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Q-SHIPS OF THE GREAT WAR

by

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER	II
CONTENTS.....	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
ENTER THE Q-SHIPS.....	5
THE ART OF DISGUISE	9
CAPTAINS AND THEIR CREWS.....	14
Q-SHIP TACTICS	17
Q-SHIP OPERATIONS.....	21
CONCLUSION.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29

Abstract

Lacking adequate antisubmarine warfare tactics and technologies to combat the German unrestricted submarine campaign during the Great War, the Allies turned to deception or *ruse de guerre* as a means to counter the U-boat menace. Armed decoys, known as Q-ships, manned by naval crews and outfitted with hidden guns, were introduced to deceive, trap and destroy U-boats. Registering early kills, Q-ships served as a valuable deterrent and had a demoralizing effect on previously bold U-boat crews. Q-ships successfully filled Britain's void in antisubmarine warfare through 1917. By 1918, the Q-ship campaign ground to a halt when these intrepid decoys lost their usefulness through frequency of use and lost surprise. This paper examines the employment of Q-ships in the Allied maritime strategy during the Great War, focusing on the requisite elements and specific tactics associated with this unique form of deception. Significant engagements are examined to assess the effect Q-ships had against U-boats and their overall impact during the course of the war.

Part 1

Introduction

The German U-boat campaign against Allied merchant shipping during the Great War is a story of enormous tragedy and controversy. Although attacks against merchant shipping had long been used as a tactic to exert economic pressure on an adversary, Germany's use of submarines for this task resulted in a loss of ships and lives on such a massive scale as never before witnessed in seafaring history.¹ Ironically, German pre-war naval strategy did not envision using submarines as commerce raiders, but during the course of 1915 Germany began to recognize the commerce raiding potential of its U-boats.²

The Royal Navy was wholly unprepared to combat submarines at the war's outset. Admiral Sir Jackie Fisher, the only British Admiral to foresee the danger from submarines, especially in their role as a commerce raiders, warned his government, but was largely ignored.³ The British Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, refused to consider that a civilized nation would embark on such a barbarous practice in violation of international laws that prohibited leaving men adrift in open boats.⁴ The British finally recognized the real menace of the submarine when shipping losses rose dramatically in 1915 after the U-boat arm began its first unrestricted warfare campaign.

Lacking adequate antisubmarine warfare tactics and technology, the Allies turned to deception or *ruse de guerre* as a means to counter the U-boat menace. Both passive and active defenses were used for deception. Armed decoys, known initially as Special Service vessels and

later as Q-ships, became the most conspicuous exemplification of these active defenses. Q-ships were designed to deceive, trap, and destroy U-boats.

The notion of using deception was not new to the British Navy. It had successfully employed the art of cunning and deception during past naval operations. In earlier examples of maritime deception, the British Navy attempted to protect sailing ships by painting them to look like frigates and fitting them with wooden guns, enabling them to sail safely past enemy ships. During the Great War, this system was reversed. An assortment of vessels appearing to look like peaceful merchant ships were equipped with hidden guns manned by naval personnel. Their aim was to lure unsuspecting U-boats to the surface while proceeding harmlessly alone along shipping routes where submarines were known to be operating. Once the bait was taken, these ships were to destroy the U-boats at close range with their superior firepower.

Convinced that Q-ships represented Britain's only imminent hope of survival in the face of the growing U-boat threat, the Admiralty pursued this creative option even when it was unlikely that this method alone would ever prove decisive.⁵ Shrouded in secrecy, Q-ship operations nonetheless helped mitigate the U-boat threat and provided the Allies with additional time to develop more advanced methods to solve the submarine menace. Although sources vary on U-boat losses attributed to Q-ships, the total during the three-year Q-ship campaign was less than fourteen, representing about eight percent of the 145 submarines sunk during the Great War.⁶ These numbers, however, are an ineffective determinant of Q-ships' successes. Even more U-boats were undoubtedly damaged in encounters with Q-ships, causing innumerable man-hours of repair work in German dockyards.⁷ The deterrent value of Q-ships is also difficult to quantify. It is impossible to determine how many merchant vessels were spared by U-boat skippers out of fear that a target may turn out to be a Q-ship or 'trap ship' as the Germans called them.⁸

Historians have varying opinions regarding the overall contribution of Q-ships during the Great War. Some claim that Q-ships may have caused more harm than good as the Germans used their presence as an excuse to increase the ferocity of submarine attacks.⁹ Experience taught the Germans the danger of surfaced attacks against seemingly innocent merchantmen. As a result, many U-boat commanders opted to sink merchant ships without warning, using torpedoes instead of deck guns. While this tactic made it more difficult for merchant ships to escape harm, it forced U-boats to expend their limited supply of torpedoes (8-12 per boat), compelling many U-boats to return to base earlier than they might have done if they had engaged on the surface.¹⁰ Regardless of these arguments, by mid-1917 Q-ships had outlived their usefulness as U-boats adapted to the conditions created by this *ruse de guerre* and the Allies adopted more efficient and effective submarine countermeasures.

