

Commander Steele VC RN

(This is the title he wrote under for his book on HMS Worcester)

This is a short precise of his life as was told to Alan Coles in 1981 shortly before he died. Alan Coles was researching background for his book "Slaughter at Sea" published in 1986 ISBN 0-7090-2597-1

We all knew that he had won his VC in 1919 against the Bolsheviks at Kronstadt but very few Cadets or his staff would have known the full extent of his WWI and WWII experiences.

He was involved in sad occurrence fairly early on in WWI which was sensationalised in both America and Germany for political gain when the 'spin doctors' of the time used the incident to sway public opinion.

Gordon Steele was born in Exeter just before the turn of the 19th Century, educated at the Vale College, Ramsgate. His grandfather was a General in the Royal Marine Light Infantry. His father was Captain H.W. Steele RN and was the Captain Superintendent of the T.S. Cornwall moored of Purfleet in the Thames, from 1903 until he had a heart attack and died in January 1916, when Gordon Steele's mother became the Lady Superintendent until August 1916 !

Gordon Steel joined HMS Worcester in 1907, leaving in 1909 for an apprenticeship with P&O. During his time on the Worcester he was considered a brilliant student, he won the Howard Medal for Meteorology, and was second for the Kings Medal of 1909. He was awarded a P&O scholarship.

He joined his first ship the "Palma" a twin funnelled passenger liner of 7600 gross tons; finishing his cadetship on the "Egypt" an older passenger liner of 7900 gross tons, which after WWI collided with the French ship the Seine off the Ushant. Remembered for the amount of bullion being she was carrying at the time.

At the outbreak of WWI he was 3/O in the "Caledonia" a smart white painted two funnelled passenger ship of around 7500 gross tons.

He was mobilized with the Royal Naval Reserve and became one of the first reservists to serve in submarines. He was in the submarine D8 for five months.

He was chosen to support another submariner LCDR Herbert RN on the ex Great Eastern Railway Ferry named the "Vienna" the name was changed to the "Antwerp" because its original name was too German!; as a "Q" ship and Gordon Steele was a SBLT RNR.

The "Antwerp" had a merchant navy Captain and crew as well as a RN commander and naval detachment, of which SBLT Steele was acting as 2/ic.

The "Antwerp" was not a success being rather slow and lightly built, so LCDR Herbert talked the Admiralty into giving him a bigger, stronger ship, to convert into a "Q" ship with hidden guns and a variety of disguises. This was an Ellerman Bucknall ship called "Baralong" or in some references HMS "Baralong" or even HMS "Wyandra" it was built in 1901, again LCDR Herbert requested that SBLT Steele was made his 2/ic.

For most of the time the "Baralong" spent hanging around areas where incoming/outgoing ships were, at either end of the English Channel.

The "Lusitania" at around this time had been sunk by U27 causing no little trouble with American and German perceptions as to the correctness of torpedoing an American ship. Shortly afterwards the "Arabic" a White Star Line passenger ship was torpedoed by U27 again with loss of civilian life, which built up a lot of resentment against German U boats and the way they were targeting passenger ships.

The "Nicosian" was approaching the Bristol Channel with a full cargo of Mules destined for the front line in France, it had a number of Americans aboard who were not seamen but were there to look after the mules. U27 came across the "Nicosian" and began to shell her. The ship stopped and the ship's company took to the boats, meanwhile the "Baralong" had crept in close to the "Nicosian" on the blind side from the U Boat. When it was clear of "Nicosian" the "Baralong" commenced to open fire with its hidden guns. SBLT Steele's gun was

the first to fire, he got away three rounds when the gun jammed, he personally opened the breech, took out the faulty round and took it to the ship's side and threw the shell overboard. (a very dangerous thing to do)

Meanwhile the crew of "Nicosian" had boarded the "Baralong" who had whacked a good number of rounds into U27, as well as small arms fire against the German submariners.

Some eleven German submariners, naked, swam to the "Nicosian" and managed to clamber aboard, it was laying stopped and abandoned, when its Captain told LCDR Herbert that there were three rifles in the chart room with 200 rounds of ammunition.

