

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS

## DORSET

It's not just wrecks that are a forgotten part of the south coast's conflict heritage; many vessels that survived the war bear remembering as well. Throughout the war many vessels did valuable service, only to be broken up in the decades that followed.

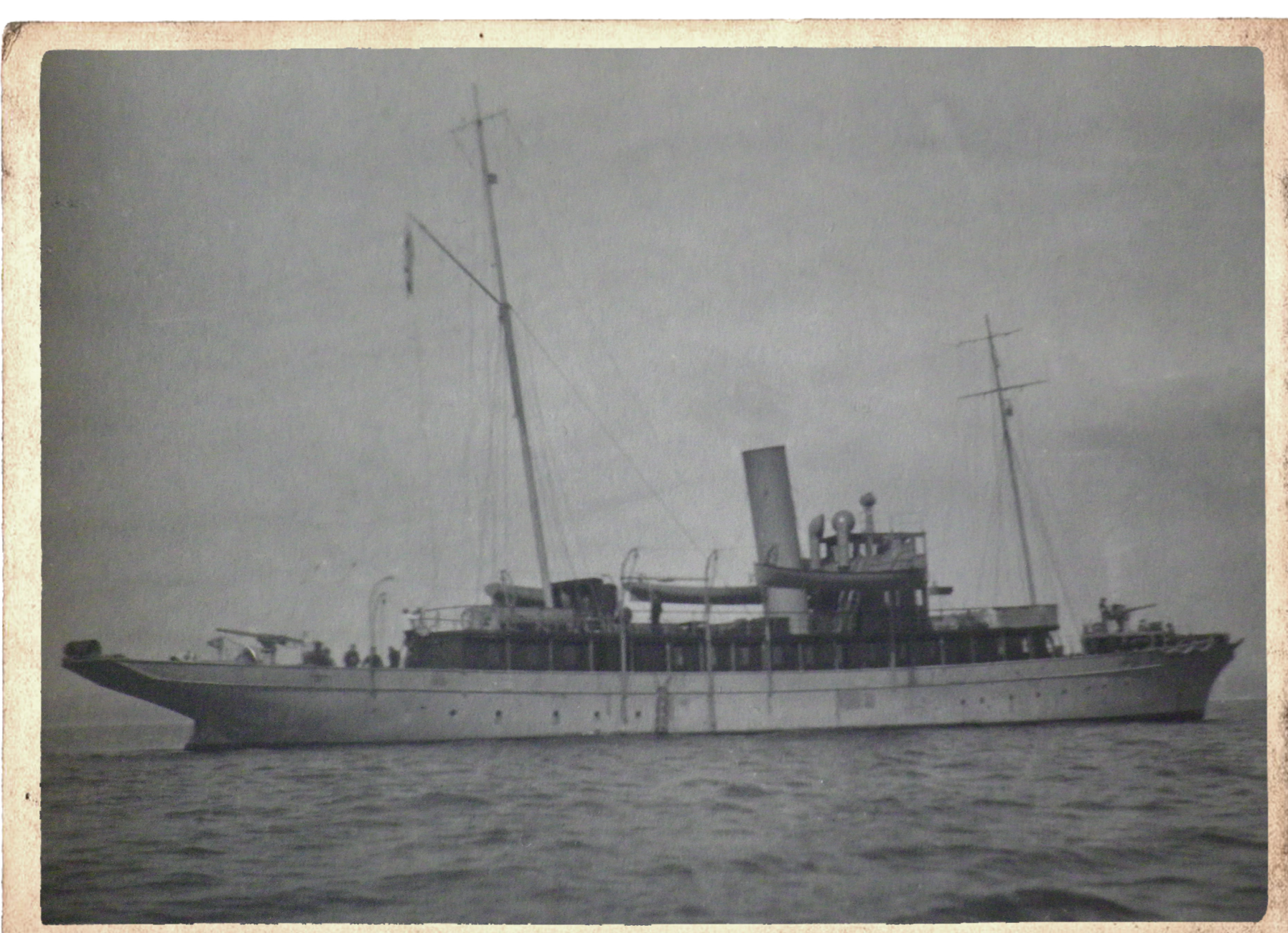
**HM Yacht *Lorna*** was just one such vessel and links two wrecks from 1918. This yacht was requisitioned by the Admiralty in 1914 and patrolled the Dorset coast throughout the war. As well as rescuing survivors, in May 1918 she sank the U-boat **UB-74** 3.5 miles west of Portland Bill, the only Admiralty yacht to accomplish such a feat.

