

FORGOTTEN WRECKS

KENT

In November 1914, Britain declared the North Sea a war zone and closed it to maritime traffic entering from the north. Merchant ships were ordered to pass through the Dover Straits, where they could be searched for war contraband that might reach Germany.

As well as restricting trade heading north, the defences in the straits were steadily increased in an effort to prevent German U-boats from sailing south and into the English Channel. Throughout the war, the Royal Navy and the U-boats played a game of cat and mouse in the straits, as both sides sought to outdo the other.

HM Tug *Char*

A number of civilian vessels worked for the Admiralty during the war, sometimes with their original crews still on board.

Stop and Search

HMT *Char* was a civilian steam tug that was hired by the Admiralty in 1914. Her original crew elected to remain with her, even at the commencement of hostilities, and were joined on board by a Royal Navy crew. *Char* was employed as a boarding vessel and spent the early months of the war searching for contraband on merchant vessels passing through the Dover Straits on their way into the North Sea.

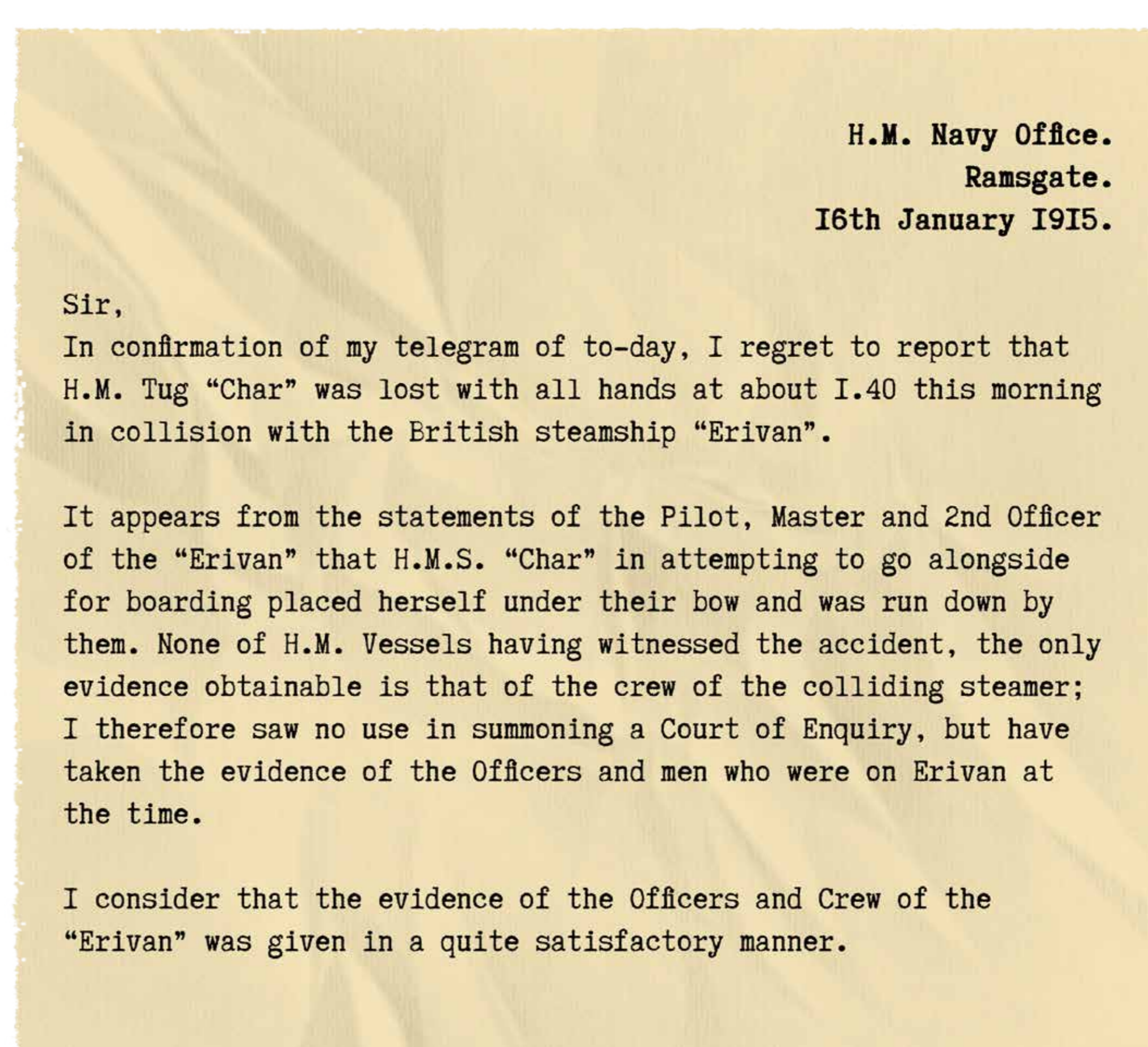
Loss

In the early hours of January 16th, and in heavy rain, *Char* was on course to intercept the British steamer *Erivan* south west of Ramsgate. On board the merchant vessel the Trinity House pilot ordered the engines to slow as the tug approached on the port side. Suddenly, when the two vessels were only 300 metres apart, *Char* turned across the bows of *Erivan* and straight into its path. *Erivan's* pilot desperately ordered the engines into reverse, but a collision was inevitable and *Erivan* struck *Char*, severely buckling the bows of the steamer.

Char passed down the starboard side of *Erivan*, but didn't respond to any hails and then appeared to steam off under its own power. *Erivan* followed to render assistance, but lost sight of *Char* in the rain. Taking on water and in rough seas, the pilot reluctantly steered *Erivan* towards land.

The Wreck Site

Despite an extensive search by the Royal Navy and the Deal lifeboat, *Char* was never seen or heard of again. The exact reason for the actions of her crew cannot be explained as all 18 were lost. There are a number of wrecks in the area in which *Char* was last seen, but none have been positively identified to date.



