

The S.S. Kerry Head



The S.S. *Kerry Head*, 825 gross tons, owned by Mullock & Sons, Limerick, was the first Irish ship to be deliberately attacked by one of the belligerent nations during World War II. The attack, by German aircraft, took place 4 miles east-south-east of the Old Head of Kinsale on 1st August 1940 whilst she was homeward bound from Swansea.

The evening of 1 August was a fine one, ideal for saving hay around Kinsale. John Hurley, a small farmer, seafarer and pilot at Kinsale, was making up a rick of hay in his haggard. He looked up at the sky when the bomber's roar ripped the silence and watched the dark wings of it rushing to the sea. Suddenly, the first sign of the war glinted in the sun over the old historic town. The German aircraft roared over the Bay of Ballymacous and circled the Sovereign Islands. John scanned the bay. There was a ship out there, a three-masted ship with derricks forward. He knew her well, the *Kerry Head*. Out near the Old Head of Kinsale he saw the plane line up, prepared for an attack on the ship.

Two explosions rumbled from the sea. John called two of the men who were making the rick with him and ran to the shore even as the plaintive siren of the *Kerry Head* moaned on. The three men launched the boat into the water and pulled at the oars. Half a mile outside the Bullman Rock, they saw the *Kerry Head*. She was stopped, but appeared undamaged. John pulled alongside and clambered aboard. There he met Captain

by Patrick J. McNamara

Charles Drummond and asked him what was wrong. The Wexford man replied "the plane bombed us."

After inspection of the ship, no structural damage was noted. No direct hit had been made on the ship. Captain Drummond explained that two light bombs had been dropped forward, missed the bridge and hit the sea right beside the vessel. A heavier bomb had fallen about five yards to the starboard side of the engine room. The concussion had stopped the engines. The impact of the sea had crushed in the vessel's side. The cabin quarters were a shambles. The forard winch had been cracked on both sides by the concussion alone; doors had been wrenched from their hinges. The compass was smashed, the glass from the wheelhouse windows was all over the place and cooking pots, tinned foods and crockery were spattered on the decks. One of the lifeboats had got locked and entangled in the davits. The other lifeboat had been lowered but was filling with water, but thankfully, nobody was hurt. The crew stood by in lifejackets. Some were disentangling the locked lifeboat. John Hurley's boat took the captain ashore to make the report to Limerick, where he was bound with a cargo of coal and tinplate for local industries.

The officers and crew stowed everything, steered the ship towards Barley

Cove with the intention of beaching her on a sandbank. There, remedial repairs were carried out to facilitate her return voyage to her home port.

