he said, "before being spotted by two fishermen who came to tow us in – one navigating and the second steering through the reefs.

"We were taken to houses where we were given food and found a place to rest," he continued. "I think the main burden fell on the local Methodist minister and his wife whose home was swamped by the addition of some 20-odd crew members."

"Whole population has turned out to meet us," wrote the unnamed crewman. "We all went to Mission and had baths and snack. Billeted with Mrs. Bethel – very decent lady.



The Royal Italian Navy submarine *Enrico Tazzoli*.

Town has been given a holiday. Visited Kemp at Mission. He is looking quite cheerful."

The *Athelqueen* crew was relieved to find that two of the men who had jumped from the third officer's lifeboat had, in fact, made it to the beach. But there was no sign of the other three, Greaser David W. Firth (52), Able Seaman Harold Jones (21) and Senior Third Engineer Officer William Proctor (30).

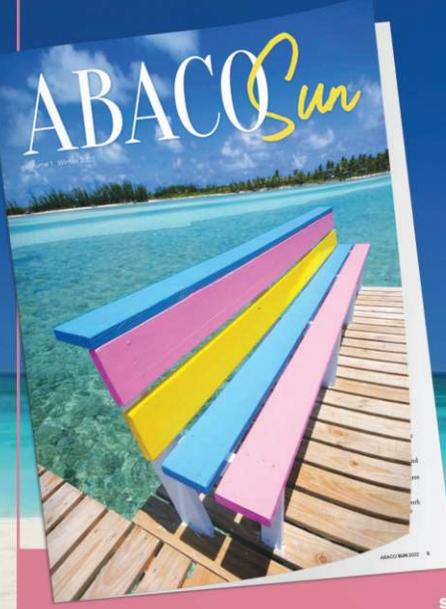
"We had been followed by sharks ever since we were torpedoed," recalled Alan Heald. "We suspected that they had met an unfortunate and messy end, although we shall never know."

The three lost men were later honoured at London's Tower Hill Memorial, which commemorates civilian merchant sailors and fishermen who were killed during the war, but who have no known graves.

And in March 2007, as part of Hope Town's Heritage Days, a monument conceived by Tony Bennett – then-curator of the Wyannie Malone Museum – was unveiled atop the cholera graveyard hill.

The memorial invites all who make their way to that windswept dune to remember the three *Athelqueen* crewmen, and all who have lost their lives on Elbow Reef. ●

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