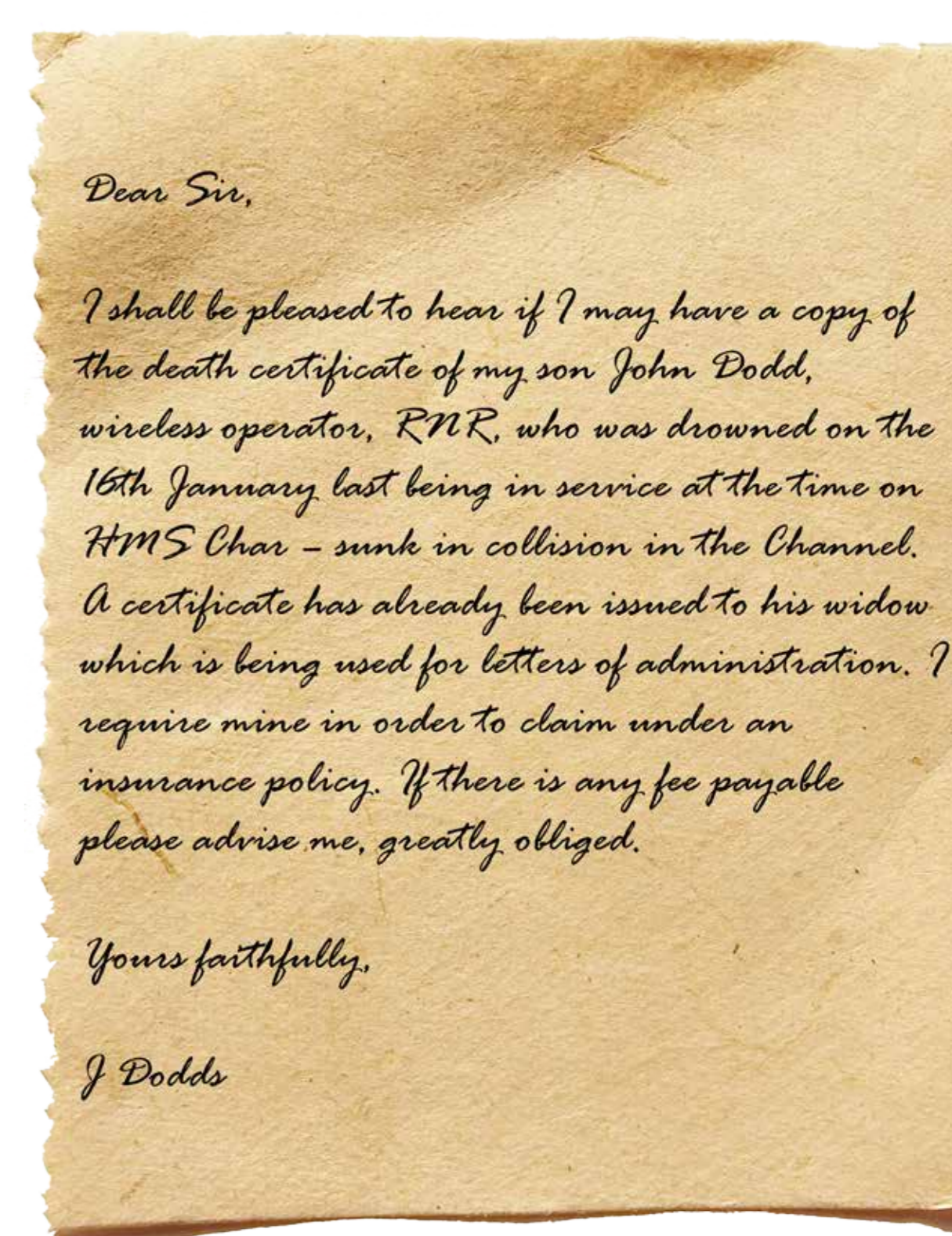
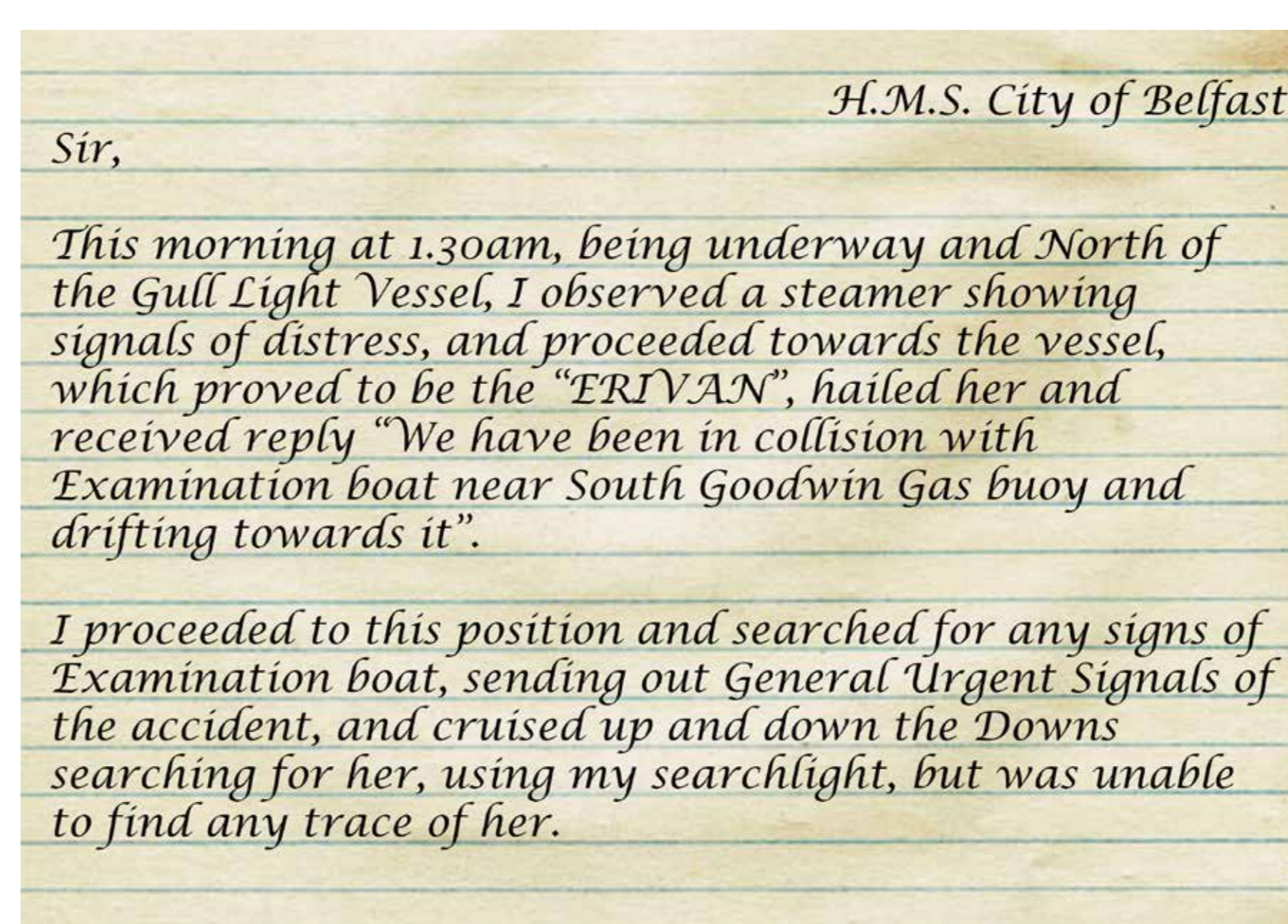
A number of reports and letters were generated by the loss of *Char*, all of which were filed by the Admiralty and can now be accessed at The National Archives, Kew.

