

HMS VICTORIA

Admiral Tryon's Blunder

By Vic Verlinden

When Admiral Tryon gave the order that positioned both mighty war vessels *Victoria* and *Camperdown* on a collision course, he made a huge mistake. So huge that it cost the lives of more than 350 crew members. The *Victoria* now is the *only* shipwreck worldwide that is positioned vertically on the seabed.

On 22nd June 1893, standing on the bridge of his flagship, HMS *Victoria*, Admiral Tryon was the commander of the biggest battleships of the biggest Marine/Navy worldwide. Having the coastline of Tripoli, Lebanon, already in view, the Admiral commanded his fleet to turn around. At a distance of approximately 1100 meters, the battleship HMS *Camperdown* was positioned next to HMS *Victoria*. According to the Admiral's order, the two vessels would have to make an inward turn before being able to turn around. The commanding officer informed the admiral of the fact that the distance between the two ships was not sufficient to perform this manoeuvre safely. The turning circle of both ships had to be at least two kilometers in order to avoid a collision.

In the Royal Navy, one should never doubt an order given by an officer higher in rank. Admiral Markham, in charge of the *Camperdown*, doubted the given order that was signalled over by flags -- so much so that he didn't obey it. It was not until Admiral Tryon signalled '*What are we waiting for?!*' that Markham had no other choice but to obey his superior's command. The order was given to turn the rudder/wheel 180 degrees.

The collision

At a speed of nine knots, the two vessels, each weighing 10,000 tons, were now turning towards each other. For several of the officers-in-command, it became crystal clear that a collision was inevitable. Captain Bourke again hinted to Admiral Tryon that they had moved too close to the *Camperdown* for the manoeuvre to be executed. However, the Admiral didn't give in, and proceeded with the manoeuvre as planned. The combined speed of both flagships was now eighteen knots, and their distance decreased quickly. In the minutes to follow, Bourke warned Admiral Tryon twice that they would get too close to the *Camperdown*. When Tryon finally realised a collision was unavoidable, it was already too late. The admiral frantically gave the order for both propellers to be switched to "reverse." However, both vessels had too much speed for a collision to be avoided. The first chief (steersman) pushed the telegraph in full reverse while at the same time the process for having the propellers reversed got the green light in the engine room. Those propellers were driven by 14,000 horsepower. The distance between both ships was now only a few hundred meters, and nothing could be done to avoid a collision. Only the counterthrust of the reversing propellers could slightly slow down their speed.

In the meantime, the *Camperdown* had gotten so close that the officers standing on her bridge became visible. A few moments later, the *Camperdown's* bow rammed into the starboard side of the *Victoria*. The *Camperdown's* ram, made of hardened steel, plunged into the hull of the *Victoria*, at about where the coal bunker was. The officers' wards were crushed instantly. The impact was devastating and felt like an earthquake had happened throughout the ship.

Sunk

On the *Camperdown*, the order was given to reverse the propellers. Slowly but surely the flagship freed herself from the iron grip of the *Victoria*. An enormous gap was left in the hull of the *Victoria* through which the vessel took on water very quickly. Immediately, the *Victoria* started listing with her bow in the deep water. Water was flooding the ship through the portholes that had been open due to warm weather conditions. A moment later, the ship's

bow disappeared beneath sea level as the still working propellers were tilted out of the water. Everyone capable of doing so jumped overboard to save himself. Hundreds of crew members were stuck in the hull while the ship perpendicularly sank into the deep, big blue -- propellers still functioning. Anyone who jumped overboard had to be careful not to be sucked down into the deep or crushed by the moving propellers.

On the other battleships, the crews witnessed the events in total bewilderment. They tried to pick up survivors from the water. "*It's all my fault,*" were the last words spoken by Admiral Tryon to his officers. That was the last ever seen of him since he went down with his ship, as dictated by tradition in those days.

Test Dives

The wreckage of the *Victoria* was discovered in 2004 by Christian Francis and Mark Elyat at a depth of more than 150 meters. Much to their bewilderment, it stood completely vertically on the sea bed. The enormous weight of the cannon combined with the still functioning propellers drilled the ship's bow into the seabed where it remains today.

Our dive team consisted of eight rebreather divers. It was our intention to photograph and film the wreck at a maximum depth of 120 meters. Our starting position was the well-equipped dive centre of Walid Noshie in Beirut, which would support the complete expedition technically. Upon arrival, our first task was to reassemble our rebreathers that had been transported dismounted. That same day, a first test dive was made to check on the good working order of our materials.

