

= Thomas Crisp =

Skipper Thomas Crisp VC , DSC , RNR (28 April 1876 ? 15 August 1917) was an English posthumous recipient of the Victoria Cross . Crisp , in civilian life a commercial fisherman operating from Lowestoft in Suffolk , earned his award after being killed during the defence of his vessel , the armed naval smack His Majesty 's Smack Nelson , in the North Sea against an attack from a German submarine in 1917 .

Thomas Crisp 's self ? sacrifice in the face of this " unequal struggle " was used by the government to bolster morale during some of the toughest days of the First World War for Britain , the summer and autumn of 1917 , during which Britain was suffering heavy losses at the Battle of Passchendaele . His exploit was read aloud by David Lloyd George in the Houses of Parliament and made headline news for nearly a week .

= = Early life = =

Thomas Crisp was born into a family of shipwrights and fishermen in Lowestoft , one of ten children to William and Mary Anne Crisp . Although his father was the owner of a successful boatbuilding firm and thus could afford an education for his children , Thomas did not enjoy school , instead showing a " marked preference for quayside adventure to school routine " . Leaving school , Thomas took to the sea , spending several years as a herring fisherman before joining a fishing trawler out of Lowestoft . He was a natural to the work , being a remarkably good sailor , but tired of it quickly and joined the Atlantic steamship SS Mobile , becoming her quartermaster and making several trans ? Atlantic voyages .

In 1895 , aged 19 , he met and married Harriet Elizabeth Alp and settled with her at 48 Staithe Road in Burgh St. Peter near Lowestoft , where they had two sons and a daughter , including Thomas Crisp Jr . , who would be with his father on the day he won the Victoria Cross . Establishing himself as a fisherman , Thomas Sr. achieved his mate and then skipper qualifications , entitling him to captain a fishing vessel sailing from the port . In 1902 he was taken on by Chambers , one of the largest boat owning families in Lowestoft , to crew and then captain their ketch George Borrow , in which he remained for thirteen years . In 1907 the family moved to Lowestoft while Crisp continued his work at sea , proving one of the most popular fishing captains in Lowestoft and joined on his ketch by his son in 1913 .

When the First World War began in July 1914 , Crisp was at sea . Unaware of the outbreak of war , he remained in the North Sea for several days , and was surprised on his return to learn that enemy submarines were expected off the port at any moment . When this threat failed to materialise , Thomas Crisp returned to fishing , considered too old for military service and in an occupation vital to Britain 's food supplies . In late September , the George Borrow passed the HMS Aboukir , HMS Hogue and HMS Cressy just hours before they were all sunk with over a thousand lives by German U @-@ boat U @-@ 9 . Tom Crisp Jr. later wrote of finding bodies in their fishing nets for weeks afterwards .

= = War service = =

In the spring of 1915 , Tom Crisp Jr. left the vessel to join the Royal Navy . A few weeks later the U ? boat threat expected so many months before arrived , as submarines surfaced among the undefended fishing fleets and used dynamite to destroy dozens of them after releasing the crews in small boats . This offensive was part of a wider German strategy to denude Britain of food supplies and took a heavy toll on the fishing fleets of the North Sea . George Borrow was among the victims , sunk in August , although it is not known if Crisp was aboard at the time . While temporarily working in a net factory following the loss of his vessel , he was scouted by a Navy officer recruiting experienced local fishing captains to command a flotilla of tiny fishing vessels , which were to be secretly armed . The boats were intended to be working fishing vessels fitted with a small artillery piece with which to sink enemy submarines as they surfaced alongside . In this manner it was hoped

they would protect the fishing fleets without the diversion of major resources from the regular fleet , in the same manner as Q @-@ ships deployed in the commercial sea lanes .

Agreeing to this proposal , Crisp became first a Seaman and by the summer of 1916 a Skipper in the Royal Naval Reserve , arranging for his son to join the crew of his boat , the HM Armed Smack I 'll Try , armed with a 3 ? pounder gun . On 1 February 1917 in the North Sea , I 'll Try had its first confrontation with the enemy when two submarines surfaced close to the smack and her companion the larger Boy Alfred . Despite near misses from enemy torpedoes , both smacks scored hits on their larger opponents and reported them as probable sinkings , although post ? war German records show that no submarines were lost on that date . Both skippers were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and a present of £ 200 for this action , and Crisp was offered a promotion and transfer to an ocean ? going Q ? ship . He was forced to turn down this offer due to his wife 's sudden and terminal illness . She died in June 1917 .