Left: Commander Moorsom, the Senior Naval Officer of the Downs Boarding Flotilla, sent his first report to the Admiralty the following morning.

Below Left: the report of Lieutenant Commander Peel, captain of HMS *City of Belfast*.

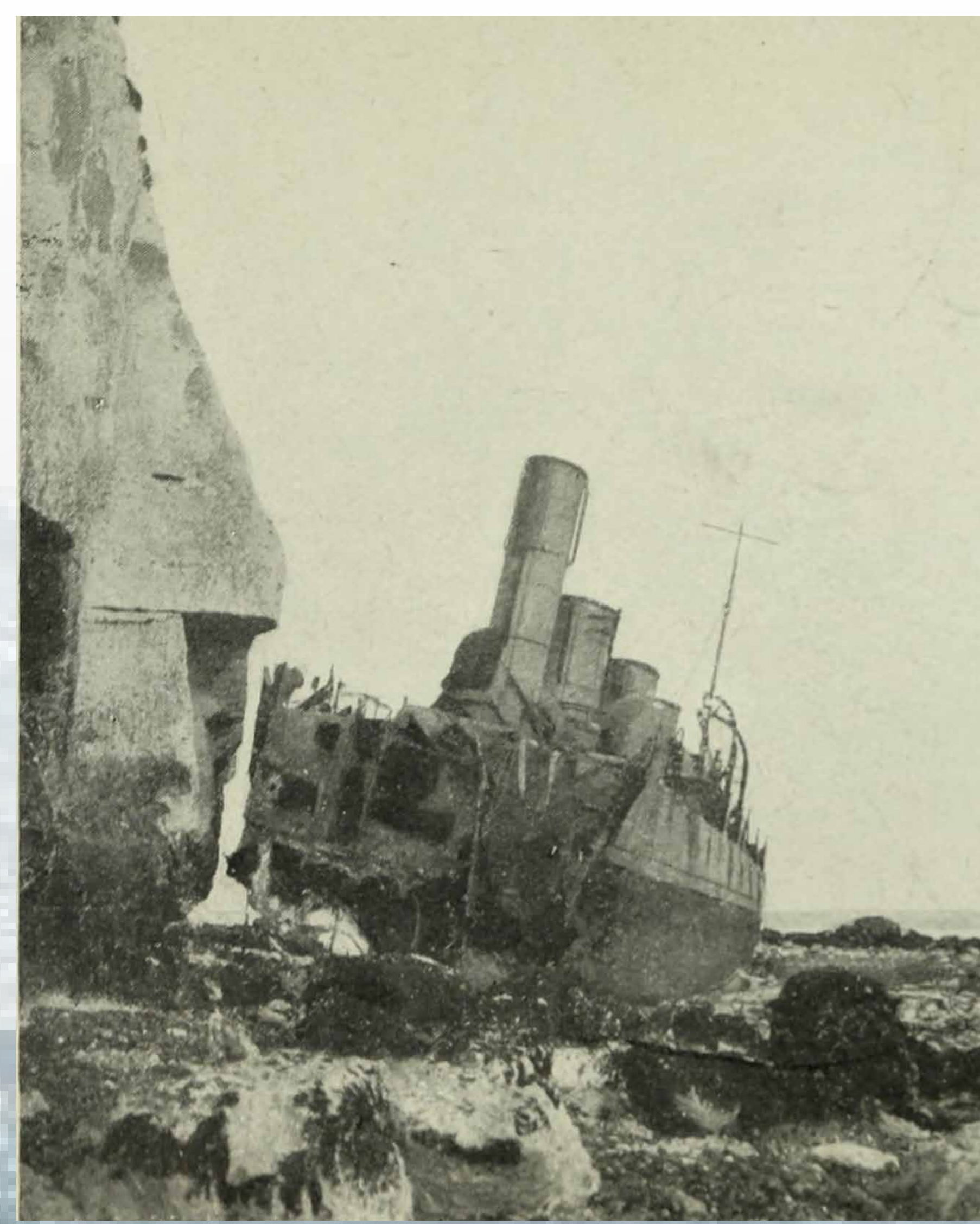
Below Right: a letter from J Dodds, mother of one of the lost crewmen.

All transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 1/8409/18.



HMS *Nubian*

HMS *Nubian* was a *Tribal* class destroyer, one of twelve such warships built between 1905 and 1908. All twelve *Tribals* saw service in the war, but *Nubian*, part of the Dover Patrol, would see service in more ways than one.



Above: HMS *Nubian* aground at South Foreland. Originally published in *The Dover Patrol* by Reginald Bacon, 1919.

Right: HMS *Zubian*. *Nubian* and *Zulu* were joined just behind the ship's bridge.

The Battle of the Dover Straits

On the night of October 26th 1916, the German Flanders Flotilla despatched a large fleet of torpedo boats to attack the Dover Barrage: an elaborate network of patrol boats, nets and mines that obstructed U-boat access through the Dover Strait.

In the ensuing battle 15 miles east of Dover, a torpedo struck *Nubian* in the bow, blowing off the entire front section of the ship. Incredibly, the stern section remained afloat and was slowly towed back to Dover as the battle raged nearby. Unfortunately, the tows broke and in the morning *Nubian* was washed up under the White Cliffs of Dover.

By a strange coincidence, another *Tribal* class destroyer, HMS *Zulu*, had her stern blown off by a mine the following month. The remains of both vessels were taken to Chatham dockyard, where they were successfully joined together. The resulting ship was commissioned as HMS *Zubian* in June 1917 and went on to sink a U-boat near Dungeness in 1918.

The Wreck Site

Some of the 15 men who died when the torpedo struck went down with *Nubian's* bow. It still lies in the Dover Strait, although it has not been conclusively identified.



Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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