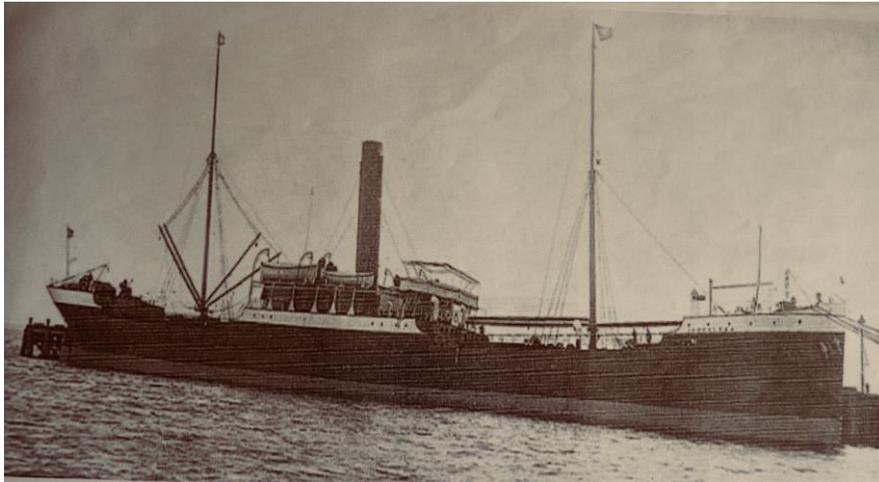


The Ordeal of the Bray Head

In March 1917, a British tramp steamer, the **SS Bray Head**, on its way from New Brunswick in Canada to Belfast, was intercepted and sunk by a German submarine.



SS Bray Head (as Indralema)

The submarine, **U-44** was commanded by 33-year old, **Kapitanleutnant Paul Wagenfuhr** (Iron Cross First & Second Class) and was on patrol from its base at Emden.

German submarines sank almost six thousand ships during the Great War; the tragedy of the Bray Head is typical of many such encounters and is a tale of bravery, fortitude but ultimately tragedy.



Kapitanleutnant Paul Wagenfuhr

The attack on the Bray Head

It was Wednesday 14 March 1917, when the Bray Head crossed the path of U-44, 356 miles off the Farset Rock; the submarine initially approached the unsuspecting merchant ship under water.

According to Wagenfuhr's report of the action, which has survived, U-44 first discharged a "bronze" torpedo at the hapless steamer.

Bronze torpedoes were old style 45-cm weapons; regular torpedoes were expensive and until the beginning of 1918, U-Boats carried a few bronze torpedoes to use up existing stocks.

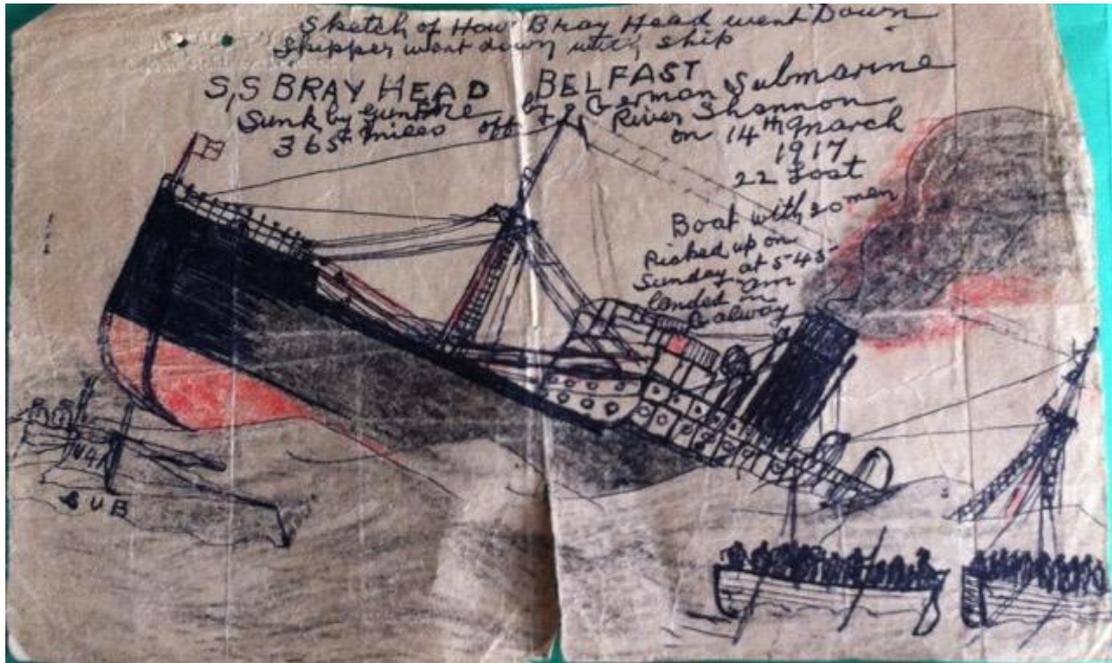
Luckily the torpedo missed and U-44 surfaced to engage the Bray Head with its 88-mm deck gun. At this stage of the war, many merchant vessels now carried defensive guns, the number and calibre depending on the size and tonnage of the vessel.

