



# FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## “Twice is Careless” – As the playwright once famously commented

The hunt for a certain *Ship's Boy* began in an account of the sinking of *HM Trawler Othello II*, probably as the result of hitting a mine in the Dover Strait, on 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1915. There was one survivor, the rest of the crew were lost.

The arresting element of this tragedy however, was the nature of the survival of that one sailor. We are told he was the ship's boy, who was on the bridge when the explosion occurred. The explosion had been so forceful that as well as sinking the vessel, it distorted the structure of the bridge, such that it proved impossible to open the door. The occupants were trapped – but they fought open one of the windows and pushed the boy out, and he survived.

The courage and compassion of those men, and the good fortune of the boy struck deeply at an emotional level. The raw compassion and courage of those men, who saved a boy's life knowingly at the loss of their own. Who were they? Who was he? Did he tell of them? Did he survive the war? The incident contrasted so wonderfully with so much of the extraordinary brutality of the rest of that war, it somehow seemed important to gain some answers.

The *Othello II* was built in Hull in 1907: 110 feet long it had a speed of 10 knots [12.5 mph], and owned by ‘Charles Hellyer, Gentleman’, and ‘Benjamin West, Stockbroker’. Like many other vessels of its class, it was used by the Admiralty for patrolling and minesweeping. Many were conscripted entirely, with their civilian crew. It is uncertain whether this was true of *Othello II*. The heroes – for such they were – are not named; one can only presume they included the Master and the helmsman and the Bosun?

We probably wouldn't know who the boy was, either. However, the formal enquiry into the ship's loss helped us. Most of that report concerns itself with setting in train the notification of the relatives of the dead seamen – especially of A.B. Butt, from Newfoundland. But right at the end of the documentation there is a request from the Accountant General's office, dated 8<sup>th</sup> January 1916, for the name and rank of the one survivor. So, on the front cover, there is a beautifully neat note from the Commanding Officer stating that Thomas Charles Farrell is currently serving as boy assistant cook on *HM Trawler Angelus*, which is attached to *HMS Attentive*.

We meet young Thomas in person four months later, at another Board of Enquiry. On 28 February 1916 *HMT Angelus* had just finished sweeping for mines when one went off alongside her on the starboard [right] side. On this occasion the statistics were reversed – just one crew member was lost. John Boyle, a deck hand was drowned. Much of the Board's proceedings were concerned with checking whether the crew had been wearing lifejackets. We see the development of safety policy emerging. John Pearson was wearing his own



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personal, non-issue “Life Waistcoat” which had kept him afloat. John Boyle was wearing a Navy issue kapok jacket.

Boy T Farroll [sic] who had been standing by the winch, then moved to the Port side, through the deck house to the After Galley on the starboard side. At the explosion he jumped overboard immediately *“I jumped straight into the water.”*

When asked why so prompt he answered, “I was blown up once before, sir.” There is no record of the officers’ response to this frank reply. There is however a recommendation that cork lifebelts should be worn instead of kapok.

In answer to a further question, he told them that he was wearing a “jacket and cork belt” lifebelt.

The Commander of *Weigelia*, which was in company with *Angelus* was reprimanded for instructing *Angelus*’ master to sweep in the area at the low stage of tide then prevailing. It had been found that shallow water increased the probability of detonation. Poor John Boyle.

There is a further footnote to this event. On 4 April 1916 Thomas was discharged from the Navy, ‘medically unfit’. It is not reported whether this was due to what today we would define as PTSD, or the effects of submersion in cold oily water twice in the same winter.

Then there is a sad codicil to Thomas’s history. Searching for further information about him, now we knew his name, we found he wasn’t such a “boy” as the navy seemed to regard him. He was born in Paddington on 3 June 1898, so was 17 years old at his first detonation – an age at which many young men saw action at the Somme and Ypres. His parents were Thomas and Ellen Farrell of Exeter Street, Lisson Grove, London where he presumably returned on discharge.

This comment comes as we discover his death. Looking to see if he was awarded any medals for his naval service, revealed that he was awarded the Victory medal..... After he died of his wounds in action in Normandy, as a Private in the 3rd Battalion (The London Regiment) Royal Fusiliers! (BT 377/7/91075) He enlisted in Whitehall. He is buried at Etretat in the Churchyard Extension, which contains 282 military personnel, including 2 German soldiers.

What an extraordinary career, and what a tragedy to have died so young after two such miraculous escapes. We can only speculate what moved him to volunteer and submit himself to the terrors of infantry warfare so incredibly soon after his naval experiences.