The Story of Three Ships Named *Harlingen*

Norman Rozef, July 2015

Ships often have strange and unusual histories. That, in fact, is the story of three ships bearing the name *Harlingen*. The first large ship that we know of carrying that name, very likely honoring the Holland city of Harlingen was built in 1905. Its keel was laid by William Gray and Company of Central Marine Engineering Works, West Hartlepool. This company was a shipbuilding firm from 1874-1963. They were the largest firm of shipbuilders in the Hartlepool and also lasted longer than any other local shipbuilding firm. For a hundred years the company ensured the towns’ prosperity by giving jobs to thousands of local people. William Gray and Co always maintained its reputation for being in the vanguard of technological and technical innovation. The company regularly topped the output for British shipyards in the last decade of the nineteenth and early 20th century.

The steel hulled cargo ship *Harlingen* was steam propelled and with its 326 n.h.p. could run at a maximum nine knots. It was moderate in size having a gross tonnage of 3471. It was 104.24 meters in length, 15.09 in beam and had a draft of 6.92 meters. It was never to see the third anniversary of its launching.

The ship was cruising from Buenos Aires to Brazil loaded with general cargo. Offshore of Brazil it encountered a strong fog bank and hit the hazardous rocks of Arraial of Cabo (Cape) Frio, Rio de Janeiro State. This cape, east of the city of Rio de Janeiro, was notorious for its shipwrecks. Over the years 104 ships foundered off its shores. The ruptured ship moved away from its tormentor and sank in waters of 18 to 25 meters depth. The crew abandoned the ship in lifeboats.

The fate of the second ship bearing the name Harlingen was equally disastrous. This steel-hulled cargo ship, S.S. Harlingen, was built in 1933 by Lithgows Ltd, Port Glasgow, Scotland. Its owner in 1941 was J. & C. Harrienson Ltd, London. Before World War II the S.S. *Harlingen* was operated by Furness Withy Co., Ltd. This company established in 1891 was merged into another shipping company in 1990. S.S. stands for steam ship. The vital statistics for this vessel were: 5956 gross tons, single screw, 428 feet in length and with a beam of 56 feet. Its maximum speed was 11 knots.

Just before dawn on August 5, 1941 the *Harlingen*, within a convoy designated SL-81, was west of Ireland and travelling east toward its Liverpool destination. The convoy had come from Lagos, Nigeria and Freeport, Sierra Leone. The Harlingen was carrying a cargo of 8800 tons of West African produce. It was hit by a torpedo fired from the German submarine U-75 commanded by Kapitanleutnant Helmuth Ringelmann. The U-75 had also torpedoed the cargo ship Cape Rodney in the convoy. The Cape Rodney was being towed to a port on Ushant Island when it too sank. Fortunately its whole crew was rescued.

The *Harlingen* had not been so lucky. Of its complement of 42, 39 survived and three died. Four people of the crew were gunners. The ship's master, Jack Willingham, and 38 other survivors were picked up by *HMS Hydrangea* and landed at Gourrock, Scotland and three crew members were rescued by *HMS Zinnia* and landed at Londonderry, Ireland. The three fatalities were Robert Elliot, age 55, fireman and trimmer; James Edward Luen, age 45, chief officer; and Robert John Stevenson, 61, second engineer officer.

The U-75 in its relatively short history under Ringelmann had an impressive record. From December 19, 1940 to December 28, 1941, it had sunk seven ships totalling 41,672 tons and two warships with a
total of 818 tons. This unfortunately included the passenger ship *City of Nagpur* (of 458 aboard, 14 crewman died along with one passenger) and the large tanker *Inversuir*, whose 45 man crew survived. The submarine was discovered in the Mediterranean on the latter date by the destroyer *HMS Kipling*. Depth charges disabled the sub that was forced to surface where it then overturned and sank. While 30 of its crew survived, Ringelmann was among the 14 who perished. The German navy thought so much of Ringelmann that it posthumously promoted him to Kaptain. As a footnote, within six months the *Kipling* itself was sunk by German bombers.

