

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## Captain Fryatt



Front cover of booklet, MT 9/1/066 The National Archives

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill realised that the war at sea was rapidly becoming a fight for the survival of the fittest – total war by any means – and issued orders accordingly to Masters of Merchant Ships to take whatever actions were necessary in defence of their ships, and Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant ships justified them in treating the crews of U-boats as criminals and not as prisoners of war. He also ordered that, if a merchant ship surrendered, the Master would be prosecuted. To Captain Fryatt, the heroic adventure was just beginning.

Charles Algernon Fryatt was a Master Mariner to his fingertips. Born in Southampton in 1872, his father had been a career seafarer before him, and Charles went from school to the merchant marine training college HMS Worcester, before gaining his sea time with a number of companies. In 1892, he joined the Great Eastern Company as a seaman on short sea Continental voyages, following in his father's footsteps who had been First Officer with the Company. In 1913, he was appointed Master of the company's steamer *Newmarket*.

Fryatt was in command of *SS Wrexham* on the 3rd March 1915, when she was attacked by a German U-boat, which chased the ship for 40 miles. With deckhands assisting the stokers to maintain full steam, the vessel made 16 knots, a remarkable speed for a ferry in those days, and arrived at the neutral port of Rotterdam with burnt funnels. The Owners presented Charles Fryatt with a gold watch inscribed with their *appreciation of his courage and skilful seamanship on March 2nd, 1915*.

The Germans were not amused.

Later that month he was in command of another of the Company's steamers, *Colchester*, when she outwitted another U-boat.

Now the Germans became annoyed.

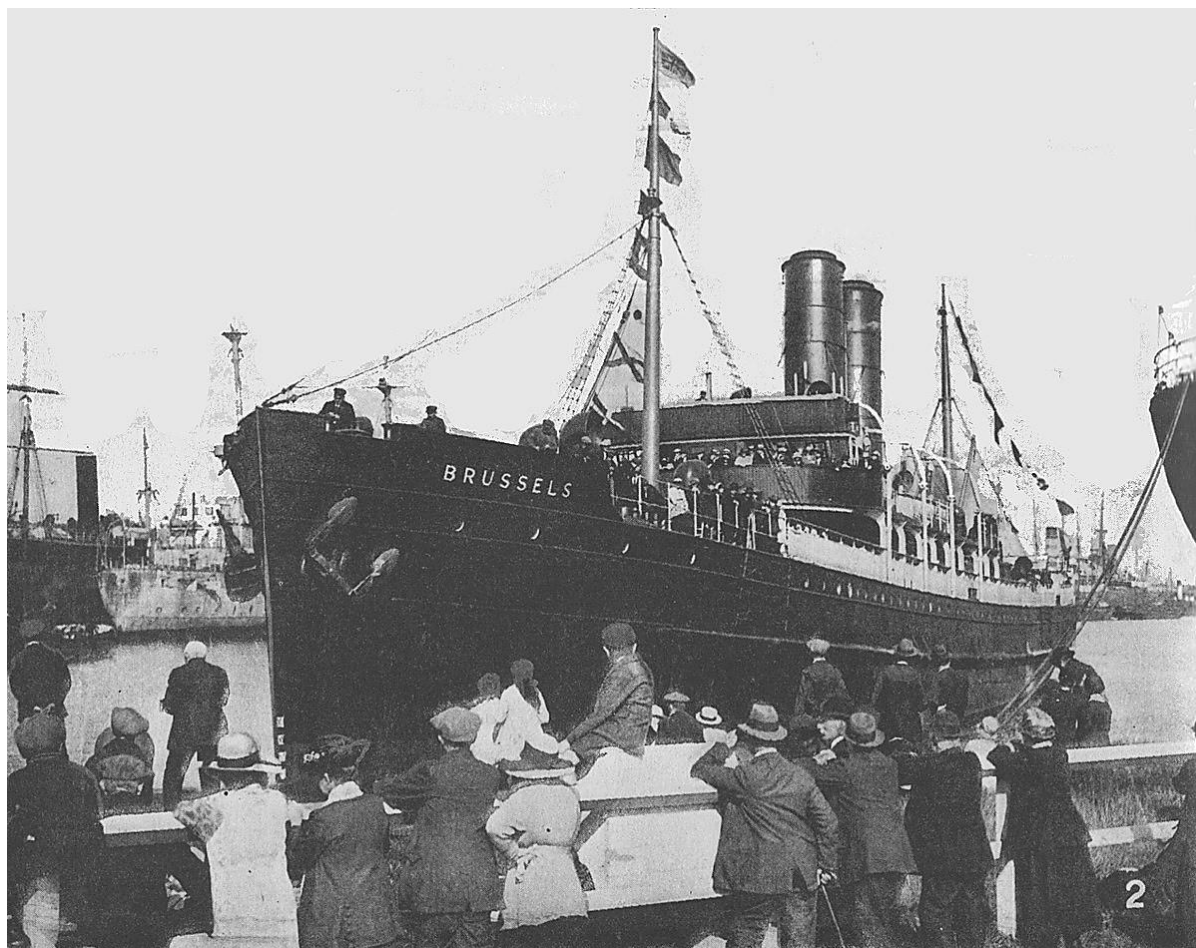
On the 28th March, the same day as the *Falaba* was attacked, Captain Fryatt was in command of the Company's steamer *Brussels*, near the *Mass* light vessel, when U-33 surfaced and ordered her to heave to. Fryatt saw that the submarine intended to torpedo his ship, and ordered full steam ahead, to try to ram U-33, which was forced to crash dive. For this second action, Fryatt was awarded a gold watch by the Lords Commissioners of the

