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SPY MAKER

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AFTER PRUE

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EAST ANGLIAN DAILY TIMES

Issue 205 | July 2017 | suffolkmag.co.uk

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The fishermen who fought for Britain

First World War German U-boats did their worst to naval boats and fishing fleets off the Suffolk coast, until skippers like Thomas Crisp started fighting back. Sarah Doig recounts his heroic story

WHEN we think of bravery and self-sacrifice during the First World War, our minds usually travel to the trenches of France and the battles to halt the advancing Germans. But equally courageous acts took place off the coast of Britain. The heroes are often forgotten, but the memory of one Suffolk man, Thomas Crisp, lives on in his home town.

At the most easterly point of the UK, the townspeople of Lowestoft found themselves at the forefront of the war at home. It was soon after the start of the conflict, in September 1914, that the Royal Navy sustained its first serious losses, as three cruisers were sunk by a German U-boat in the North Sea. Two Lowestoft trawlers were fishing nearby. The skippers steered their ships to the battle scene and rescued 156 British sailors from the water.

The Lowestoft fishing fleet, which comprised smacks – wooden sailing ships – was soon heavily involved in the war at sea. Many of the boats were sunk by German submarines. A common tactic of the U-boats was to surface among the trawlers, come alongside, take the catch of fish, order the crew into their lifeboat, then blow up the vessel with dynamite.

It was part of a German

strategy to strip Britain of its food supplies. One of the smacks destroyed in this way in 1915 was the George Borrow, captained by Thomas Crisp.

Thomas was born in 1876, one of 10 children of Lowestoft boat builder William Crisp and his wife, Mary. The Crisp family were shipwrights and fishermen, so it was not surprising that after his early schooling, Thomas went to sea. He spent several years as a herring fisherman before joining a trawler operating out of Lowestoft. Crisp gained his mate and then skipper qualifications which entitled him to captain a vessel. He first crewed, then skippered the George Borrow. By this time, he was married with three children, including a son, Thomas, who followed his father to sea.

Because of the continued destruction of Lowestoft's fishing fleet, some of the more enterprising skippers persuaded the Admiralty that some of their smacks should be secretly armed and operated to decoy the U-boats. The volunteer crews of these boats, code named Q-ships, were not to wear uniforms, nor were their guns revealed until the enemy had been lured within range. They were, however, given naval pay of three shillings and sixpence per day, as well as danger money of two shillings per day in recognition of the peril in which they were putting themselves. When the U-boat was close enough, the cover was whipped off the gun, the Royal Navy's White Ensign was run up the flagpole, and the crew donned naval caps and armbands, so that if they were captured, they could claim prisoner of war status.

The Lowestoft Q-ships continued to operate successfully throughout the war, the crews receiving many commendations. Crisp was recruited into the Royal Naval Reserve and, by the summer of 1916, he was commanding a Q-ship called the HM Smack I'll Try, joined by his son, Thomas, the ship's mate. The rest of the personnel comprised a fishing crew of four, and three naval gunners, four more than a normal smack's complement. On each trip, they would be away on the fishing grounds for five or six days, trawling and packing the fish, as well as keeping watch





for enemy submarines. In February 1917, Crisp's smack, along with another Q-ship, had a confrontation with two U-boats and, despite near misses from German torpedoes, the smacks scored direct hits on the enemy, earning the two skippers the Distinguished Service Cross and 'prize money' of £200 each. Crisp's smack was renamed Nelson to maintain its cover.