### HMS *Wellholme*

**HMS *Wellholme*** was a Q-Ship – a Royal Navy vessel disguised as an innocent civilian ship. *Wellholme*, a two-masted ketch sailing vessel, would have appeared to be a small coastal cargo vessel of a type that was still widely used at the time, but in fact hid a 12-pounder gun on its deck, ready to be uncovered to strike at a U-boat if the chance presented itself.



**Left:** A ketch of similar size to HMS *Wellholme*. During the First World War, a large proportion of British merchant vessels were sailing ships. From the State Library of Victoria. H99.220/2523.



**Left:** HM Yacht *Lorna*. Armed with two 6-pounder guns and depth charges, even a pleasure craft could be converted into an effective fighting vessel. Image courtesy of Colin M Baxter (www.colinmbaxter.co.uk).

Q-Ships had proved successful in the earlier years of the war; U-boats, unwilling to sacrifice a torpedo unnecessarily, would surface near unarmed craft and sink them with gunfire. If the target happened to be a Q-Ship, it gave the British crew time to uncover their gun and attack the U-boat first. However, in the later years of the war, wily U-boat commanders were more cautious and would often try to strike unseen. So it was with the *Wellholme*.

#### Loss

On the morning of the 30th of January, in response to reports of U-boat activity near Lyme Bay, *Wellholme* set sail from Portland. Patrolling around Lyme Bay her crew saw nothing until, as the sun was setting in the west, a U-boat was spotted on the surface 400 yards away. But the U-boat had seen *Wellholme* too and quickly moved east where it was hidden in the rapidly darkening sky. Just before 6pm, the German crew fired four shots in quick succession on *Wellholme*. One struck the hull at the waterline and *Wellholme* immediately began to settle.

Realising there was nothing to be done the captain ordered the crew on deck and, less than five minutes after being struck, the ship heeled over and the crew were tossed into the water. A small boat drifted free and the crew were able to clamber on board, but it was soon realised that three men had been lost.

The U-boat, SM *UB-55*, had played a shrewd game, quickly taking advantage of the dimming light and moving each time it fired. The attacker wasn't seen by the *Wellholme*'s crew again and they drifted in their boat for seven hours until, at 1am, they were picked up by the Admiralty yacht HMY *Lorna*.

*Wellholme* itself hasn't been seen since either - its wreck has not yet been identified on the seabed.

### SS *Pomeranian*

The speed with which this ship sank, combined with the cold waters of the Channel in spring, resulted in one of the largest death tolls on a torpedoed merchant cargo vessel in the First World War.

The *Pomeranian* was launched in 1882 as the *Grecian Monarch*, a 4,200 ton steamship built in Hull. Five years later she was purchased by the Allen Line, the largest privately owned shipping company at that time, and renamed *Pomeranian*. For the next 30 years she would sail between Britain and North America carrying passengers, cargo and Royal Mail consignments across the Atlantic.

The Allen Line was purchased by Canadian Pacific Steamships Ocean Services Ltd. in 1917, but the fleet retained their identity and British registration. Throughout the war *Pomeranian* had continued to cross the Atlantic and on Saturday 13th April 1918, she left London and set course for Saint John in New Brunswick, Canada.

#### Loss

In the early hours of the 15th, *Pomeranian* passed south of Portland and steered northwest to hug the coast of Lyme Bay. U-boats were ever present in the Channel in early 1915 and the master, Alexander Maxwell, presumably hoped to avoid them by staying close inshore. It didn't work.

At 5.30am, a torpedo slammed into the *Pomeranian*'s hull, fired from the submerged *UC-77*. Water poured into the ship and down below in the engine room, second engineer William Bell waited nervously at his post. As the ship started to list and it became clear that nothing could be done, he headed for the deck with his lifebelt. Moments later the ship sank beneath his feet.

Bell managed to cling to a plank as the *Pomeranian* sank, but the ship had tall masts and when it settled on the seabed, the uppermost sections remained above the surface. He was able to climb into the crow's nest where he waited until he was rescued by HMY *Lorna* several hours later. He was the only survivor from a crew of 56.

