

TRAGEDY AT SEA

- A Guided Tour

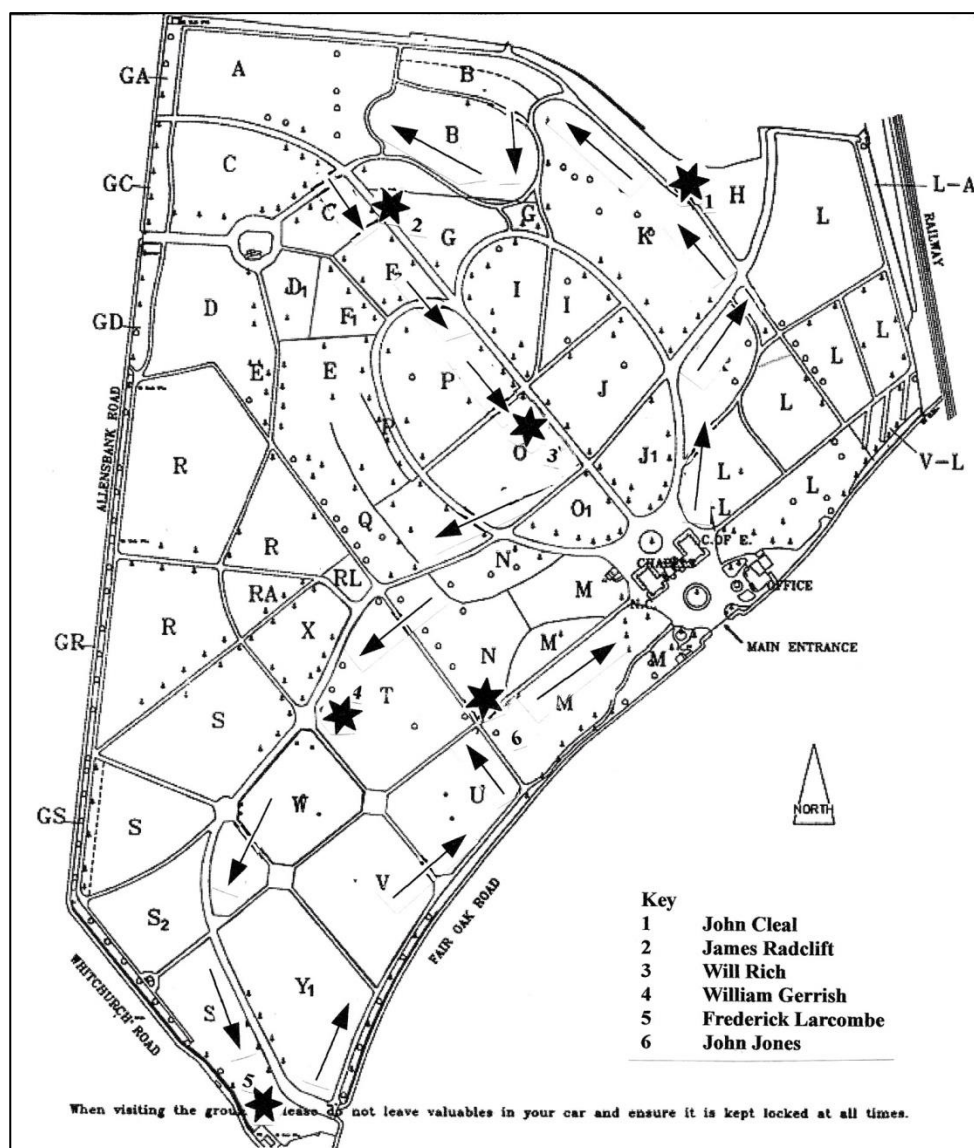


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Grave Location Map and Route



John Cleal (H1865) - Zeebrugge Raid

This is the memorial to 23 year old stoker, John Cleal, who postponed his wedding to take part in the Zeebrugge raid in April 1918. He would have known that the planned attack was desperately risky, but he put his loyalty to his shipmates first. Sadly, he was fatally wounded, so the wedding never took place.

Although he would have been provided with a standard War Graves Commission headstone, this memorial was paid for by public subscription in recognition of his particular sacrifice. The grave was rediscovered by the Friends, somewhat overgrown and neglected. After it had been cleared, a rededication service was held in February 2008.