This paper examines in detail the use of Q-ships in the Allied maritime strategy during the Great War. It provides a brief overview of the contextual elements that necessitated such a strategy in the absence of other countermeasures, introduces key personalities who advocated the use of Q-ships, and examines requisite elements along with specific tactics associated with this unique form of deception. Significant engagements are examined to assess the effect Q-ships had against U-boats and their overall impact during the course of the war.

Notes

¹ Bryan Ranft, "The Royal Navy and the War at Sea," in *Britain and the First World War*, ed. John Turner (London: Terrence Dalton, 1988), 64.

² Phillip K. Lundeberg, "The German Naval Critique of the U-boat Campaign, 1915-1918," *Military Affairs*, 27, no.3: 106-107.

³ Barry M. Gough, "Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute Science* 133, no. 4: 57.

⁴ Tony Bridgland, *Sea Killers in Disguise: The Story of the Q-ships and Decoy Ships in the First World War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 2.

⁵ Carson Ritchie, *Q-ships* (London: Terrence Dalton, 1985), 80.

⁶ Ritchie, 157.

Notes

⁷ Bridgland, 147.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ritchie, 160.

¹⁰ Gordon Campbell, *My Mystery Ships* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1929), 304.

Part II

Enter the Q-Ships

Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, is often credited with inaugurating the Q-ship era during the Great War. Churchill's desire to trap a German submarine that was sinking vessels off Le Havre on the northwest coast of France served as the impetus for the first Q-ship operations of the war. In a telegram sent to the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, Admiral Sir Hedworth Meux, on 26 November 1914, Churchill wrote:

It is desired to trap the German submarine which sinks vessels by gunfire off Havre. A small or moderate sized steamer should be taken up and fitted very secretly with two twelve-pounder guns in such a way that they can be concealed with deck cargo or in some way in which they will not be suspected. She should be sent when ready to run from Havre to England and should have an intelligence officer and a few seamen and two picked gunlayers who should all be disguised. If the submarine stops her she should endeavor to sink her by gunfire. The greatest secrecy is necessary to prevent spies becoming acquainted with the arrangements.¹

The Admiralty ordered its first dedicated decoy vessels shortly after the Churchill directive. Before Q-ships came into service on a large scale, the decoy system scored some early successes in the North Sea where U-boats harassed and frequently attacked the British fishing fleet with gunfire from the surface.² A group of fishing trawlers interspersed with a few armed decoys, forefathers of the Q-ships, successfully lured *U-14* into a trap on 5 June 1914 that resulted in her being rammed and ultimately sunk. Armed fishing trawlers also engaged *UB-6* and *UB-4* in a similar manner in August 1915.³ Because these fishing trawlers were not officially designated as

Q-ships their successes were not included in Q-ship kill totals, but these trawlers did validate the concept of using decoys against submarines.

Another idea evolved from the trawler concept described above. The Admiralty decided to use an ordinary trawler and a British submarine to hunt as a pair. In accordance with this plan, a decoy trawler was outfitted with a “stinger” in the form of a submerged C-class submarine attached by a towing cable.⁴ The vessels communicated via a waterproof telephone cable and two phones. When attacked, the trawler’s skipper notified the submarine, which would then release to pursue the U-boat. The trawler *Taraniki* and *C-24* registered the first success using this tactic on 23 June 1915 by sinking *U-40* off Girdle Ness on the east coast of Scotland. This engagement was not without incident, however, as *C-24*’s release device jammed. *Taraniki* was forced to slip her end of the tow causing *C-24* to become entangled in her own cables and lose trim. *C-24* miraculously extricated herself and was able to torpedo and sink *U-40*. About a month later, on 20 July, the trawler *Princess Louise* and *C-27* working in tandem successfully sank *U-23* off the Scottish coast. During this attack, the now famous Q-ship ploy, simulated panic, was first used successfully. Details on the use of ‘panic crews’ are provided in a later discussion on Q-ship tactics. Despite their initial success, trawler/submarine partnerships were employed infrequently after the sinking of *U-40* and *U-23*.

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, was among those who early in the war believed that the decoy system offered the best chance to overcome the growing submarine menace. In spite of this view, some within the Admiralty were less optimistic about the utility of individual Q-ships, given their limited success in the eight months following Churchill’s directive. By mid-July 1915, Jellicoe and other members of the Admiralty realized that additional coordination was required to maximize Q-ship effectiveness.⁵ It is interesting to

note, however, that despite the Admiralty's desire for increased coordination, no single officer was ever appointed to oversee the Q-ship fleet. Therefore, the task of raising, equipping and overseeing Q-ship operations was dispersed among those admirals in charge of local commands. While this approach hampered coordination efforts, it did result in great enthusiasm, drive, and creativity regarding Q-ship employment among these local commanders.⁶

Because the Germans concentrated their attacks against merchant ships off the western approaches to the British Isles, this area became a focal point of antisubmarine operations.⁷ Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly was charged with protecting a 25,000 square mile area surrounding the western approaches from his base at Queenstown (current Cobh), on the southeastern coast of Ireland. Bayly was perhaps the most visible and vocal of the Q-ship enthusiasts.⁸ In August 1915, shortly after assuming command at Queenstown, he sent the Admiralty a letter outlining his ideas regarding the employment of Q-ships. Incorporating the idea of using decoys to protect the western approaches, he immediately ordered the conversion of three ex-colliers to serve as Q-ships. Eventually, Bayly had over 140 Q-ships under his command. Several officers under Bayly's charge, including Commander Gordon Campbell, First Lieutenant Harold Auten and Commander F.H. Grenfell, became legendary Q-ship skippers. Much of their success is owed to Bayly who did everything in his power to ensure the success of Q-ships by improving their fighting power and survivability, perfecting disguises and improving crew morale through offering hazard pay and incentives for U-boat kills.