The Bray Head carried a 3-pounder gun, operated by two naval gun-layers, Alexander Langlands from Montrose and Percy King from Hastings.

The Bray Head's weapon was no match for the submarine's but even so the uneven duel lasted for over two hours; Wagenfuhr's report notes that U-44 fired forty-five shells at the hapless steamer.

During the action, the Bray Head's master, 41-year old **John Curry Hoy** from Port Davey, Whitehead, played a key role, personally serving the gun until the ammunition was exhausted,

The ship was now on fire and following an explosion, Captain Hoy ordered the 38 crew to take to the two lifeboats; there was a heavy sea running and it was difficult to lower the boats which stood by as the Bray Head began to go down by the stern. One of the crew, James Watson, from Killyleagh, later made a sketch of the ship sinking.



The end of the Bray Head

One lifeboat was under the command of Captain Hoy while the First Mate, James Macartney from Belfast, commanded the second.

Submarine and steamer

Originally called **Indralema**, the Bray Head was built in 1893 by Swan Hunter of Wallsend for Thomas Royden & Sons of Liverpool. She was a mixed cargo ship of 3077 gross tonnage and a crew, in 1917, of thirty-eight including the two naval personnel.

In 1900, Indralema was bought by the Ulster Steamship Company, the famous “Head Line” of Belfast, renamed, and began regular trading between Belfast and North America.

It was on one such voyage, from Galveston, Texas to Belfast, in February 1908, that the Bray Head came across the crew of a wrecked American schooner, the **William H Skinner**. They had been adrift, clinging to wreckage, for six days before being picked up and landed in Belfast.

President Theodore Roosevelt later rewarded the Bray Head’s master, Captain Thomas McDowell and other crew-members, with gold watches, chains and medals.

U-44 was one of a class of eight ocean-going submarines. Built in Danzig and commissioned in May 1915, she had a complement of 36 and carried an 8.8cm (3.5 in) deck gun and six torpedoes.

The Bray Head crew

The composition of the Bray Head's crew was typical for merchant vessels of the time. Most were from Ulster - twelve came from Belfast, others from small villages like Glynn and Eden and coastal communities such as Killyleagh, Carrickfergus, Islandmagee, and Whitehead. A handful came from Dublin and Glasgow. Albert Stewart from Islandmagee, at sixteen years old, was the youngest member of the crew.



Captain John Hoy

Captain Hoy came from a well-known local family in Port Davey, Whitehead; a widower, his son was an apprentice on another Head Line ship. First Mate James Macartney came from Belfast; he would be a key figure in the unfolding tragedy.

A return to unrestricted submarine warfare

The Bray Head was a victim of the Imperial German Navy's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare.

This had been tried earlier in the war but came to an end in May 1916 following American protests

Although Germany had claimed victory at the Battle of Jutland it gradually became obvious to military strategists that the High Seas Fleet did not have the resources to affect the outcome of the war.

As 1916 closed, the overall military situation increasingly pointed to a return to unrestricted submarine warfare as the only means left that could bring victory to Germany in a short space of time.

This meant attacking, without warning, neutral vessels, as well as Allied; the Germans had concluded that under the so-called Prize Rules – stopping a vessel and allowing non-combatants to leave prior to sinking – they could never sink sufficient tonnage to force Great Britain to give up the struggle.

After much debate, the German admirals calculated that it would take six months to sink sufficient tonnage to force Britain into defeat; Admiral von Holtzendorff, Chief of the Naval Staff, confidently predicted that 4m tons of shipping would be lost to Britain.