Rededication ceremony

The port of Zeebrugge was being used by German U-boats and the objective of the raid was to sink a number of old ships in the navigation channel to put the base out of commission. 70 ships and 1700 men were involved in the raid. Crucial to its success was the laying down of a smoke screen, but a sudden change of wind direction left the seaborne force exposed to heavy shelling from

German shore batteries, virtually from the outset. Despite this, three ships were sunk in the entrance to the Bruges Canal that led to the submarine depot, but not in the intended locations and the base was operational again within a few days. Despite this, the Allies claimed it as a famous victory. Nearly 600 men were killed or wounded and eight Victory Crosses were awarded. German losses were recorded as six dead and sixteen wounded.

James Radclift (G433) - HMS Glorious

The bare facts on this headstone tell us that Thomas Henry (Harry) Radclift died in 1926 at the relatively young age of 37. Also interred here is his wife Eva Norman, who outlived him by more than forty years. Their son James would have been eleven when his father died. A closer look at the inscription tells us that James was a Lieutenant on HMS Glorious, an aircraft carrier built in the late 1920s, and lost his life on 8th June 1940.

From the start of the Second World War, Glorious spent 1939 unsuccessfully hunting for the German pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee in the Indian



Ocean before returning to the Mediterranean, where the picture below was taken.



While the Allies initially supported the Norwegians in resisting the German invasion of their country, the need to concentrate forces further south led to the reluctant decision to withdraw. *Glorious* was

recalled in April 1940 to support British operations, including the evacuation of British aircraft. *Glorious* was given permission to leave for Scapa Flow ahead of the main convoy, seemingly to enable its captain to attend the court-martial of his Commander (Air). At 4:00 p.m. on 8th June, *Glorious*, accompanied by the destroyers *Ardent* and *Acasta*, was cruising at 17 knots on 12 of her 18 boilers. No aircraft were in readiness on deck, nor were any in the air. None of the ships was fitted with radar and the carrier had no lookout in her crow's nest. The sea was calm and visibility excellent. The state of readiness might be described as surprisingly relaxed.

When *Glorious* was detached, there was no intelligence that a powerful German squadron was at sea. In the event, two pocket battleships, *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, with four destroyers and a cruiser had been at sea since 4th June and their operations in the North Sea had already resulted in the sinking of several British transports. The pocket battleships were on their own on 8th June because the other ships had diverted to refuel in occupied Norway.

The German ships saw the British ones 15 mins before the British ships saw them, at around 5.00 p.m. *Ardent* closed to identify the approaching ships, while *Glorious* started to get its 5 *Swordfish* up to the flight deck. Around 5:30, the German ships opened fire on

Ardent, which was engaging them in the hope of giving *Glorious* and *Acasta* more time. Ardent was hit by the first salvo, while *Scharnhorst* hit *Glorious* with its third try, at a range of over 24 km - at the time believed to be the greatest distance for a hit from a warship. The two aircraft that had just been readied on deck went overboard, while the big hole in the middle of the deck made it impossible to launch other aircraft. Despite suffering increasing damage, Ardent continued to fire and launch torpedoes, until she capsized and sank around 6.20. By this time, *Glorious* had taken further hits to the bridge and main engine room and was effectively doomed. The picture of *Glorious* below was taken from *Scharnhorst*.



Up to this point, *Acasta* had been making a smoke screen to try to hide *Glorious* from its attackers, but it now turned to attack the German ships with torpedoes - but this meant closing to about 7 km. It was an unequal contest: now

that it was the only threat, the German ships could concentrate their firepower on it.

Around 7:10 pm, *Glorious* disappeared beneath the surface. A couple of minutes later, the order to abandon ship was given on *Acasta*. On board *Gneisenau*, orders were given to put the war flag at half mast and stand at attention to honour the brave crew of the *Acasta*. In less than 2 hours from commencement of firing, all 3 British ships had been sunk and only carley-floats and rafts with around 900 survivors were on the sea. The German ships left the area without rescuing British survivors, reasonably believing that the *Glorious*'s radio report at the start of the battle (which they had picked up)

would have resulted in additional ships being dispatched to the area and that their arrival was imminent.

