

SEA HEROES

Thomas Crisp, VC, DSC, Hero of the Q-Ships



Thomas Crisp was born in 1875 in Lowestoft. At the beginning of the First World War he joined the Royal Naval Reserve and was skipper on armed fishing smacks in the North Sea. He is remembered for his bravery when a German U-boat attacked his boat, the *Nelson*, in 1917. In the conflict he was killed and later awarded the posthumous Victoria Cross.

(Photograph courtesy of the Crisp family)

Armed fishing boats in the First World War (Q-ships)

One of the greatest threats to Britain at the beginning of the war was the sinking of shipping by formidable German submarines called U-boats. One line of defence was to use secretly armed small vessels, such as coasters and fishing smacks, which the Navy called 'Q-ships'. They would have guns cunningly concealed and large enough to cripple or sink a submarine. U-boats had tended to fire torpedoes from a distance at large ships but would use guns while on the surface on smaller craft. So the Royal Navy's idea was to lure the U-boat into the firing range of these 'innocent' vessels.



Typical fishing smacks during the First World War

(Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society)

In the early years of the war the Q-ships were quite successful, but by 1917 these operations became dangerous as the German navy realised they could be ambushed by small boats. Despite this, Skipper Crisp and his crew on the smack *I'll Try* sank a submarine in January 1917, for which

he received a Distinguished Service Medal and the crew shared a reward of £1000. Q-ships were renamed often and after this success his smack was called *Nelson*.

The final U-boat attack

On the fateful day of 15th August 1917, the *Nelson* was fishing with its partner smack *Ethel & Millie* off the coast of Lincolnshire. The crew spotted a U-boat on the horizon. As the submarine slowly approached, Tom Crisp's men waited for their opportunity to fire — but the U-boat was prepared for action. The submarine began to fire huge shells at the

smack, one of which hit it below the waterline. The boat began to take in water as more shells were fired. Although hopelessly outgunned the *Nelson* fought back, and then one shell hit Skipper Crisp direct. Half of his body was blown away but, astonishingly, the Skipper continued directing operations: 'Throw the books overboard!' 'Send the pigeon for help!'

The 'books' were the confidential navy logs that could assist the enemy. The *Nelson's* last remaining carrier pigeon, named Red Cock, was now the smack's only means of communication with the port and a message was tied to him. Tom Crisp ordered the crew to abandon ship and save themselves. He refused to be helped into the waiting lifeboat, telling the Mate, his own son Tom, that he was finished would go down with his vessel.



The crew escaped in their boat and were later found by a search vessel, thanks to the efforts of their pigeon Red Cock. But the crew of their partner ship Q-ship *Ethel & Millie* were not so lucky. They were taken prisoner and never heard of again.

The crew of the armed smack Ethel & Millie.
(Photo courtesy of Lowestoft Maritime Museum)

Thomas Crisp was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery, which was presented to his son Tom by the King.

The Victoria Cross (left) and the Distinguished Service Cross (replicas) awarded to Thomas Crisp.

Courtesy: Lowestoft Maritime Museum



The Nelson's carrier pigeon 'Red Cock'

During the First World War the Admiralty kept special pigeons in lofts at the Lowestoft naval base for use by armed vessels. In those days most of them had not yet been fitted with wireless. the *Nelson's* crew sent Red Cock on his way in the chaos of shelling and return fire. Other pigeons released were disorientated and failed to reach the base. As a result of the message carried by the splendid bird, a vessel sent out to search for them safely picked up the crew. When Red Cock died his body was mounted and placed in the Town Hall museum. Later it was reputedly moved to a museum in South Kensington.