The third ship *Harlingen* of which we know is still sailing today. The newest ship with the Harlingen name is the *WMS Harlingen*. It is a container ship flying the flag of Cyprus. She was built in 2006 at Mawai Shipbuilding Fuzhou, Peoples Republic of China. This company, established in 1866, is China's oldest shipbuilder. With a length of 426 feet, breadth of 68.9 feet, draft of 23 feet and a deadweight of 9065 tons, she is owned by WMS Harlingen Navigation Ltd., Groningen, Netherlands. The abbreviation WMS stands for Wilhelmsen Management Services. This firm provides full technical management, crewing and related services for all major vessel types with exception of oil tankers.

This large container ship was lucky not meeting the fate of her other namesakes, for in her first year of operation *Harlingen* was in a collision with another ship. The synopsis of the United Kingdom accident report read: “At 0205 UTC on 30 June 2007, a collision occurred between the container vessel *WMS Harlingen* and the product tanker *Prinkipo* in the River Humber. *WMS Harlingen* was on passage from Queen Elizabeth Dock in Hull to Southampton, *Prinkipo* was inbound to King George Dock, also in Hull. Both vessels had a pilot on board. The weather at the time of the collision was a south-westerly force 3 wind, cloudy, with good visibility. The tide was flooding at between 2-3 knots.

*WMS Harlingen* departed the lock at 0155 and turned into the channel with the engine, with controllable pitch propeller, set for half ahead. The bridge team of *WMS Harlingen* moved from the port bridge wing to the centre console, where control of the steering and bowthrust was taken at 0159, and the auto pilot was set to keep to the starboard side of the channel. The engine control was left on the port bridge wing. At this time, *Prinkipo* was approaching Salt End, and the two vessels were aiming to pass each other, port to port, at the Anson buoy.

At 0202, the main engine control of the *WMS Harlingen* was set to stop on the port console, and 18 seconds later the vessel started to take a sheer to port. The auto pilot applied helm hard to starboard to counter the sheer, the master then confirmed that hard to starboard had been achieved by engaging hand steering. However the vessel continued to swing to port. On the pilot’s instructions, the master moved the engine control at the centre console to full astern, but without effect as the port wing console was still in command of the engine. The bowthrust was started and placed full to starboard with little effect due to the vessel’s speed, of around 9 knots, through the water. On becoming aware that *WMS Harlingen* was turning towards them, the bridge team on *Prinkipo* increased speed and altered course to starboard to increase the passing distance, and then to port to reduce the effect of the imminent collision. This maneuver was partly successful and both vessels sustained only minor damage. *WMS Harlingen* continued across the channel with her propeller turning at zero pitch, until she grounded a few minutes after the collision. Twelve minutes after the collision, engine control was transferred to the centre console, and shortly after this it was possible to drive the ship, stern first, back into the channel.”

Both vessels, considering their significant size, were very fortunate that the collision was not a major one. The report concluded with these recommendations made by the Deputy Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents to the managers of *WMS Harlingen* “Review and revise the company’s operating procedures to ensure:
Masters are trained and competent in the use of all bridge equipment before taking command

- Masters are familiar with the principles of Bridge Resource Management, and understand the company’s requirement for utilizing bridge personnel effectively.

Review and revise the company’s shipboard ISM procedures to ensure:

- Information is immediately available to facilitate prompt and effective responses to emergency situations.
- Realistic drills are routinely carried out to prepare ship’s staff for potential emergency situations.

Review Voyage Data Recorder (VDR) procedures to:

- Routinely verify VDR functionality and performance.

Provide instructions to ensure data is saved effectively following an incident.”

Hopefully the newest Harlingen will end its working career as an ageing “rust bucket” rather than encountering the traumatic type ends of its two previous namesakes.