The radio message had in fact been picked up by the heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire which, at the time, was a little over 20 km (less than 1 hour's cruising) from the German ships, though further from the British ones. However Devonshire maintained a course heading away from *Glorious*, increased speed and undertook a practice with its main guns. But Devonshire had an important cargo - 461 passengers, among whom were the King of Norway, his family and the Norwegian Cabinet and their families. It may well have been under orders to do nothing that might have jeopardised its mission to get its cargo safely to Britain. No immediate help came from Royal Navy ships and it was not until the early hours of 11th June that a merchant ship sighted 21 rafts and rescued 3 Officers and 35 sailors from *Glorious* and 1 from *Acasta*. 5 *Glorious* sailors were rescued by another ship and 2 *Ardent* sailors were rescued by a German seaplane. These 7 were taken to Norway and became prisoners of war. So about 1500 lost their lives, more than 800 only because they weren't rescued in time. James Radcliff was one of these.

Will Rich (O1064) - Halifax Explosion

This is the memorial on the Rich family grave, which we were prompted to investigate by an email from someone who had emigrated to Australia more than 50 years ago. He described walking through Cathays Cemetery in the early 1950s and remembering a prominent memorial on the main drive to a victim of "The Halifax Explosion". He had recently visited Cardiff and had walked the main drive, but had failed to find the memorial. The reason he couldn't find it was not because his memory was playing tricks, but because it was obscured by a holly tree that has now been cut back. The memorial records that Will was the son of Thomas and Mary Rich: while Mary was interred here in 1951, the memorial doesn't record what happened to



Thomas. It does, however, show that Will's sisters, Maud and Ivy are also buried here, in 1926 and 1992 respectively, and that another daughter, Annie, married Oliver Dring and that their son Albert was killed in Greece in 1944.

But what was this Halifax Explosion? In WW1, the deep natural harbour in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was extremely busy as an assembly point for convoys across the Atlantic. The French ship, SS Mont Blanc, had arrived on 5th December 1917, fully laden with explosives and high octane fuel. The harbour was protected by submarine nets which were raised at night and the ship was too late to enter, so had to wait in the approach channel overnight. At the

same time, the Norwegian ship, SS Imo, had been delayed from leaving after stopping to re-fuel. At first light, as soon as the submarine nets had been lowered, both ships moved off, anxious to make up for lost time, into what was the narrowest part of the channel. The hazard was compounded by the Norwegian ship recklessly ignoring the speed limit and 'rules of the road'. In the inevitable collision, the French ship was holed, volatile fuel oil escaped and vapour ignited. The ship was quickly engulfed in flames and the whole crew, recognising what would happen next, abandoned ship.

20 minutes after the collision, the ship exploded and was completely blown apart. An area of more than 400 acres was completely destroyed by the explosion, while the harbour floor was momentarily exposed by the volume of water that vaporized. A tsunami, formed by water surging in to fill the void, rose up 60 ft above the harbour's high-water mark. Over 1,600 people were killed instantly while 9,000 were injured. Every building within a 1.6 mile radius, over 12,000 in total, was destroyed or badly damaged. Hundreds of people who had been watching the fire from their homes were blinded when the blast wave shattered the windows in front of them.

The blast was the largest man-made explosion prior to the development of nuclear weapons and became the standard by which all large blasts were measured. Indeed, a report on the bombing of Hiroshima, described the explosive power of the Little Boy bomb as seven times that of the Halifax Explosion. The comparison does not end there - look at archive pictures of the devastation (easy to find on the internet) and the scene looks very much like the aftermath of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan.

This view looks across to the Dartmouth side of the harbour and you can just see the Imo aground on the far side.



William Gerrish (T967) - Rifleman Explosion

In the latter part of the 19C, tugboats were the work-horses of the docks. One such tug was The Rifleman, built at North Shields, on the River Tyne, in 1860. The wooden hulled vessel was powered by side paddles driven by a steam engine. The job of this powerful and highly manoeuvrable vessel was to assist ships around the harbour and in and out of the docks. With a limited high tide window, tugs were essential to the efficient use of time for traffic in and out of the docks.