Admiral Sir Stanley Colville was another Q-ship enthusiast. The Admiralty selected him as Bayly's counterpart for the area north of Scotland. This area was also heavily infested with U-boats. Colville had long been a staunch advocate of decoy vessels and his enthusiasm for this idea only increased as he witnessed firsthand the potential of Q-ships. Both of the

Q-ship-submarine tandems highlighted above were under Colville's charge when they teamed up to sink *U-40* and *U-23* respectively. Colville is credited with crafting the panic ploy, a standard tactic of Q-ship warfare. In great secrecy, Admiral Colville assembled and directed the operations of a small group of decoys at Longhope, a small inlet off Scapa Flow. Admiral Colville was also blessed with capable Q-ship skippers like Lieutenant William Mark-Wardlaw who commanded the *Prince Charles*, the first dedicated Q-ship to register an independent U-boat kill.

Notes

¹ Bridgland, x.

² Bridgland, 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David D. Mercer, "Sledge Hammers, Lance Bombs, and Q-ships," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 87, no. 4, 77.

⁵ Bridgland, 6.

⁶ Ritchie, 45.

⁷ E. Keble Chatterton, *Q-ships and their Story* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1972), vii.

⁸ Chatterton, 46.

Part III

The Art of Disguise

Throughout 1915-1917, upwards of 200 vessels served as Q-ships, with some commissions lasting only a few months. During this same period, hundreds of passenger, steamer and sailing vessels throughout Britain were inspected for their potential as Q-ships, but many were found unsuitable owing to their peculiar structure or the impossibility of effective disguise.¹ A variety of platforms were eventually converted to Q-ships including steamers, tramps, colliers, cargo ships, coasters, convoy sloops, salvage vessels, stores carriers, tugs, yachts, whalers, trawlers, and sailing ships. Early on, there was considerable debate amongst the Admiralty, local commanders and Q-ship skippers as to which platform was best suited to serve as decoys. In order to be appealing bait for a submarine, yet not attract a torpedo, a Q-ship had to be a small merchant craft.² Therefore, ships ranging from 200 to 4,000 tons were generally preferred for Q-ship duty. Unfortunately, vessels of this size were generally unable to maintain the speed and agility required for naval maneuvers. Eventually, the ‘three-island’ tramp, whose appearance was so ordinary that it could be seen at any time at sea, became the ideal Q-ship.³ Although limited to a speed of about 10 knots, a tramp could remain at sea for long periods without coaling. This, coupled with its small size and innocent appearance, made the tramp particularly suitable for Q-ship duties.

Disguise was an essential ingredient in the success of Q-ships. One of the most salient features of the Q-ship was its perpetual masquerade.⁴ Creative craftsmen, who secretly transformed innocent vessels into armed and dangerous Q-ships from dockyards throughout Britain and Ireland, facilitated such masquerades. Often pooling ideas, these craftsmen altered basic structures and contrived a multitude of devices designed to conceal the identity of Q-ships. A variety of ingenious false deck fittings, disappearing mounts, as well as hinged bulwarks and gunwales were commonly used to conceal the Q-ships' arms. A typical Q-ship armament mix consisted of heavy 12-pound guns, smaller 6 and 3-pounders, modern 4-inch guns, Maxim machine guns and shoulder-fired weapons. Some later Q-ships were even equipped with depth charge launchers. Dummy lifeboats and scuttles, empty cargo crates and hatchway covers were also used to conceal guns. When a U-boat came within range, these contrivances were designed to collapse like cards or fall apart on command with a jerk of a lever, disclosing loaded guns and providing a clear field of fire. Screens that could be easily pushed aside were also used to conceal smaller guns mounted on bridge wings and stanchions.

Because a decoy's crew typically outnumbered that of an ordinary merchant owing to the fact that in addition to sailors navigating the ship, men were needed to man the guns and orchestrate the panic ploy, it was necessary to keep the 'extras' out of sight of watching periscopes. Craftsmen made this possible through the installation of a series of trap doors that allowed movement within the ship's skin, limiting the use of outside ladders.⁵ Crewmembers entered many of the gun and lookout positions using these trap doors. A former Q-ship crewmember remarked that "so skillfully was the armament of these ships concealed that they frequently laid in harbor close to foreign ships without revealing their true nature."⁶

Q-ships were also outfitted with periscopes and wireless aerial antennas that were also cleverly disguised.