= = Victoria Cross action = =

In July , I 'll Try was renamed Nelson and Boy Alfred became Ethel & Millie , in an effort to maintain their cover . The boats continued to operate together and Crisp 's crew was augmented with two regular seamen and a Royal Marine rifleman , providing the Nelson with a crew of ten , including Crisp and his son . The smacks set out as usual on 15 August and pulled in a catch during the morning before making a sweep near the Jim Howe Bank in search of cruising enemies . At 2 @. @ 30 pm , Crisp spotted a German U @-@ boat on the surface 6 @, @ 000 yards (5 @, @ 500 m) away . The U @-@ boat also sighted the smack and both vessels began firing at once , the U @-@ boat 's weapon scoring several hits before Nelson 's could be brought to bear . By this stage in the war , German submarine captains were aware of the decoy ship tactics and no longer stopped British merchant shipping , preferring to sink them from a distance with gunfire .

With such a heavy disparity in armament between the smack 's 3 pounder and the submarine 's 88 mm deck gun the engagement was short lived , the submarine firing eight shots before the Nelson could get within range of her opponent . The fourth shot fired by the U @-@ boat holed the smack , and the seventh tore off both of Crisp 's legs from underneath him . Calling for the confidential papers to be thrown overboard , Crisp dictated a message to be sent by the boat 's four carrier pigeons : like many small ships of the era , the Nelson did not possess a radio set .

" Nelson being attacked by submarine . Skipper killed . Jim Howe Bank . Send assistance at once . "

The sinking smack was abandoned by the nine unwounded crew , who attempted to remove their captain , who ordered that he should be thrown overboard rather than slow them down . The crew refused to do so , but found they were unable to move him and left him where he lay . He died in his son 's arms a few minutes later . It is said that he was smiling as he died and remained so as the ship sank underneath him . The Ethel & Millie had just arrived on the scene as the Nelson sank , and her captain Skipper Charles Manning called for Nelson 's lifeboat to come alongside . Realising that this would greatly overcrowd the second boat , the survivors refused and Manning sailed onwards towards the submarine , coming under lethal fire as he did so . His vessel was soon badly damaged and began to sink .

The crew of the Ethel & Millie then abandoned their battered boat and were hauled aboard the German submarine , where the Nelson survivors last saw them standing in line being addressed by a German officer . The seven British sailors of the Ethel & Millie were never seen again , and much controversy exists surrounding their disappearance . Prevailing opinion at the time was that they were murdered and dumped overboard by the German crew or abandoned at sea without supplies , but these scenarios cannot be substantiated . Another theory is that they were taken prisoner aboard the boat and killed when the submarine was itself sunk . The son of Arthur Soanes , a sailor who disappeared in this incident , later claimed to have contacted his father through his powers as a spiritual medium , reporting that he had died on board the German vessel . UC 63 has been named as the submarine that sank both vessels .

The survivors of the Nelson drifted for nearly two days until they arrived at the Jim Howe Buoy ,

where they were rescued by the fishery protection vessel Dryad . A pigeon named " Red Cock " had reached the authorities in Lowestoft with news of the fate of the boats and caused the Dryad to be despatched to search for survivors . Following their rescue , the whole of Nelson 's crew were extensively debriefed following medical treatment for exposure and minor injuries .

A court of enquiry praised the surviving crew and their dead captain and authorised the award of the Victoria Cross posthumously to Thomas Crisp and Distinguished Service Medals to his son and another member of the crew . On 29 October 1917 , David Lloyd George made an emotional speech in the House of Commons citing Crisp 's sacrifice as representative of the Royal Navy 's commitment " from the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean to the stormy floods of Magellan " , which promoted Crisp into an overnight celebrity whose story ran in all the major London papers for nearly a week , containing as it did a story of personal sacrifice , filial devotion and perceived German barbarity . The medal presentation was made to Tom Crisp Jr. at Buckingham Palace on 19 December 1917 , shortly before he was promoted to Skipper in his own right .

Thomas Crisp , VC , DSC , is buried with his wife in Lowestoft Cemetery .

= = Post ? war remembrance = =

After the war , a small display to the memory of Thomas Crisp Sr. was set up in Lowestoft free library and another in Lowestoft Maritime Museum . The former contained a specially commissioned painting and parts of the sunken Nelson , which were dredged up years later . This display was destroyed during the Second World War when the building was gutted in the Blitz . A new display featuring a replica of the Victoria Cross awarded to Tom Crisp currently stands in Lowestoft town hall . The original is held secure by the local council after the family of Skipper Crisp felt his interests would not be served if the medal were held privately . It can be viewed on request of Waveney District Council 's Chief Executive . Thomas Crisp 's name is inscribed on the Chatham Naval Memorial for those lost at sea during the First World War , as well as two church memorials in Lowestoft to the town 's war dead , St. John 's and St. Margaret 's . The latter church also contains a " VC Bell " dedicated to Thomas Crisp 's memory . Tom Crisp Way , a street in his native Lowestoft , is named in his honour .

In a footnote to the action , the pigeon " Red Cock " , which brought news of the engagement to the authorities , was stuffed upon his death and was mounted in the Thomas Crisp display at Lowestoft town hall for many years before being reportedly relocated to a museum in South Kensington .