

Men of the lightship

The true story behind the WW2 propaganda film by the noted lightship historian Anthony Lane.

In the terrible winter of 1940 the East Dudgeon lightship was severely damaged by an attacking German aeroplane and was abandoned by the crew soon afterwards. All the crew except for one survivor perished. I think it worthwhile to recall what really happened when the master of the lightship, Mr George, a former trawler skipper, decided to abandon the vessel, which although badly damaged, remained afloat and row the 25 miles to the nearest shore in what was described as the worst winter for 100 years.

Lets start with a newspaper report of the time.

Sole Survivor

Illustrated Magazine 24 February 1940

While the majority of the residents of a seaside resort on the Lincolnshire coast were lying in their beds, another drama of the war at sea was being enacted on their shore. The crew of eight from the undefended East Dudgeon lightship—machine-gunned and bombed by a German plane—were fighting for their lives against the sea and exposure. Only one had sufficient strength to gain shelter and survive the ordeal.

The first intimation we had of the tragedy was the finding, soon after dawn, of a number of bodies lying on the sands. Soon after this a man was found in an untenanted part of a house, one of the few houses in the vicinity.

The survivor, John J.R. Sanders, of Great Yarmouth, aged thirty-one, told me this story. "It would be about 9.30 on the Monday morning when we saw a German plane coming from the direction of the English coast. It was a 'Heinkel.' The plane circled round and the next thing we knew the crew had opened fire on us with machine guns. Then still circling round, they started to bomb us. The ninth bomb hit the ship and at the same time damaged one of the two ship's boats. The ship heeled over and seemed to go right under. The decks were awash and we were floundering about waste deep in water.

One of the crew was ill in his bunk and we had to get him on deck and then we took to the small boat. Although badly knocked about, the ship remained floating. The plane circled round but dropped no more bombs.

We then started rowing shorewards, as there was no ship in sight. We still continued to row after darkness had set in and it would be about two o'clock the next morning when we heard the sound

of waves breaking on the shore. We dropped anchor and it was then waves capsized the boat. We were flung into the sea and I could hear my mates shouting all around me. Someone grabbed hold of my life jacket but he was shot right over my head by a wave. I am a good swimmer but realised it was useless to attempt to swim in my heavy clothes. I turned on my back and hoped for the best.

Soon I found I was in calmer water and, on turning over, discovered it was like a shallow pond. I must have remained on my hands and knees in that water for ten minutes, until I had regained some strength, and then I crawled ashore. I heard one of my mates shouting as the waves carried him ahead of me, but in the darkness I could not find any of them.”

Naturally after all that time in an open boat and now with the added shock of the icy water and clothes drenched through, he was not sure of the period of time which elapsed through the next stage of his adventure. Fortunately for him, he commenced to walk in the right direction, for if he had gone the other way he would have been unable to find shelter, and would have quite possibly suffered the same fate as his comrades.’ (source W.E.T.)

John Sanders had reached the edge of Mablethorpe when he was found.

The Propaganda Film ‘Men of the Lightship’

A decision was made at that time to use the occasion for propaganda purposes and so the GPO film unit produced *Men of the Lightship*, highlighting the plight of a crew of actual lightship men and the barbarity of the German air attack, driving them to abandon their sinking ship (vessel No. 61 in the film) and face drowning in icy waters – the *Daily Express* described the sea as frozen in places.

The film shows in detail the life aboard a similar wooden lightship (No.60) and is important also as it shows a lot of detail of the vessel’s layout and construction, information that is hard to obtain these days. The crew go about their duty with the usual banter but I find it hard to believe that a regular seaman would throw the contents of the ‘gash’ bucket to windward. However, something had to lead him to sighting a mine. As the air attack develops the deck is raked by machine-gun bullets forcing the crew to abandon ship and see it eventually sunk by a bomb. Their attempt to reach the shore is harrowing, fulfilling the purpose of the film. Many more seamen were to experience escaping from their doomed ships in open boats in the years that were to come, so the film in a way prepared the public for the loss of many more seafarers before the end of the war.

Why the crew of the *East Dudgeon* decided to abandon their damaged, but still floating vessel, after the enemy aircraft had departed is not easy to explain. They kept attached initially by a line, but fearing injury or death from aerial gunfire cast off. Whether the wind and sea conditions

prevented them from regaining the vessel is not known but may have been the cause they chose to attempt the grim and fatal voyage to reach the shore.

In the days following, the lightship, No.63, according to Trinity House wartime records, was towed to Great Yarmouth and moored at their depot, where it was inspected by none other than the Duke of Kent who perhaps was Master at the time. (Great Yarmouth Mercury). Lightship No. 63 was repaired and returned to service after the war.

Tragically, Lightship No.60 was to suffer the same fate, she was sunk by German bombers with no survivors at the East Oaze wartime station in the Thames on 1 November of the same year. The tragedy was enhanced by the possibility that some of the Trinity House personnel featured in Men of the Lightship may have fallen victim to a similar, but more lethal, attack to that staged for the film.

No replacement vessel was moored at the East Dudgeon station and by the end of the year all the east coast lightships were withdrawn for the duration of hostilities.