In addition to the permanent disguises, Q-ship captains used a variety of subtle temporary disguises to quickly alter a Q-ship's appearance in hopes of confusing U-boat commanders.⁷ These temporary disguises could be applied or removed during darkness, so that as dawn broke an entirely different ship would appear on the horizon. A fairly simple trick in this respect was flying a neutral country's flag and painting the corresponding colors on the ship's side and funnel. Q-ship skippers were encouraged to assume names of ships of tonnage similar to their own that could reasonably be expected to be operating in the same area. They were also urged to consult *Lloyds's Weekly Index* and *Lloyd's Register* to obtain owners' names and paint schemes as the Germans also had access to such information.⁸ Canvas screens were also stretched along the sides of a ship's well-deck to give it a flush-deck appearance. False or dummy structures, such as wooden funnels and lifeboats could be added, removed or shifted as desired. Spare ventilators, cowls and removable stanchions could also be moved about the deck. Telescopic topmasts enabled ships to appear as either a stump-mast ship or a ship with a topmast. Derricks could be stowed in different positions to fool the enemy. Other simple disguise measures included moving the location of deck cargo and life-belt racks.

Although some Q-ships and platform types became famous for their disguises, one of the most ingenious disguises emerged early into the campaign when a Q-ship was disguised as a crashed Zeppelin in August 1915. The concept was that a well-armed trawler, suitably disguised as a disabled airship forced to land at sea, would trap any U-boat coming to the rescue, while a C-class submarine waited in the vicinity to attack. The trawler *Oyama* was chosen for this unique masquerade. Several problems resulting from a lack of freeboard and an abundance of

outside fitting were encountered on *Oyama's* maiden voyage in disguise. *Oyama* never fooled the Germans and because of this and the difficulties associated with this ploy, she was withdrawn from service after about three months.⁹

Besides disguises, the Admiralty took other measures to provide for the security of Q-ships and the safety of their crews. From the start of the Q-ship campaign, white ensigns were raised at the commencement of naval action in compliance with provisions of the Hague Convention. By September 1915, the Admiralty commissioned all Q-ships to further comply with international law. This measure ensured Q-ship crewmembers were not treated as pirates or *francs tireurs* in the event of capture. The term *francs tireurs*, originating during the Franco-Prussian War, was used to refer to French fighters out of uniform. A lasting German hatred grew from the constant harassment at the hands of *francs tireurs*, resulting in those British sailors who were suspected of being *francs tireurs* being dealt with mercilessly. During the Great War, Germany equated Q-ship crews with *francs tireurs*.¹⁰ In July 1916, as a concession to the Germans, the Admiralty directed that Q-ship crews wear 'War Service Badges' as added insurance against being shot as *francs tireurs*. Additionally, about half way through the Q-ship campaign, the Admiralty scrapped the practice of assigning "Q" numbers to each decoy. Because this designation was used exclusively for decoy vessels, it made for easy identification. Finally, many Q-ships filled their cargo holds with buoyant materials like timber, empty casks and barrels to prevent or delay sinking after torpedo attack.

Notes

¹ Chatterton, 186.

² Ritchie, 52.

³ Chatterton, 24.

⁴ Ritchie, xviii.

⁵ Bridgland, 15.

⁶ Chatterton, 25.

Notes

- ⁷ Bridgland, 15.
- ⁸ Ritchie, 16.
- ⁹ Bridgland, 16.
- ¹⁰ Ritchie, 166.

Part IV

Captains and their Crews

Next to disguise, a skilled captain and disciplined crew were considered requisites for success. The initial commanders of the Special Service were handpicked from the regular navy. Later, volunteers were drawn from varied backgrounds, including retired naval officers and mercantile skippers.¹ Although little is written about the qualities sought in Q-ship captains, it appears independence of character was essential given the special nature of decoy work. Q-ship captains, arbitrating not only their fate, but that of their crews and ships, could hardly afford to be panic-stricken, hasty or impetuous.² Because crews became so reliant on their captains, strong bonds developed and when a Q-ship was sunk or taken out of service, her crew generally transferred to a new ship as a group.

As mentioned earlier, Q-ship crews were large owing to their tactics. Q-ship crews comprised both active service and mercantile ratings. Manning for two crews was required for each ship, imposing a burden on accessions for the Q-ship fleet. Crew sizes varied according to ship size and armament, but a typical complement included 70-100 officers, seamen, and marines ranging in age from their late teens to early sixties. At first, Navy depots drafted Q-ship manpower from their 'hard men' - ex-inmates of detention quarters, brawlers, leave-breakers and rebels.³ Unreliable and uncontrollable, these men were less than ideal for Special Service duty, especially since they served alongside merchantmen unaccustomed to naval discipline. Self-

discipline was the trait that captains most desired in their crews. Such discipline was integral to tactics that required crewmembers to remain perfectly still and quiet for hours even when under attack and to refrain from defending themselves, in order to preserve a Q-ship's identity, until directed to fight. Captain Campbell, a renowned Q-ship skipper, constantly emphasized that "success depended on each individual, and that any one man could spoil the show."⁴ Reliability was another important crewmember trait, as secrecy was vital to the Q-ship campaign. Campbell and the other Q-ship commanders eventually convinced the Admiralty that only the best were good enough for decoy work and eventually more suitable men were selected from volunteers. Surviving these initial growing pains, an *esprit de corps* quickly developed among Q-ship crews as men from varying walks of life became united in their singular mission to kill U-boats.

