

WEEKENDER

The second destruction of the HMS Aboukir



HERITAGE MATTERS

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Underwater Cultural Heritage encompasses all traces of human existence that lie or were lying under water and have a cultural or historical character. Recognising the urgent need to preserve and protect such heritage, UNESCO elaborated in 2001 the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. — UNESCO website 2011

The continuing global recession and the sharp increase in the value of precious and semi-precious metals represents a worldwide threat to heritage sites, both on land and under the seas and oceans.

The looting of archaeological sites on land will undoubtedly continue apace, as rich and poor alike take part in the finding and marketing of artefacts, particularly from prehistoric contexts in arenas such as South America and West Africa.

The poor take part by looting for a few pennies for their survival bank, the rich by buying illicit works of art, banking on such objects as inflation-proof in times when the real banks pay practically no interest on deposits, yet lend your money out at high rates.

Due to the high price of gold and silver, antiquities and precious objects, such as family silver and heirlooms, stand to be stolen and melted down to satisfy the lust for a quite buck.

With "send us your gold and silver and we'll send you cash" operations proliferating, Bermuda may not be immune from the latest criminal assaults on objects of cultural heritage.

Under the sea, the race to find and ransack the next shipwreck with bullion of some sort or another aboard appears also to be on the increase, as unfortunately, contrary to the behest of UNESCO, anything goes in the free-for-all underwater world of 'international waters', the emphasis being on short term cash returns versus the long term preservation and economic value for tourism use of cultural finds from under the sea.

Salvage of shipwrecks for less valuable metals, such as copper and bronze, seems also to be a returning fashion, much as it

was in Bermuda in earlier decades when there was at least one outfit here that purchased such 'scrap' materials for shipping overseas.

That is perhaps why bronze propellers are now missing from historic and picturesque shipwrecks in local waters, to say nothing of 'disappeared' portholes and other features of metal on those carcasses of the misfortunes of others.

Nearer to Britain, where we sent hundreds of our young men in the two World Wars, some of whom died on the soils of The Netherlands or nearby, Dutch salvage operators are enacting the second destruction of HMS *Aboukir*, the war grave site (many would say, sacred) of over 500 men, including William Edmund Smith, the first Bermudian to give his life in the First World War.

War graves on land are considered to be sacred territory and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and respective governments place great emphasis on the maintenance and preservation of such sites in honour of those who gave their lives for our future freedoms.

Underwater sites, being under-derover (not to say underworld) as it were, are perhaps less well monitored, as exemplified by the ripping apart of HMS *Aboukir* in recent months, for the extraction of industrial metals.

The sacredness of the site in the sands off the Dutch coast relates to the first few weeks of the Great War (1914–18), the start of which for the British Commonwealth began on fourth of that month in the late summer of 1914, as immortalised in the title and content of Barbara Tuchman's classic book, *The Guns of August*, being a history of the first month of the conflict.

When the guns fell silent four years later at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918 (commemorated as Remembrance Day, 11 November annually), some 35 million people were dead or wounded, including some six million allied troops of which 80 were Bermudians of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps, the Bermuda Militia Artillery and other services; nearly all the Bermudians were volun-



HMS *Aboukir*, a Cressy Class cruiser, launched in 1900, pictured about 1905.

teers.

Of our 22 year old man off the Dutch coast, it is likely he enlisted in the Royal Navy, being: "SMITH, William Edmund, L/1874, 1st class cook, R.N., lost on HMS *Aboukir* 1914, September 22, a coloured man, believed to have been the first Bermudian to lose his life in this war, son of William Felix Smith and his wife Emma Jane, née Douglas, of Harman's Hill, Somerset, baptised 1893, June 4, at St James Church, Sandys. Mrs Smith received a letter signed by Mr Winston Churchill, conveying the sympathy of the King and Queen."

The designation L/1874 may indicate that William Smith may have enrolled here first in one of the local forces before the War.

Termed the 'Live Bait Squadron' because of their age, HMS *Aboukir*, HMS *Cressy*, and HMS *Hogue* of the Seventh Cruiser Squadron were on patrol in the early morning of Tuesday, 22 September 1914, when U-9, a German submarine commanded by Lt Otto Weddigen fired a torpedo at *Aboukir*, which sank in 20 minutes with the loss of 527 men, including the Bermudian Smith.

Stopping to pick up survivors (thinking the *Aboukir* struck a mine), the *Cressy* and *Hogue* were then sent to the bottom as well; in all, 1459 men were lost in the 90-minute attack.

While it is no consolation, the fact is that the incident established the U-boat as a major weapon in the conduct of naval warfare.

A number of naval associations have lodged objections to the desecration of these war sites by the Dutch salvage companies.

Archaeologists, such as one Andy Brockman, are also firing salvos across Dutch bows: "In case you have not seen today's Times (27 September 2011), the violation of the three ships has been condemned by the Ministry of Defence, and the Dutch cultural agency.

On a practical level, the ships



The HMS *Aboukir* Monument on the shore of the English Channel at Southsea, near Portsmouth.



A commemorative card for a member of the losing side, perhaps William Smith's mother received one.



The commemorative card for the winning side, featuring the commander of the Kaiser's submarine U-9.

alleged to be carrying out the raids have been identified as the MS *Bernica* and MS *Bela* based in Scheveningen.

However, the Dutch Coastguard are quoted as being unable to act in spite of the vessels being seen on site by a Dutch aircraft and wreckage being found on the salvage ships by Dutch Police.

The UK Ministry of Defence is quoted as making efforts with the Dutch authorities to prevent "inappropriate activity".

Not only are sites like that of HMS *Aboukir*, *Cressy* and *Hogue* cultural heritage, but they are the sites of serious social heritage.

In this instance, the *Aboukir* is the last tangle remains relating

to the lost of Bermudian William Edmund Smith, aside from the *Aboukir* Monument at Southsea near Portsmouth, for in the nature of things, descendants here have little or nothing in the way of material mementos of their ancestor, not even a photograph.

As we approach Remembrance Day 2011, the *Aboukir* affair and other recent underwater salvage work again raises the question as to what price we place as a world community on underwater cultural heritage, especially as much pertains to the grave sites of mariners and others.

Many otherwise enlightened lands have yet, after a decade, to ratify the UNESCO Convention

on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, and we, being a Dependent Territory of the United Kingdom, fall into that category.

On Remembrance Day, spare a thought for William Edmund Smith, who, if he was trapped in HMS *Aboukir* when he met his Maker, has probably been rolled over in his grave (after 97 years of peace) by those seeking a fast Euro at the expense of others who gave their all to defend and liberate Holland from German domination in the two World Wars.

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