Over more than 25 years, The Rifleman worked in Cardiff (though with a variety of owners). It is reported to have sunk in the harbour in 1878, but it had been raised and repaired. In 1886 it was owned by Mrs Elizabeth Spear, of 19, South William Street.

On Monday 8 March 1886, the tug had started the day by towing a vessel from the canal to a temporary mooring on the mud of the harbour. It then moved to the Pierhead and was made fast. Steam was kept up, in anticipation of an early order to back into the West Bute Dock to tow out the schooner Edith Eleanor. It was reported that most of the men on board were sitting on the boiler dome in order to keep themselves warm.

About nine o'clock, there was a tremendous explosion accompanied by a great cloud of steam and the air was filled with falling debris. The boiler had burst, tearing the upper parts of the vessel apart and throwing pieces, and most of the crew, high into the air. The body of the captain, James Pill, was picked up on the pier some sixty yards from where the tug was moored, and that of the engineer, John Lovell, a few yards further off on a heap of tiles and other building materials. Eyewitness accounts described these two men as having been shot at least thirty feet over the clock tower on the Pierhead.

In the case of the engineer, it seems that the tragedy was compounded by dire family circumstances, as the South Wales Echo reported:

When the body of John Lovell, the driver, was picked up, the bearers were about to convey it to his residence, but on second consideration it was taken to 19, South William Street, the public-house where Mrs Spear lived. It appears that Lovell's wife was dangerously ill, and his daughter was also reported to be at the point of death, so that fatal consequences were feared from the shock should the corpse of the husband and father, who had left home that morning alive and well, be brought back a shattered and bruised mass.

The only member of the crew of five not killed more or less instantly was a young apprentice, George Phillips. William Owen, a pilot, was on board the tugboat at the time of the catastrophe, but was fortunately in the cabin and escaped the full force of the explosion. However, he was blown into the water, and two men rowed out and rescued him in an exhausted state, suffering more from nervous shock than serious injury. Both Owen and Phillips were taken to the Hamadryad Hospital Ship, but the latter died of his injuries early the following day.

Some 300 yards away, the dome and part of the shell of the boiler landed on the Italian barque, *Clotilde B*, which was just mooring in the East Basin, being newly arrived from Bordeaux. The boiler parts, weighing more than four tons, dropped on the aft part of the vessel, taking out the top of the stern and the steering apparatus. They then fell over onto William Hunt, killing him instantly. Hunt was a seaman on the tug boat *Windsor*, which had just towed the *Clotilde B* from its low tide mooring in the Cardiff and Penarth Roads into the dock. He had only just boarded the *Clotilde B* to release a tow rope.

The other two crew members who were killed more or less instantly were William Gerrish, a mariner whose body was recovered from the sunken wreck at low tide, and George Clare, who was described as a firemen (stoker).

Debris from the explosion was showered over a large area and it was reported that the funnel was blown into the West Basin. Captain John Brown, the owner of several steam-tugs, was struck by a large object while he was standing on the paddle-box of his tug *Pleiades*, also in the West Basin. The unconscious Brown was picked up and taken to his house in Dudley Terrace, where he was examined by a doctor and found to have several broken ribs and severe contusions to his face and arms. Many other people sustained slight

injuries but it appears that, generally, they did not seek medical attention.

The docks would have been a hive of activity at the time, crowded with people working or just watching. It was considered almost miraculous that the consequences in terms of death and injury were not far greater.

The Rifleman itself was pretty well gutted and sank almost immediately. However, the hull was clearly visible at low tide and we have the benefit of photographs taken at the time to testify to its state and position. It had sunk at what we know today as the bay



entrance to Roald Dahl Plass. Copies of these photographs were sold, with 20% of the money realised being donated to the relief fund. The wreckage was purchased by an Adam Willis, but the tug did not re-enter service as a registered vessel, so was presumably acquired for scrap value only.

As indicated above, a relief fund was established for the benefit of the families of the men killed by the explosion. The committee appointed to manage the fund organised a series of entertainments at venues as diverse as the Royal Hotel, Park Hall, the Theatre Royal and Andrew's Hall, Penarth. The master of the Severn Road Board School organised a concert by the school choir, with the proceeds being devoted to the fund. There were also donations, although it was pointedly recorded that, with the exception of money from Lord Bute and a Mr Llewellyn, these had come entirely

from the docks, while nothing had come from the prosperous tradesmen in the town. The total raised for the families would be the equivalent today of £40 - 50,000. This would have been very welcome to the families, particularly those of the captain, who left a wife and five or six children, the engineer, who left "a widow and several children", and Gerrish who left a wife and one or two children.