Because a Q-ship's success was dependent on its ability to present itself as an ordinary merchant, all onboard activities had to be carried out in the mercantile fashion. Strictest attention to detail was required. Q-ship crews studied and assumed the dress, manner, speech and gait of merchant seamen at all times.⁵ Uniforms were forbidden and the Admiralty provided a small allowance to each crewmember for the purchase of nondescript, second-hand clothing. Even navy-issued flannel underwear was barred out of fear that if hung on a clothes line it could have been a signal that navy men were aboard, thus giving away the game. Stretching the rules of the game beyond what might be considered fair play, some men disguised themselves as women by wearing dresses and wigs to convince watching U-boats that their ships were harmless. Going ashore in civilian clothes presented some problems for Q-ship crews. Captain Campbell noted that his men complained that "girls would not walk out with them" and they were "attacked with white feathers."⁶ It was a common practice for women to stick white feathers, a sign of cowardice, in the pockets of any young man not in uniform. Sympathetic to

their plight, Campbell received permission for Q-ship crews to wear a buttonhole-badge worn by dockyard workers that read ‘On War Service.’

Much was asked of and expected from Q-ship crews. Living in overcrowded conditions, crews stayed at sea for long periods, were under constant threat from U-boats, and ran the risk of being shot as *francs tireurs*. Additionally, crews had to have good memories so that in the event of capture, all their facts would match.⁷ Because of these hardships, Admiral Bayly successfully petitioned the Admiralty for extra pay for members of the Special Service. Amounting to little more than a few extra pence per day, this money served to recognize the extraordinarily harsh conditions and dangers faced by Q-ship crews.

Notes

¹ Ritchie, 1.

² Chatterton, 159.

³ Bridgland, 13.

⁴ Campbell, 61.

⁵ J. D. Copley, “The ‘Q’ Ships,” *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 12, no. 4, 459.

⁶ Campbell, 56.

⁷ Copley, 459.

Part V

Q-Ship Tactics

Q-ship tactics were simple but relatively effective. As already mentioned, disguise - along with a well-trained and disciplined crew were essential to Q-ship tactics. Sailing from a variety of Irish and British ports, Q-ships were rarely assigned to a specific target. Instead, Q-ships plied normal trade routes, where U-boats were usually concentrated, in the hope of inviting attack. For the most part Q-ships operated off the coasts of Ireland, Britain, Scotland and France, but many also saw duty in the Mediterranean. During a voyage, months might pass before a U-boat was sighted and many Q-ships never did sight one.¹ While cruising, Q-ship skippers took rigid safety precautions, including posting lookouts and steering zig-zag courses. General orders to Q-ship skippers stipulated that Q-ships:

...strictly observe the role of a decoy. If an enemy submarine is sighted, every effort is to be made to escape, and if the submarine opens fire, engines are to be stopped, and the ship's company (except the necessary engine-room staff and the guns' crews, who must be kept carefully out of sight) commence to abandon ship. The submarine should be allowed to come as close as possible to decoy, and fire then opened by order of the whistle or steam siren with white ensign being hoisted at the same time. Do not fire unless you are pretty sure of making a hit.²

When the long-desired contact with the enemy finally came, Q-ship skippers feigned an effort to get away, though as a matter of practice, vessels were slowed up gradually to bring the submarine within range. With luck, the submarine would surface to engage the 'merchant ship' with its deck guns or to plant bombs on its victim, conserving its precious torpedoes for more

lucrative targets.³ Prior to 1917, it was common for U-boats to surface and give merchant ships time to lower lifeboats before being sunk. Ironically, this practice complemented Q-ship tactics.

The panic crew was the most rehearsed of the acts of pantomime used by Q-ships. Q-ship skippers, remaining hidden, would give the order to abandon ship, unleashing the ‘panic crew,’ who mimicked the action that a merchant ship’s crew would take if under attack. Of course, the major difference was that half the crew stayed behind to man the hidden guns. When directed by the Q-ship captain, deliberate pandemonium broke out as men climbed out of their holds and scrambled about the main deck with every semblance of terror and panic. They held prized possessions and supplies, and shouted and tripped over each other as they struggled into lifeboats with feigned clumsiness.⁴ Some seasoned crews embellished this ploy by intentionally leaving a shipmate behind to give the appearance that he had not heard the abandon ship order. In a display of high drama, a sooty-faced stoker staggered to the main deck rail waving his arms and desperately yelling for help from the lifeboats, which would retrieve him without haste. The panic crew’s goal was to trick the U-boat into thinking the seemingly doomed vessel had been completely abandoned, enticing it nearer to shell the ‘abandoned’ ship. Once within range, on the captain’s order, the white ensign was run up the masthead and the ingenious contrivances, described previously, would collapse, exposing the hidden guns that raked rapid and accurate fire onto the U-boat at point-blank range before it could dive out of danger. The majority of the U-boats killed by Q-ships fell victim to this standard tactic.