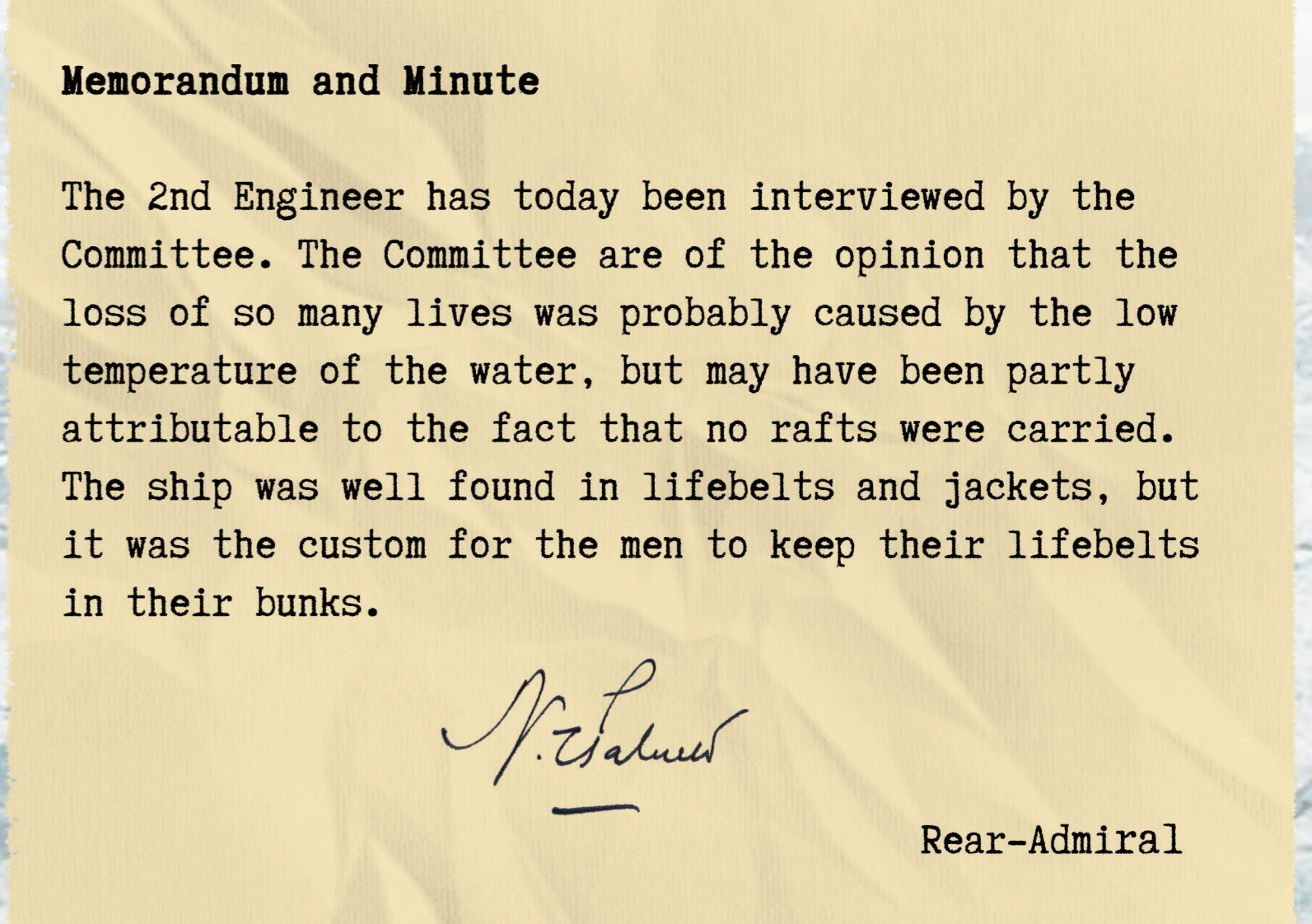
#### The Wreck Site

Within two months the *Pomeranian*'s masts had collapsed and today all that remains of the vessel is the wreck below. The ship lies in two parts; some pieces still stand some seven metres above the seabed, but most of the hull has collapsed. Little remains of her cargo of ground chalk and Fuller's earth.



**Above:** William Bell is rescued from the rigging of the *Pomeranian* by a launch from the yacht *Lorna*. Image courtesy of Colin M Baxter (www.colinmbaxter.co.uk).

**Right:** An advisory committee on merchant shipping interviewed William Bell to try and establish the cause of such a large loss of life. The committee proposed that ships should use lifebelt boxes on deck that doubled as large free-floating rafts. It was adopted soon after and can still be seen on ships today. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/1478.



#### Memorandum and Minute

The 2nd Engineer has today been interviewed by the Committee. The Committee are of the opinion that the loss of so many lives was probably caused by the low temperature of the water, but may have been partly attributable to the fact that no rafts were carried. The ship was well found in lifebelts and jackets, but it was the custom for the men to keep their lifebelts in their bunks.

*N. Belmont*

Rear-Admiral

Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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