All of those killed in the explosion were buried in Cathays Cemetery. The burial register records the following:

John Lovell, Engineer, age 36 - Plot T48a

William Hunt, Seaman, age 24 - U177


George Arthur Clare, Fireman, age 19 - L1591

William Henry Gerrish, Mariner, age 22 - T967

George Emmanuel Phillips, Apprentice, age 14, and Capt James Henry Pill, Master Mariner, age 32 - interred together T978



The only grave to be marked by a headstone is that of William Gerrish, which records the fact that he died in The Rifleman explosion. The inscription also tells us that he was joined by his 10 month old son, also called William, 5 weeks later. His wife, Henrietta, not only survived these tragedies, but must have lived to quite a good age, as her death and burial here occurred in 1939.

 The coroner's court conducted the inquiry into the deaths of the six men, calling on eyewitnesses to the explosion, local people experienced in the operation of tugboats and experts from the ship and boiler manufacturers. It was also assisted by Board of Trade officials who

made an examination of the wreckage. Inevitably, there was an element of speculation about events immediately preceding the explosion and normal operating practice on The Rifleman, because all key witnesses that could have thrown light on this were dead. The coroner's inquiry was held in the Town Hall, before a jury.

The boiler had been replaced about 16 years earlier, but it was considered that the ordinary working life on a steam tug would be about 12 - 14 years. Evidence about the maintenance and repair history of the boiler was sketchy. When new, the boiler would have had a maximum operating pressure of 30 psi (pounds per square inch) and would have been tested to about 50% above this. But the Board of Trade inspectors' evidence was that the boiler was in a defective state, and unfit to be worked at more than about 12 psi, while a gauge indicated that it had been set to work at about double this.

More damning evidence related to two valves which should have controlled the boiler pressure. While these had been recovered an appreciable distance from the tug, they were pretty well in tact and indicative of their states at the time of the explosion. A regulating, or working, valve had a lever which would have performed a similar function to the accelerator pedal in a car - press down on the lever and you would get a higher pressure and more power. There was inconclusive evidence that this lever may have had weights hung on it. The second control was a governing, or safety, valve, intended to 'blow off' if the boiler pressure reached its intended working maximum. This should have been fool proof, with a precise weight being pushed up a cylinder, opening the valve to release steam. On examination, however, it was found that a thick iron pin had been inserted into the cylinder where the weight should rise. This pin prevented the proper working of the valve. While this was clearly foolhardy in the extreme, there was some disputed evidence that it was fairly common practice on the tugboats in Cardiff.

The jury delivered the following verdict:

That the explosion was caused by over-pressure of steam, which was caused by a pin or stud that was in the cover of the governing valve, this being screwed down to prevent the escape of steam and we also believe that the lever valve was overloaded. We, as a jury strongly recommend that tugboats should be periodically surveyed and examined like all other steamers.

It had been noted during the proceedings that passenger steamers were regularly surveyed by the Board of Trade, but no similar procedure applied to tugboats. The Coroner remarked that:

... if the engineer in charge had been alive, he would have been committed for trial for manslaughter, as, whether he put in the pin or not, it most certainly was his business to detect its presence and take it out.

One cannot but wonder if the engineer would have been a convenient scapegoat. In the same situation today, the Health and Safety Executive would set their sights much higher, to those who should have known what was going on and, perhaps, had turned a blind eye to unsafe practices in the interest of increased profit!

Frederick Larcombe (S4014) - The Malta Convoy: Operation Pedestal

The headstone pictured on the next page is not so much a memorial as a family almanac! Only the first and last two named on it are interred here, the others are just remembered. Despite considerable use of abbreviations, close to 1200 letters have been

engraved, which represents a cost of £3-4000. While there is a wealth of interesting information here, in the context of this booklet, we will confine ourselves to one of those remembered here, Frederick William Larcombe, and concentrate on the last entry against his name.