After the initial successes, the effectiveness of Q-ships declined as the Germans became aware of their existence and familiar with their tactics, forcing variations in the standard Q-ship ruse. To continue to lure their prey, Q-ship skippers intentionally set fire to tubs of dried seaweed on deck to give U-boat gunners a false sense that they had scored a direct hit. This also

confused gunners regarding the range and accuracy of their weapons. Q-ships would often make smoke to give the appearance that they were endeavoring to achieve top speed to escape, when in reality the engines were slowed.⁵ Explosive and smoke-producing devices were also used to give the impression that a Q-ship had suffered a catastrophe, luring overconfident U-boats into easy range. Soon, however, U-boat skippers came to recognize these variations too.

To compensate for the Q-ship threat, U-boat skippers were forced to alter their tactics. By 1917, U-boats became increasingly reluctant to engage on the surface and many opted to ruthlessly torpedo merchant ships without revealing themselves, providing no warning or chance of defense. The advent of the improved-range 5.9-inch gun enabled U-boats to sink ships with gunfire from greater distances, rendering shorter-ranged Q-ship guns useless. Many U-boat skippers refused to come alongside an intended victim, preferring to attack from dead ahead or astern, where concealed Q-ship guns could not be easily brought to bear.⁶ During the course of the war, U-boat skippers also became more proficient at recognizing Q-ship disguises, particularly the hinged structures used to conceal arms. Many skippers sailed submerged around a potential victim staring intently through the periscope to detect any tell-tale signs that may betray a Q-ship.

Q-ships were for the most part unable to counter these new German tactics. Efforts were taken to reinforce Q-ships with timber and other buoyant materials to delay sinking brought on by torpedo attacks. During 1917, some Q-ship skippers adopted near-suicidal tactics to lure submarines to the surface. By inviting U-boats to torpedo them and turning into the track of inbound torpedoes, some skippers hoped that their stricken ships could keep afloat long enough to eventually dispose of the attacking U-boats.⁷ Once hit, the skipper would order the panic ploy while the remainder waited concealed and unresponsive to the inflicted damage. Displaying

incredible bravery, those still onboard waited as the U-boat either closed on the surface or shelled the Q-ship relentlessly from a distance. U-boat skippers only acquiesced after they were convinced that it was safe to approach, confident that the shelling had exceeded the limits of human courage and no survivors were likely.⁸ In this battle of will, Q-ships could only wait. Sometimes the results were favorable, in other cases, Q-ships and their crews perished.

Notes

¹ Copley, 458.

² Ritchie, 13.

³ Copley, 458.

⁴ Bridgland, 18.

⁵ Chatterton, 101.

⁶ Copley, 459.

⁷ Ritchie, xvii.

⁸ Charles Gill and William Stevens, eds., *Harper's Pictorial Library of the World War: Vol IV The War on the Sea: Battles, Sea Raids, and Submarine Campaigns* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920), 299.

Part VI

Q-ship Operations

Much has been written about the lively actions fought between Q-ships and U-boats during the Great War. Over seventy duels took place, yielding less than fourteen U-boat kills.¹ This came at a disproportionate cost as approximately 27 Q-ships were lost to U-boats.² While, it is not possible to recount the details of each of these deadly tales of courage here, a few of these engagements stand out for the effect they had on the course of the war. Two significant encounters occurred in mid-1915, early into the Q-ship campaign. While not representative of every duel, the exploits of *Prince Charles* and *Baralong* highlight some of the positive and negative aspects of Q-ship operations. An examination of these engagements is useful in determining the overall impact Q-ships had against U-boats.

The small collier *Prince Charles*, commanded by Lieutenant William Mark-Wardlaw, a 28-year old hailing from a family with a long naval tradition, became famous as the first Q-ship to sink a U-boat unaided. Setting sail from Scapa Flow on 20 July 1915, *Prince Charles*, after three uneventful days at sea, sighted a U-boat on the surface about 120 miles west of the Orkney Islands. *U-36* was preparing to board the Danish steamer *Louise*. On sighting *Prince Charles*, *U-36* departed *Louise's* side, pursuing instead the more lucrative collier at full speed. Mark-Wardlaw stopped the ship's engines and ordered the panic party to take to the boats. Continuing to close, *U-36* fired a shot from about 600 yards, missing its mark by only a few yards. *U-36*

then stopped, but continued to fire while turning broadside to *Prince Charles*. Mark-Wardlaw, recognizing this blunder as an opportunity, unmasked his guns, hoisted the white ensign, and opened fire. *Prince Charles*' initial shells missed, but they sent *U-36*'s gunners into the conning tower for shelter as the submarine attempted to dive. Firing a second round broadside from 300 yards, *Prince Charles* scored a direct hit. *U-36*'s crew tumbled out of the conning tower as the submarine sank stern-first. Fifteen men, including *U-36*'s commander, survived and were captured. Intelligence gained from interrogation of the survivors provided valuable insight into U-boat operations.³ *Prince Charles*' success was very encouraging to the Admiralty and many other Q-ships were fitted out and sent into action as a result.