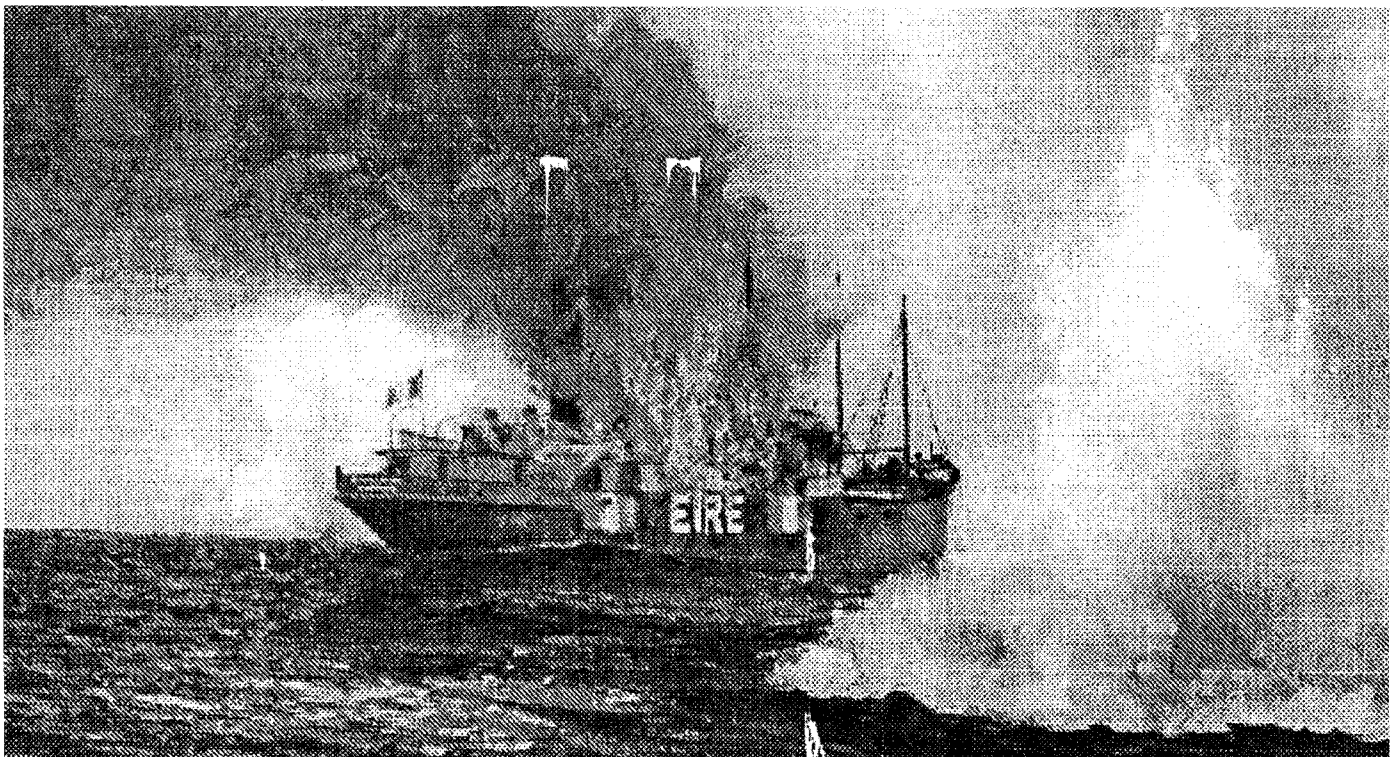
On her return to Limerick, Mullocks reported the incident. The Department of External Affairs instructed the Irish Charge d'Affaires in Berlin to lodge a protest with the German Foreign Office and to claim compensation for the damage caused. In reply, the German authorities accepted that the aircraft involved in the attack was indeed German, regrets were expressed and compensation was paid.

On the 17th August 1940, the German authorities published a notice stating that in future all shipping entering into prescribed zones including waters surrounding the Irish coast would be liable to attack without warning.

On 22nd October of the same year, the *Kerry Head* departed Limerick in ballast for Newport, Monmouthshire. Local people at Blackhall Head recognized the familiar outlines of the vessel as she passed out of sight.

She came to the attention of the Luftwaffe despite conditions of good visibility and the clear neutral markings on the ship. To the Germans, the *Kerry Head* was a target of opportunity. She was attacked 5 miles west of Sheep's Head, Co. Cork. According to the reports of four witnesses who saw the incident, they reported seeing an aircraft flying over the vessel and reported seeing the vessel sink immediately after an explosion at about 1. 15 p.m.

Local boats searched the area when



The *Kerry Head* on fire by Kenneth King



John Tobin



James Naughton

the signal went along the coast; the *Kerry Head* had passed Kinsale for the last time. There were no survivors, she went down with all hands and no bodies were ever recovered.

The *Kerry Head* was used mainly to bring coking coal from Cardiff to the old gasworks in Limerick. The original capital "K" from the stern of the ship is still in the office of Mullocks in Limerick, where it is part of a memorial plaque to the crew. It would appear that on its last voyage, the "K" was pulled off when it got caught in the ropes used to manoeuvre the ship into mid-channel.