However, British counter-measures such as the arming of more merchant ships, more effective depth charges, improved hydrophones and particularly the introduction, in April 1917, of the convoy system meant that his confidence was misplaced.

The campaign began on 1 February, 1917; the first victim was the small steamer **Essonite**, torpedoed without warning off the Cornish coast with the loss of ten lives.

The career of U-44

U-44 sank its first ship in March 1916 and in what was a modest career dispatched a total of 25 vessels; not all ships succumbed however. A few days before it sank the Bray Head, U-44 had fired upon the Workman Clark- built **SS Aracataca** (Elders & Fyffes Line).

The Aracataca's master had carefully rehearsed the crew for just such an encounter; the ship's gunners, one of them the ship's carpenter, returned fire with its 12-pdr, firing forty rounds in reply to thirty-five from the submarine.

The Aracataca was hit three times, one man being killed but by coolness, skilful navigation and effective zigzagging, the master successfully dodged the remainder of the submarine's shells. Three quarters of an hour after the attack began, another British vessel arrived to provide assistance but by this time the submarine's gun had been silenced and the steamer had registered one hit.

Germany's fatal error

In the early months of 1917, it looked as if von Holtzendorff's confidence in his U-boats was bearing fruit. In March, 379 ships had been sunk but the peak was reached in April 1917, when 880,000 tons of shipping was lost through enemy action, 516,000 of it by submarines.

The Kaiser and his naval staff were not unaware of the effect their action would have in the United States of America but believed that their submarines could sink enough tonnage before the full power of the USA could be brought to bear.

It was not to be. On hearing Germany's decision, the USA immediately severed relations and on 6 April declared war. U-Boats, including U-44, soon began to take a toll of USA-registered vessels.

One incident is particularly noteworthy. On 28 April 1917, in a "no-warning" attack, U-44 torpedoed and sank the 2,500 ton tanker **USS Vacuum** 120 miles off the Hebrides. Lieutenant Clarence Thomas, in command of the naval guard, was thrown into the water by the force of the torpedo and later died from exposure.

Lieutenant Thomas has the unenviable distinction of being the first American naval officer killed in the Great War and is commemorated by a grave marker in Brookwood American Military Cemetery in Surrey.

The crew's fate

Exposure was also to be the lot of the Bray Head crew set adrift in two small boats in the teeth of an Atlantic Ocean gale.

Both boats managed to stay together until Thursday evening, 15 March. There was a gale blowing and food and water were running low. Captain Hoy signaled occasionally by lantern during the night but next morning his boat and the 19 men in it, had disappeared.

In the second boat, First Mate James Macartney hoisted the sail and set a course for land taking great care to avoid the floating wreckage from the sunken steamer. The cold was intense as the men had not been able to don overcoats. William Keenan died from exposure about midnight on Thursday, his body thrown overboard; another James McAree, the second cook, died about six o'clock on Sunday morning.

Macartney had to ration the water and on Sunday morning there was only enough for each man to receive a mouthful - fortunately their ordeal was almost over.

At 06.30 a.m. that morning, Sunday 18 March, the exhausted, frozen and half dead men who had been sitting in water up to their waists, were rescued by the cruiser **HMS Adventure** and landed in Galway; seventeen men were left from the 38 original members of the Bray Head crew. Captain Hoy's boat was never seen again.

The captain of the Adventure remarked that it was marvelous they had held on in such weather.

One of those lost was 19-year old Seaman Moses Alexander Reid from Belfast's Sailortown, who was a relative of the author; he had survived the loss of the hospital ship Britannic in November 1916.



Remembrance

The dead of the Bray Head are remembered in their own communities; Hans Hunsdale on the roll of honour on the wall of Killyleagh Castle, Charles Curry in Malone Presbyterian Church, James Ferguson on the war memorial in the small village of Glynn; Captain Hoy on his wife's gravestone in Carnmoney cemetery and many others.

One place where the Bray Head names can be found together is the Sir Edwin Lutyens-designed Merchant Navy Memorial on London's Tower Hill.

Here, written on tablets of stone, the Bray Head names are listed with almost 12,000 names of merchant seamen from the Great War who have no grave but the sea.

Nemesis

The end for U-44 was not long in coming; on 12 August 1917, off the Norwegian coast, it was rammed and sunk by the destroyer HMS Oracle – all forty-four crew were lost. They are remembered on the Naval Memorial at Laboe, near Kiel.