On 19 August 1915, the Q-ship *Baralong*, a converted tramp steamer, gained the world's attention through its dramatic and controversial engagement with *U-27*. *Baralong* was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Godfrey Herbert, an ex-submariner considered by many to be a maverick for his unconventional methods, roistering style and ruthless disposition.⁴ *Baralong* had been in service for four months, but had yet to encounter any U-boats. The crew's only moment of excitement came in responding to a distress call from *Lusitania*, sunk by a U-boat in April. Herbert and his crew were deeply affected by this incident as they saw first-hand the recovered bodies of *Lusitania* passengers that had been laid out on the Queenstown jetty.⁵

At mid-day 19 August, *Baralong* was patrolling the western approaches off the Scilly Islands when it received another distress call, this time from passenger liner *Arabic*, which had been attacked by a U-boat. Herbert raced to the scene, but there were no signs of wreckage at the reported position. Believing they had arrived too late, Herbert and his crew were devastated, unaware that *Arabic* had provided the wrong coordinates during the panic. Dejected, *Baralong*

turned towards the Bristol Channel only to intercept yet another SOS from a ship in close proximity being chased by a submarine. At that moment, one of the lookouts reported steam coming from a stalled British freighter ahead. The freighter was later identified as *Nicosian*, carrying 750 mules and other supplies from America for the British Army.

Baralong approached the scene cautiously, hoping to close within range without arousing suspicion by flying the neutral Stars and Stripes and displaying a name board reading ‘*Ulysses S. Grant, USA.*’⁶ Herbert hoisted the international distress flag for “am saving life” as further evidence of his innocent intentions. By the time *Baralong* arrived, *Nicosian*’s crew had already manned the lifeboats as *U-27* continued to pump shells into the now-abandoned freighter. Herbert maneuvered *Baralong* for action, putting *Nicosian* between himself and *U-27*, shielding the submarine’s view. Within seconds, the ‘American tramp’ transformed herself into a British man-of-war. *Baralong* rapidly fired thirty-four 12-pound rounds at *U-27*, which quickly sank.

The controversial events that followed turned this encounter into an atrocity that was admonished by the Kaiser himself. Amazingly, a dozen of *U-27*’s crew, including its skipper Kapitänleutnant Bernhard Wegener, escaped certain death and swam towards *Nicosian*, which surprisingly remained afloat. Herbert observed a few submariners climbing up *Nicosian*’s ladders. Fearing they might scuttle the ship and destroy its valuable cargo, Herbert ordered his riflemen to open fire again. Six submariners survived the fusillade, scrambling to safety on *Nicosian*’s deck and hiding. Herbert sent a boarding party of Marines aboard *Nicosian* to find the submariners. The Marines tracked down and shot the remaining Germans. *Baralong*’s crew reveled in its actions, having avenged *Lusitania* and *Arabic*. Although accounts vary, eyewitnesses reported that Wegener was shot at least twice in the water, despite raising his hands to surrender.

The Germans learned about *U-27's* fate from American newspapers. American muleteers serving aboard *Nicosian*, complained to the American Consul in Liverpool about the cold-blooded manner in which the submariners were killed. The details of the incident were published when they arrived back home. Prior to this encounter, the employment of Q-ships had not provoked any comment from Germany.⁷ The German government was outraged upon hearing details of this incident, demanding the arrest and trial of *Baralong's* crew for murder. Using the *Baralong* affair for propaganda, the Germans now had a 'British atrocity' as a counterpoise to offset their own U-boat atrocities.

The *Baralong* incident became a turning point in the Q-ship campaign. Naturally, the Admiralty was pleased with *Baralong's* disposal of *U-27*. Further amplifying the value of Q-ships and their ability to independently destroy submarines, the incident convinced the Admiralty to shelve Q-ship-submarine partnerships in favor of fitting out more steamers as decoys.⁸ The Admiralty was, however, somewhat disappointed with the price of *Baralong's* success as the ensuing negative publicity made Q-ships anything but a secret weapon, impairing their future usefulness.⁹ Once the surprise factor was lost, a Q-ship's task of enticing submarines became a much more difficult. As the war progressed, a Q-ship's best hope was to catch an impulsive or inexperienced U-boat skipper off guard. The situation was made even more daunting by indecisive duels. Q-ships involved in failed engagements became marks for future attack as the German intelligence network compiled extensive dossiers on known decoys.