Among the crew members were five Limerick men:

John Tobin, 55 O'Dwyer Villas, a married man with four daughters and a son. He was married to Abina Twoomey of Banteer, Co. Cork. John was aged about 50 and served as cook on the vessel; it was his first and sadly his last voyage on the *Kerry Head*. John was well known to oarsmen all over the country owing to his long connection with the Limerick Boat Club, where he was employed as a boatman.

The loss of the *Kerry Head* was a triple tragedy for the Naughton family. They had lost two sons, 41 year old George and his 30 year old brother, James. Their sister, Josie, had lost her intended husband, Bill Davidson, from Carrickfergus, who was chief engineer of the *Kerry Head*.

Thomas Begley, from William Street,

was a young married man who left a widow and three young children.

The fifth Limerick man was Patrick O'Neill, 89 Henry Street. He was single but was the main support of his widowed mother and sister.

News of the loss was broken to the relatives of the crew by local clergy. On the 1st March 1941, the following item appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*:

'With reference to the loss of the Kerry Head off Bantry Bay in October last, the Limerick City Manager has received a letter from the Department of Industry and Commerce stating that evidence had now reached the Ministry, which would appear to indicate that the loss of the Kerry Head was due to belligerent action. It would be possible to deal with the claims of dependents, but while a doubt remained the Minister could not entertain a proposal, which would involve payments from State funds.'

The German government disclaimed all knowledge and liability for the attack, stating that the ship was in a zone declared dangerous to shipping as per the 17th August 1940 notice.

In the course of an interview with Ms Barbara McNaughton, Hove, East Sussex, she related to the author the tragic story of her two uncles, George and James Naughton, and the last voyage of the *Kerry Head*. The ship, skippered by Charles

Drummond from Blackpool, was about to begin a supposedly uneventful voyage. On the morning of the ship's departure, it was realised that the ship did not have a full compliment; they were short one. George Naughton, the second engineer, mentioned the fact to the skipper that his brother, James, would fit the bill. At the original signing-on of the crew, James was unable to secure a berth, so reluctantly, he returned to his home at 4 Hogan's Terrace, located in the Windmill area of the city. The Windmill, a noted sea-fearing area of the city, was to give up more than one of her sons in the course of the war.

Without hesitation, George Naughton left the ship to inform his brother that he had secured a berth for him, as one of the original members of the crew had not reported for duty. James thought his luck was in and he was now on his way. What started as an uneventful trip was to end in tragedy for all at about 1.15p.m. on 22nd October, 1940.

Ireland, an island nation, was solely dependent on her small Mercantile Marine Fleet to sustain her with the necessities of life during the dark days of World War II. All the men were volunteers and the service in which they served was a civilian service. There was, however a price to pay and 14 brave Limerick men of the Irish Mercantile Marine paid it.

These were the men who went down to the sea in ships and never returned. They have no known grave and are commemorated on the Seamen's Memorial, Spokane Walk, Limerick City.

*There are no roses on a sailor's grave
No lilies on an ocean wave
The only tributes are the seagulls' sweep
And the teardrops that a sweetheart weeps.*

Taoiseach Eamon de Valera said "No country had ever been more effectively blockaded because of the activities of belligerents and our lack of ships, most of which had been sunk, which virtually cut all links with our normal sources of supply."

At the close of the war, he said "To the men of our mercantile marine, who faced all the perils of the ocean to bring us essential supplies the nation is profoundly grateful."

SOURCES

McNamara, Patrick J.: *Their Name Liveth For Evermore*, Limerick, 2006

Barbara McNaughton, Hove, England.
Mullock & Sons, (Shipbrokers) Ltd., Limerick.

Gerry Hartigan, Shannon.

Limerick Chronicle

The Irish Press.

The painting of the *Kerry Head* is by Dublin-born artist, Kenneth King. He was commissioned into the Royal Navy as a Chaplain and served in the Arctic, Atlantic, Mediterranean and Far East waters. He began painting full-time in 1976, specialising in the naval and merchant shipping of Ireland, together with the country's coastline and lighthouses.