

# SEA HEROES

## Thomas Crisp VC DSC

### Hero of the 'Q Ships'



One of the greatest threats to Britain at the beginning of World War I was the sinking of shipping by German submarines called U-boats. One line of defence was to use secretly armed small vessels such as coasters and fishing smacks, which the Navy called 'Q-ships'. They had guns cunningly concealed, large enough to cripple or sink a submarine. Lowestoft produced many plucky men willing to serve on armed Q-ships. But by 1917 these operations became dangerous as the German navy realised they could be ambushed by small boats.

Despite this, Skipper Tom Crisp and his crew on the smack I'll Try sank a submarine in January 1917, for which he received a Distinguished Service Cross and the crew shared a reward of £1000. After this success his smack was re-named Nelson.

Tom Crisp and his son Tom on the armed smack "Nelson".  
(Photograph, Lowestoft Maritime Museum, 1999/386)

On 15th August 1917, the Nelson was fishing with its partner smack Ethel & Millie off the coast of Lincolnshire when a U-boat was spotted on the horizon. As the submarine approached Tom Crisp's men waited for their opportunity to fire — but the U-boat was prepared. The submarine began to fire huge shells at the smack, one of which hit below the waterline causing it to sink.

Although hopelessly outgunned the Nelson fought back, and then one shell hit Skipper Crisp direct. Half of his body was blown away but, amazingly, the Skipper continued to direct the crew: 'Throw the books overboard!' 'Send the pigeon for help!' He refused to be assisted into the waiting lifeboat, telling the Mate, his own son Tom, that he was finished and would go down with his boat. Thomas Crisp was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery.

The crew escaped in their lifeboat and was later found by a search vessel, thanks to the efforts of their carrier pigeon "Red Cock". The crew of their partner Q-ship Ethel & Millie were not so lucky. They were never heard of again.



Model of the smack Nelson, LT 459 (Lowestoft Maritime Museum, 1999/181)



After the loss of the Nelson, Red Cock continued to work as an Admiralty carrier pigeon. When he died his body was mounted and placed in the Lowestoft town museum. He was later sent to a museum in London.

Carrier pigeon Red Cock  
(Photograph, Lowestoft Maritime Museum, 1999/389)



The crew of the partner smack Ethel & Millie, whose skipper was Tom Manning.  
(Photograph, Lowestoft Maritime Museum, 1999/848)