Perhaps the most important ramification of the *Baralong* incident was its adverse psychological effect. The *Baralong* affair doubtlessly hardened the attitude of U-boat commanders and the use of Q-ships made it difficult for Germany to wage its U-boat campaign

using traditional prize rules.¹⁰ The mere existence of Q-ships appeared to be a ready-made justification to ruthlessly attack civilian and neutral shipping as reprisals.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the *Baralong* was not the only Q-ship to arouse German hatreds. On 30 April 1917, *Prize*, most famous of the sailing Q-ships, inflicted what appeared to be mortal damage to *U-93*, the most modern U-boat then in service. The *U-93* disappeared beneath the surface after suffering an incredible pounding. Three crewmembers including *U-93's* skipper, Kapitänleutnant Von Spiegel, managed to escape before the apparent sinking. Von Spiegel, was convinced that his boat had perished. Incredibly, *U-93's* remaining crew brought her back to Emden on the surface under the cover of darkness. The Kaiser, who personally decorated *U-93's* second-in-command, was outraged by this incident. As a result, U-boat crews were instructed to regard *Prize* as a priority target.¹² The Germans found their mark in late 1917, sinking *Prize* with all hands.

In addition to the loss of surprise described above, Germany's decision to end unrestricted submarine warfare in mid-September 1915 also affected Q-ship operations. This decision was brought on by vigorous American protests over U-boat sinkings of passenger liners. During the winter months of 1915-1916, U-boat activities against shipping practically came to a halt except in the Mediterranean.¹³ During this same time period, Q-ships saw little action.

The situation remained static until Germany reinstated unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917 in the hope of crippling Britain before America entered the war. Q-ships rapidly responded to the resumption of U-boat operations, scoring two kills in mid-February.¹⁴ By March, however, U-boats exercised greater caution in approaching merchant ships, even when stopped and abandoned. There is some evidence that Germany launched a concerted campaign to destroy Q-ships in March 1917. Sixteen Q-ships fell victim to U-boats during 1917

alone, most were torpedoed without warning.¹⁵ In May 1917, the Admiralty finally introduced the convoy system in an attempt to cut shipping losses. This action not only effectively countered the submarine menace, but also severely limited the role of independent Q-ships as all ships were now required to sail in convoys. Ships not protected by convoys became easy targets for German torpedoes. Additionally, the widespread application of dazzle camouflage, with all its intricacies, made it very difficult for Q-ships to continually alter their disguises. Finally, advanced technologies and tactics like depth charges, improved torpedoes and mines, the non-ricochet shell, hydrophones and aerial bombardment were also being used by the war's end to counter the U-boat threat. The net effect of all these factors was that decoys lost their effectiveness and the Q-ship campaign ground to a halt by the end of 1917. By all accounts, no U-boats were sunk by Q-ships after September 1917.

Notes

¹ Ritchie, xv.

² Kenneth M. Beyer, *Q-ships Versus U-boats: America's Secret Project* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), xx

³ Ritchie, 51.

⁴ Bridgland, 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mercer, 79.

⁷ Ritchie, 57.

⁸ Ritchie, 65.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 301.

¹¹ Ritchie, 66.

¹² Copley, 462.

¹³ Robert M. Grant, *U-boats Destroyed: The Effect of Anti-submarine Warfare 1914-1918* (London: Putnam and Co., Ltd, 1964), 30.

¹⁴ Ritchie, 169.

¹⁵ Ritchie, 125.

Part VII

Conclusion

Although the size and role of the Q-ship fleet diminished dramatically during 1918, the overall contribution of these intrepid decoys during the Great War cannot be discounted. The Q-ship concept emerged early into the war when no other method seemed likely to deal with the German U-boat threat adequately. Q-ships successfully filled Britain's void in antisubmarine warfare until new technologies and tactics were developed, tested and implemented.

Registering early kills, Q-ships had a demoralizing effect Germany. Attacking the will of German U-boat skippers and their crews, Q-ships instilled a wariness into a previously bold and seemingly invincible enemy.¹ Their value as a deterrent during the early stages of the war, while incalculable, cannot be dismissed. During the Germans' first unrestricted warfare campaign, Q-ships served as a particularly effective irritant to U-boat skippers, eventually forcing the Germans to alter their tactics.

The usefulness of Q-ships waned as they lost their surprise factor through frequency of use and unfortunate incidents like the *Baralong* affair. The advent of superior antisubmarine technologies and tactics also made Q-ships obsolete. While secrecy precluded public knowledge of Q-ship operations during the peak of their existence, an enormous debt is nevertheless owed to Q-ships and their brave crews. Many Q-ship captains and crewmembers earned the Distinguished Service Medal and Victoria Cross for their gallantry. Enduring horrid living

conditions and undertaking incredible risks, Q-ships were able to flourish in the face of adversity until late 1917. Each Q-ship represented all that could be accomplished by a combination of intellect and engineering skill.² Likewise, every crewmember demonstrated what could be achieved through strict self discipline and uncompromising nerve. Finally, the cooperation that existed between members of the regular navy and mercantile marine that served together aboard Q-ships also demonstrated what could be accomplished when Britain's two national sea services united for the good of the Empire.³ In sum, Q-ships helped mitigate the U-boat menace at least until more effective and efficient means were adopted late in the war. The fact that British and American navies employed Q-ships during the Second World War serves as testament to the heroic efforts and genuine contributions made by the Q-ships of the Great War.

Notes

¹ Copley, 462.

² Chatterton, 269.

³ Chatterton, 271.

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