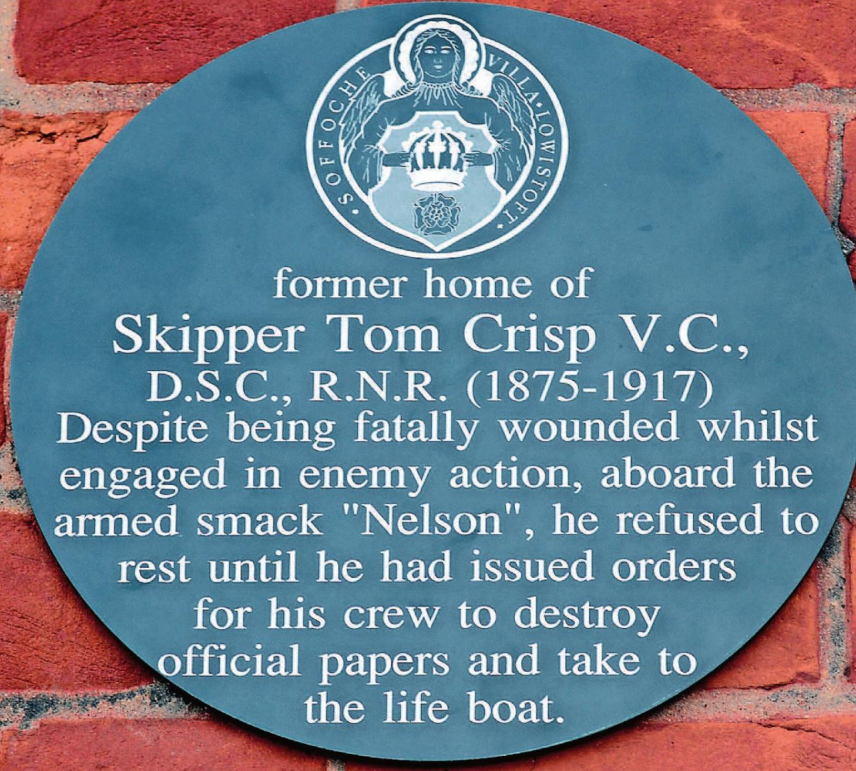
THE FINAL CONFLICT

On August 15 that year, while the Nelson was fishing off the Lincolnshire coast, skipper Crisp spotted a German U-boat on the surface of the water. The U-boat saw the smack and began firing, scoring several hits before the Nelson's gun was in range. By this stage of the war, enemy submarine captains were aware of the decoy ship tactics and tried to sink them with the crew on board, rather than stopping the ship and saving the British men. Although hopelessly outgunned, the Nelson fought back, but its hull was hit below the water line. The seventh shell hit Crisp, blowing away half his body, but he continued to direct the crew, ordering confidential papers to be thrown overboard. He also dictated a message to be sent by the boat's carrier pigeon: "Nelson being attacked by submarine. Skipper killed. Jim Howe Bank. Send assistance at once."

The crew, tried to remove their captain from



The family of Tom Crisp VC



former home of
**Skipper Tom Crisp V.C.,
 D.S.C., R.N.R. (1875-1917)**
 Despite being fatally wounded whilst
 engaged in enemy action, aboard the
 armed smack "Nelson", he refused to
 rest until he had issued orders
 for his crew to destroy
 official papers and take to
 the life boat.

A Commemorative plaque has been erected at the former home of Skipper Tom Crisp, in Stanford Street, Lowestoft. Photo: Nick Butcher

the sinking smack, but he ordered them to throw him overboard rather than slow them down. They refused, but were unable to move Crisp, and he died in his son's arms. They left the dead skipper in the Nelson, which sank shortly afterwards. The survivors escaped in the lifeboat and were found two days later by a search vessel, thanks to the carrier pigeon that had delivered Crisp's message.

A court of enquiry into the incident praised the surviving crew and their dead captain. Skipper Crisp was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, and his son, Thomas, and another crew member were given Distinguished Service Medals. Thomas' body was recovered and laid to rest in Lowestoft Cemetery alongside his wife, who died a few months before him. After the war, a small exhibition about him was established in the Lowestoft Free Library, but it was destroyed during Second World War bombing. Today, there is a display in Lowestoft Maritime Museum.

At St Margaret's Church, Lowestoft, Crisp's name appears on the war memorial, and one of the church bells, VC Bell, is dedicated to him. And two roads in the town are named after the famous skipper, Crisp Close and Tom Crisp Way, part of the A12 approach into the town from the south. Testament to the high regard in which Thomas Crisp, Lowestoft's foremost First World War hero, is held. ♦



Skipper Tom Crisp was awarded the Victoria Cross during WWI. The original medal is held by the local council.