So, quickly summarising the early parts of his inscription, we can see that Frederick first saw action in the Second Boer War, taking part in the Relief of Mafeking (which made Robert Baden-Powell a national hero), in 1900. Later in the same year, he was amongst the contingent sent from South Africa to China, to assist in the Relief of Peking, where the Boxer uprising had resulted in

foreign diplomatic staff and their families, with hundreds of Chinese Christians, being besieged in the Legation Quarter and in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Peking. He returned to South Africa in October 1901 and finally reached home around July 1902. Frederick then joined the French Foreign Legion, serving across North Africa for 10 years. In WW1 he is with the British Expeditionary Force for two years. If the abbreviations have been interpreted correctly, he survived a torpedo attack, but the two years attributed to this suggest that he may then have been a prisoner of war.

In the Second World War, aged about 65, he is "lost at sea" while serving as a ship's carpenter, during THE Malta Convoy of 1942. This must be the key convoy in August of that year, Operation Pedestal. There were 35 major supply operations to Malta between 1940-1942, but most of these were frustrated or suffered severe losses. There were long periods when no convoy runs were even attempted, and only a trickle of supplies reached Malta by submarine, or by fast warship. By early 1942, the Axis forces had the upper hand, achieving complete air and naval supremacy in the central Mediterranean. The supply situation had become critical, particularly food and aviation fuel. According to some sources, remaining supplies were sufficient for only 10 days.

In August, the largest convoy to date was assembled at Gibraltar. It consisted of 14 merchant ships, including the large oil tanker SS Ohio, escorted by 44 warships. In addition, a diversionary operation was staged from Alexandria. The convoy was attacked fiercely. Three merchant ships reached Malta on 13 August, another on 14 August and the Ohio on 15 August: the remaining 9 were sunk - it seems likely that Frederick Larcombe was on one of these. An aircraft carrier, two cruisers and a destroyer were also lost, and there was serious damage to other warships. The Ohio was heavily damaged by air attacks and completed the journey supported by 2 destroyers. It later broke in two in Valletta Harbour, but not before much of her precious cargo of aviation fuel had been unloaded. Spitfires flown



off from the carrier HMS Furious helped even up the battle for air supremacy. Pedestal is seen as the turning point of the siege as the convoy's arrival proved that German and Italian efforts to obtain air and sea superiority had failed. With Malta and the Mediterranean secured, the Allies were able to launch amphibious landings in North Africa (Nov 1942), Sicily (Jul 1943) and mainland Italy (Sept 1943).

John Jones (M1937) - January 1883 Storm

Although this is a high quality memorial, not many people would take an interest if just the name John Jones was inscribed. But here we see that he was the chief engineer of the James Gray, a ship that was lost off Porthcawl in 1883.

The James Gray was a 78m steam powered cargo ship from Whitby, built just six years earlier. It was carrying a cargo of coal from Cardiff to the Cap Verde islands, when it lost power in a storm

off Porthcawl. Despite trying to anchor, it was dragged onto Tusker Rock, off the mouth of the River Ogmore. The storm was so strong that the Porthcawl lifeboat could not reach her. The entire crew of 23 was lost, together with the captain's wife and child.



But the storm of 27th Jan 1883 was no ordinary storm. Two other ships were lost that day off the south Wales coast ... The Agnes Jack , carrying lead from Sardinia to Llanelli was lost off Port Eynon with the loss of all hands - a crew of 17 - and the local Llanelli pilot. The loss of this ship led directly to the establishment of the lifeboat station at Port Eynon.

And, just by the Mumbles lighthouse, Admiral Prinz Adalbert, a sailing ship registered in Danzig, became unmanageable when she lost her sails. She was carrying 900 tons of pitprops to Swansea from Rochefort in France. A rescue attempt was made by the Mumbles lifeboat, but as the crew were being winched from the stricken ship, a wave capsized the lifeboat. Four lifeboatmen and a crewmember from the Admiral Prinz Adalbert lost their lives. The survivors struggled to shore where they were helped by the small community living around the lighthouse, including the lighthousekeeper's two daughters, whose heroism is recalled in the poem "The Women of Mumbles Head"

In all 46 people were lost that day.