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Admiralty inscribed *in recognition of the example set by that vessel when attacked by a German submarine on March 28th, 1915.*

The Germans had now been utterly humiliated by this Master of the Merchant marine, and their wounded pride demanded revenge. They would not have long to wait.

On the 25th June 1916, Fryatt took his ship *Brussels* out of Hoek van Holland in neutral territory, bound for Harwich. But German collaborators signalled to the enemy with a flare from the shore as she sailed, and a passenger was reported to have been seen on deck signalling to the shore. Five German destroyers surrounded *Brussels*. She was boarded by an enemy detail, the radio was smashed and Fryatt arrested and the ship escorted into German-occupied Belgium.



SS Brussels

Fryatt and his crew were taken prisoner and sent to the civilian internment camp at Ruhleben, near Berlin. Although a non-combatant in defence of his ship, the Germans had to find a way to exact punishment for their humiliation. A neutral Dutch newspaper reported what happened next, for, on the 27th July 1916, a very public German Court-martial was held in Bruges Town Hall, in which Fryatt was charged with sinking the German submarine U-33, and identified Fryatt formally by way of the evidence of the inscription on his watches.



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It was, of course, a complete sham: the Germans knew that U-33 had not been sunk; at the time of the Trial, she was on active service as part of the Constantinople Flotilla. The truth did not deter the Germans in the least, for their pride had to be salvaged, and Charles Fryatt was sentenced to death. The sentence was confirmed by the Kaiser and, at 19.00, he was executed by firing squad, with the announcement posted:

*NOTICE. The English captain of a merchant ship, Charles Fryatt, of Southampton, though he did not belong to the armed forces of the enemy, attempted on March 28th, 1915, to destroy a German submarine by running it down. For this he has been condemned to death by judgment this day of the Field Court Martial of the Naval Corps, and has been executed. A ruthless deed has thus been avenged, belatedly but just. Signed VON SCHRÖDER, Admiral Commandant of the Naval Corps, Bruges, July 27th, 1916.*

In London, upon hearing the news, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith condemned the execution of Captain Fryatt very publicly indeed. In a statement to the House of Commons on the 31st July he said:

*I deeply regret to say that it appears to be true that Captain Fryatt has been murdered by the Germans. His Majesty's Government have heard with the utmost indignation of this atrocious crime against the laws of nations and the usages of war. Coming as it does contemporaneously with the lawless cruelty towards the population of Lille and other occupied districts of France, it shews that the German High Command, under the stress of military defeat, have renewed their policy of terrorism. It is impossible of course to conjecture to what atrocities they may proceed. His Majesty's Government desire to repeat emphatically their resolve that such crimes shall not, if they can help it, go unpunished. When the time arrives, they are determined to bring to justice the criminals whoever they maybe and whatever position they may occupy. In such cases as these the authors of the system under which such crimes are committed may well be the most guilty of all. The question of what immediate action can be taken is engaging the earnest attention of the Government and I hope very soon to announce to the House of Commons what we can do.*

But the murder of Captain Fryatt prompted something with much more serious consequences, in the form of international outcry whose ferocity probably surprised even the Germans, especially from the United States, already turning against Germany for the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and which possibly had the gravest consequences for Germany in the long-term, when the United States joined the war. The 'New York Times' condemned the cowardly execution as a deliberate murder, while the 'New York Herald' called it the crowning German atrocity. In the neutral Netherlands, the 'Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant' described it as arbitrary and unjust, while the 'Handelsblad Holland' summed it up as a cowardly murder inspired by hatred and revenge. In Switzerland, the 'Journal de Genève' commented: *It is monstrous to maintain that armed forces have a right to murder civilians but that civilians are guilty of a crime in defending themselves.*

The consequences outlived the war, and demanded some sort of retrospective justification by Germany. In April 1919, a German international law commission ostensibly reviewed the case and, reconfirmed Captain Fryatt's sentence, stating in its Judgment:



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*The execution by shooting of Captain Charles Fryatt, which was given by the Court Martial Bruges, due to the sentence of the court martial proceedings on 27 July 1916, contains no violation of international law, The Commission apologizes most vividly for the hurry in which the judgment was enforced.*

Nobody was fooled by that for a moment.

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