The following day, our agenda indicated that we had a wreckage dive at a depth of 65 metres. The *Lesbian*, named after the Greek Isle of Lesbos, is a magnificent wreck that was sunk during the Second World War. Ever since then, it's been lying untouched on the sea bed. Bad weather conditions forced us to make a second dive on the wreck the next day. After our first deep wreckage dive, we agreed to set up a decompression station in order to heighten the security measurements. During our second dive, this station was also tested thoroughly to check its performance. Everything went as planned, and that became the moment we thought to be ready for our dives to the *Victoria*.

Dives on HMS *Victoria*

Prior to diving the HMS *Victoria*, it was necessary to first cross the 80-kilometer distance from Beirut to Tripoli. We did so by a rental bus, which also allowed us to take along all of our gear. Once in Tripoli, we were taken to the wreckage by boat, located approximately five kilometers off shore. It was still very early morning when we found ourselves anchored to the buoy pinpointing the wreck's exact location. Everything was checked for the last time when I, together with Pim de Roodes and Danny Moens, made our descent to the wreckage as the second team. After awaiting dive buddies at the buoy, we finally started our descent.

Looming up from the deep blue at 65 meters, we landed on the wreck's stern at 76 meters. The two enormous propellers and rudder were the first items that caught our attention. Prior to our further descent, I prepared my camera, as I wanted to make sure of getting pictures of the name mentioned at the back of the wreckage. After three or four frames, we swam further towards the deep, passing by the balcony and the entrance door of the admiral's quarters. Positioned on the quarterdeck, we now got to see the nine-ton heavy cannon that had its barrel pointed straight to heaven. It was a tremendous sensation and privilege being able to swim freely right next to this great wreck which was positioned straight up...just like a big apartment block.

The display of my dive computer showed a depth of 91 meters. Because my camera casing allowed a maximum depth of 75 meters, I was not willing to take any further risks. I limited myself to taking pictures of the big gun whilst my buddies continued their downward dive until 110 meters. On the side, I also noticed one of the smaller guns sticking-out of the porthole so I gladly snapped a few pictures. Unfortunately, time flew by, and after twenty minutes of bottom time we had to start our decompression ascent of nearly three hours.

Once back aboard, the crew informed us that a car bomb had exploded 500 meters from where we had started off that day. Five soldiers were killed and thirty people injured. In the distance, we could still witness the smoke caused by this outrage. Having to travel back to Beirut by bus was in no way reassuring!

Further exploration of the wreckage

The following day we had planned a full day's rest. But the day after we were again lying above the wreck. I had agreed with Pim de Roodes to first take a few pictures at the entrance door of the admiral's quarters. In the meantime, he would make video footage with the mini-cam, mounted on his Kirby Morgan mask. When we landed on top of the wreckage, it appeared that the visibility was even better than two days earlier! I was able to start my recordings immediately after which we swam to the propellers for a few more snapshots. We then moved back to the bow where, at a depth of 85 meters, I left my camera on the wreck in order to descend some more. At 111 meters, we found ourselves right underneath the big cannon. The deck's board flooring had remained in place in some parts as had the big capstan on the deck. Looking up, it was an incredible, hallucinatory sight to witness this huge wreckage from this angle. Underneath the cannon there appeared to be a big hole through which one would be able to swim through. Yet again, time had run out and we urgently had to start our ascent and decompression halts. On my way up, I didn't forget to pick up my camera, and was still able to take a few more pictures of Admiral Tryon's terrace. After more than four hours of diving, my head reappeared above the water. This dive left an even bigger impression than had the first one.

Last dive on this incredible wreckage

For the last dive, I decided to leave my camera aside so I could fully enjoy this unique experience. At a depth of 120 meters, there were even more holes in the deck. Looking inside, I found plates and other tools; however, we left everything untouched, as this wreckage is a war grave site. On the side, I also saw a few quick-firing guns still mounted on their original undercarriage. Back at the big capstan, I noticed the driving gear. Again, I could see the big cannon above me and realised that the wreck's bow will one day crush under the enormous weight. I noticed some additional smaller guns on the side sticking out of the portholes. Following my trail along the bow, the two big propellers reappeared above me. They must each weigh a few tons. I arrived back at the rudder and our ascent rope. Behind me, I encountered Admiral Tryon's terrace again where he once must have stood to get some fresh air. However, he went down together with his enormous war machine and is buried somewhere in this big tomb.

When I started my decompression, the thought occurred to me that this must have been the most impressive wreckage I'd ever seen so far. No one knows how much longer this wreckage will remain in this unique position: vertical on the sea bed.