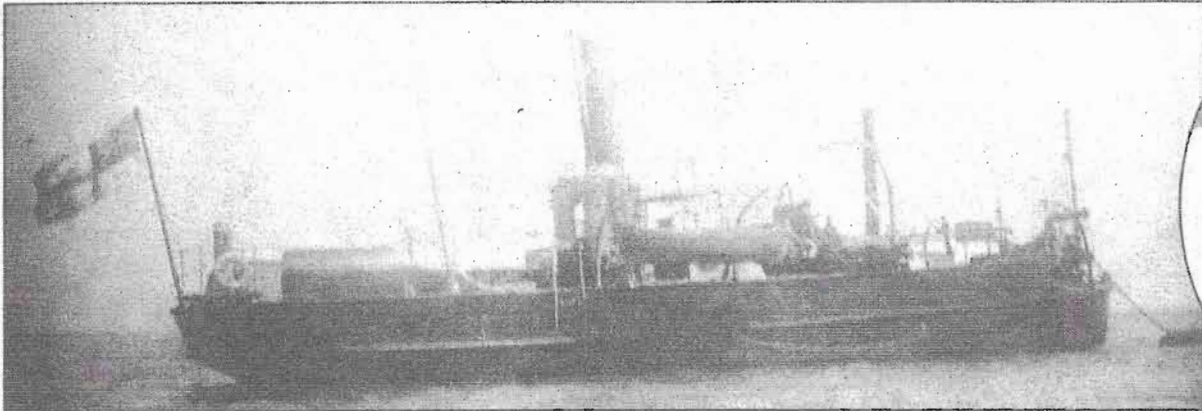


THE SHIPWRECK, THE CRIPPLED COOK AND A HERO'S LAST WORDS



TRAGEDY: The Disperser, which sank in a storm off the North Yorkshire coast. And right, lifeboat commander Robert Patton, whose bravery cost him his life

I just couldn't let the poor lad go...

BY MIKE HURST

NEARLY 70 years ago in stormy seas off the Yorkshire coast, a dramatic tale of heroism was acted out and is still remembered in nearby coastal communities today.

On a night in February 1934, as a salvage steamer was being towed up the coast, it got into trouble in a gale and heavy seas off Staithes and the lives of its crew-members were in danger as it was rapidly sinking.

The lifeboat *The Always Ready* was launched from nearby Runswick Bay and rushed to the aid of the stricken ship, *Disperser*.

Crew

As the lifeboat got alongside it was found that most of the steamer's eight-man crew had been rescued by the tug but one man, a cook who was crippled, was still on board and unable to make the leap to the rescue boat.

The coxswain in command of the lifeboat, Robert Patton, reached out to grab hold of the man as he clung desperately to the side of the sinking ship.

A large wave then pulled the two



● DISCOVERY: Andrew Jackson and Carl Racey with artefacts from ship

vessels apart. Patton was left with a split-second decision whether to keep hold of the terrified man or let him go.

As the lifeboatman recalled a few days later in hospital: "I could not let the poor lad go as he might have drowned." Both

men were tossed into the waves and Patton, a 36-year-old father and fisherman who had served on lifeboats for 30 years, was crushed between the two boats as he clung on to the man.

The other man was rescued unharmed, but Patton suffered severe injuries and died nine days later.

Medal

He was posthumously awarded the gold medal, the highest award which the Royal National Lifeboat Institution can bestow, which was presented to his widow by the then Prince of Wales.

At the hero's funeral at Runswick Bay, where he had lived, 4,000 mourners were there to pay tribute and the lifeboat was renamed in his honour.

The sunken salvage ship *Disperser* lay undiscovered on the seabed for 62 years until 1996 when two local diving enthusiasts, Andrew Jackson and Carl Racey, of Scarborough Sub Aqua Club, eventually found it after a search lasting 20 years.

They made the big breakthrough in 1996 after their research of records unveiled three years earlier that the vessel had stayed afloat hours longer than was previously thought and was likely to have drifted several miles further down the coast. The pair recovered various

items and then returned last year to find a prized copper and brass diving helmet.

They continue to return to the 30 metre wreck in the hope that yet more artefacts can be recovered.

Until now, the discovery of the historic wreck has never been publicised and very few know of its whereabouts in over 100ft of water several miles off Whitby.

Father-of-two Andrew, 43, of Scarborough, a civil engineer with Yorkshire Water, said: "Finding the wreck of the *Disperser* had been something of an obsession with us because of its links with this historic event.

Photographs

"It was our greatest moment as divers when we found the wreck and when we went down to it we recognised it straight away from the photographs we had seen.

"The helmet would be worth a lot of money to collectors but is priceless as far as we are concerned because of the event in which a brave man lost his life."

● The story of Robert Patton's heroic sacrifice and the discovery of the *Disperser* is told in a short TV programme *Inside Out* tonight at 7.30pm on BBC1.

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