LCDR Herbert told Gordon Steele to organise a boarding party, for which Gordon volunteered to lead, but was turned down by LCDR Herbert, who said he wanted him to control the ship's guns if they were needed and sink the "Nicosian".

The "Nicosian" was showing no signs of sinking so Steele raised his sights and fired over the ship. He was then ordered to fire at the gun on the "Nicosian's" poop till he learnt that it was a wooden mock up.

The boarding party, which was meant to be made up of Marines on the "Baralong", also had the Chief Engineer and the Carpenter of the "Nicosian" amongst them complete with pistols.

Anyway the outcome was that LCDR Herbert told the Corporal of Marines not to take any prisoners and to remember the "Luistiana" and "Arabic." All of the naked German submariners that were aboard the "Nicosian" were shot out of hand.

All this was witnessed, by the crew and muleteers of the "Nicosian". The people from "Nicosian" return to their ship and it was towed to start with by the "Baralong" but they eventually made Avonmouth under their own steam.

The police and other authorities told all concerned they were not to mention this to ANYONE, initially because the role that "Baralong" was supposed to play as a "Q" ship not for the incident just described.

It eventually leaked in the New Orleans press, and the German propaganda machine went into overdrive. LCDR Herbert got his DSC, and Gordon Steele "was 'admitted' to the RN, the first RNR officer to so be honoured"

He later went with LCDR Herbert back into the Submarine Service on the E2. He left the E2 to join the HMS "Royal Oak" and took part in the Battle of Jutland.

His first command was in 1917 and was the escort P63, he ended WWI as the captain of the sloop "Cornflower"

In August 1919 he was 2/ic of CMB88 when his commanding officer was shot, he took charge and attacked the Russian battleship "Andrei Petrozovanni" firing his starboard torpedo at it and sinking her, then on to the battlecruiser Petropavlosk firing his port torpedo and damaging her.

His C/O died when they had left the Kronstadt harbour and were picked up by the supporting destroyer. LEUT Steele and CMDR Claude Dobson are the only men to have been awarded a VC in action against Soviet Russia. Gordon Steele specialised in anti-submarine warfare after the WWI and 1919 episode, in 1929 when the XO of HMS "Cornwall" on the China Station, he applied for the position of Captain Superintendent of HMS "Worcester".

In 1938, the "Cutty Sark" the widow of its then owner, had given to HMS "Worcester" was being towed by the tug "Muria" from Falmouth to Greenhithe. Captain Steele was on the poop, near the saluting cannon, a gust of wind blew a smoking charge wrapper onto nearby charges, which exploded. Gordon Steele was severely burnt on the face and hands and temporarily blinded had to be put ashore, but recovered after 2 weeks in hospital. (another living source who was a cadet on that trip does not recall this explosion at all when I quizzed him about it!!)

In his reign on the "Worcester" he re-introduced the wearing of naval uniform by cadets. (I didn't know that we had not had a period without a uniform!) He reformed the daily life of the cadets by reduced fagging, stopped bullying, reformed beatings and stopped public Canning (?) (Although I can remember at least two occasions when it happened with summary punishment metered out by the PTI with all hands watching)

As Captain Superintendent he established syllabus courses on Civil Aviation and Air Navigation (When ?)

He was a member of the Central Board for Training Merchant Navy Officers, Brother of Trinity House, Member of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights, a Fellow of the Institute of Navigation, the Royal Geographical Society and Royal Meteorological Society and a Freeman of the City of London.

He was recalled in WWII and became the Commander Anti-Submarine Humber area, then the Inspector of Anti-Submarine equipment in Glasgow. He returned to HMS "Worcester" I 1945.

He never married

His 91 year old mother (The ex Lady Superintendent and we never knew) used to chat up the Cadets and his sister lived with them, along with a spaniel dog.

The "Nicosian" affair affected his outlook on life and he immersed himself in religion, he was a lay reader in the diocese of Canterbury, he began writing spiritual guidance booklets.

He had never committed the horror of the "Baralong" to paper.

The comments in brackets are mine, the rest is from more than one source.

Books in regard to the Kronstadt incident and LEUT Steele's part are:

Cowans War by Geoffrey Bennett.

Footprints in the Sea by Captain Augustus Agar. RN

Tony Maskell

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Sydney