

19. The First World War (1914-18) – The family consumed

The Battle of Jutland, May 1916 – Barkly Molteno captains the *Warrior*

By the time the Great War broke out in August 1914, Barkly Molteno, the youngest son of Sir John Molteno, had been a serving Royal Navy officer for over 25 years. In 1910, at the age of 38, he had been promoted to the rank of Captain,¹ and in December 1913 was appointed flag captain of the 3rd Cruiser Squadron under the command of Admiral W. C. Pakenham.² When war was declared, the Navy's strategic task was to make sure that the very powerful and modern German High Fleet remained bottled up at its base on Germany's North Sea coast. This was essential if Britain was to ferry men and supplies uninterrupted across the Channel to the Western Front. To this end, the Royal Navy positioned its main concentration of capital ships at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, from where the fleet conducted periodic sweeps of the North Sea. This is where Barkly was based in the summer of 1916 in command of H.M.S. *Warrior*, a huge 13,500 ton battle-cruiser, with a crew of 800 men.

The Grand Fleet left its anchorage on a Tuesday in pleasant summer weather and the next day, 31st May 1916, was off the Jutland coast of Denmark. Its forward units, the Battle-cruiser Fleet under Admiral Beatty, of which the *Warrior* was part, was tens of miles ahead of the main Battle Fleet. Towards evening they saw several warships which, it soon became clear, were part of the German High Seas fleet that was out in full force. At this time, a century ago, there was no such thing as aerial reconnaissance, let alone radar, and the two fleets had no idea they were so close until the first sightings. Because the main British fleet took some hours to catch up with the fighting that broke out, the official account states rather laconically Beatty's Battle-cruiser Fleet 'fought an action under, at times, disadvantageous conditions'.³ Visibility was poor and commanders had a real problem distinguishing their ships from the enemy's. 'At 6.16 pm, *Defence* and *Warrior* were observed passing between the British and German Battle Fleets under very heavy fire.'

Barkly wrote a more detailed account of how, as Captain, he saw the battle develop around his own ship.⁴ And we have the following graphic description giving a real sense of the chaos and horror by Sergeant Shaw of the Royal Marine Artillery who was on board the *Warrior*:⁵

¹ *London Gazette*, 28 June 1910.

² South African Military History Society, Ross Dix-Peek, 'South Africans at the Battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916'.

³ Despatch of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief, Grand Fleet (The *London Gazette*, 3rd Supplement, 6 July 1916).

⁴ This account draws on Percy Molteno's letter of 8 June 1916 to his brother Charlie Molteno, Barkly Molteno's letters to his brother Wallace, and other sources.

⁵ W. E. Shaw, 'One Against Nine: How the *Warrior* fought her last fight', *The London Magazine*, p. 66ff.

Straight at the enemy we went, the *Defence* leading us into action... Orders were passed down to us to open fire upon a German light cruiser which was nearly 16,000 yards (9 miles) away. No sooner did we begin shelling it than four of the enemy's battle-cruisers, all more heavily armed than the *Warrior*, started bombarding us.

This exchange of fire had only been going on for about eight minutes when something shocking happened.

I saw a sight which I shall never forget. Just as we getting abreast of the *Defence*, when she was about 1,000 yards away, a large salvo fell around her. There was a small flash, and then her sides seemed to burst all ways. A terrific flame shot upwards and clouds of smoke. Her masts and funnels seemed to part all ways, and she was gone. All you could see was a huge column of smoke on the top of which was a black object which looked like a gun. Thirty seconds elapsed, and then the smoke lifted and for five seconds we saw her bottom, and then she slid down to the bottom of the sea. As far as I could see, not a vestige of wreckage remained on the surface.⁶

Sergeant Shaw explained the parlous position in which this now left the *Warrior*:

It left us to cope single-handed with all the big German ships in our vicinity.... [They] concentrated all their guns on the *Warrior*. Almost the first round that struck her disabled her starboard engine-room and also wrecked her hydraulic pumps, so that from then onward all her guns had to be worked by hand.

The *Warrior* began to slew round. This brought her port battery to bear on the German light cruiser which our starboard guns had set on fire. Range now decreased to under 6,000 yards, and opening on the light cruiser at this distance, our port battery soon sank her. She was the only victim we could claim, as the battle-cruisers were too strong and too numerous for us to put up a very effective fight against them.... [They] gave the *Warrior* a nasty battering. But by turning so that her port battery could reach the light cruiser, she got clear of the battle-cruisers' guns, only to come immediately under the fire of five battleships of the *Koenig* class. These blazed away at her with 11-inch and 14-inch guns.... A huge projectile plunged into the *Warrior's* dynamo room, wrecking it absolutely and destroying all lights and communications throughout the ship.

This was an extremely unlucky shot for us as it cut off all our telephones and extinguished the electric light in the magazines and all other places below. That meant semi-darkness and men were obliged to grope their way as best they could... And of course broken communications prevented orders from being passed in the usual quick way....

During the action we lost 66 killed and 25 wounded, most of these casualties being caused by shell fire. The greater number occurred on the mess-deck where the repairing parties and fire parties were stationed. The scene here was terrible, for some of the men sustained shocking injuries. Quite a lot of them were 'gassed' [for] the Germans also fired a lot of gas shells at us and these took effect in the confined spaces between decks....The Marines who manned the upper deck guns [had to] wrench open the armoured hatches which led to the mess-deck and gave air to the men cooped up under them. This proved a difficult task as, owing to the battering they had received from shells, the hatches were jammed.

⁶ An officer on the *Warspite*, quoted in H. H. Front, *The Battle of Jutland*, United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, 1936, 1964, p. 310.

The pounding went on relentlessly during the minutes that followed the disappearance of the *Defence*. ‘The noise was perfectly appalling, and you couldn’t hear at all between decks, and the worst of it was one knew nothing.’⁷ Another sailor on board wrote: ‘If you can imagine a hundred thunder and lightning storms rolled into one – that was what the battle looked and sounded like.’⁸ The *Official Narrative* says *Warrior* took 13 direct hits, but her executive officer described several more, including some which holed the ship below the water line.⁹ All the *Warrior*’s boats were smashed and the upper structure of the ship ‘absolutely riddled’. It was only by chance, Percy Molteno recounted, that Barkly was not killed; he had left the bridge only moments before the whole thing was swept away. The sea around the ship was also erupting in waterspouts from the shells that fell short and these explosions drenched the ship and everyone in her. The *Warrior* looked set to follow the *Defence* to the bottom of the ocean. Sergeant Shaw takes up the story again:

Beyond all question what saved the *Warrior* from being sunk was the arrival of the *Warspite*. I cannot describe to you our relief as we saw the battleship *Warspite* steam up at full speed [25 knots an hour] and throw herself between the *Warrior* and the German battleships that were attacking us.

With the *Warspite* in the fray, matters suddenly took a new turn. In her the Germans found a doughty opponent, for with her 15-inch guns she could give back as good as she got – and she did so right heartily. The enemy left us alone and gave all their attention to this new and very virile opponent.

Then we were witnesses of a remarkable incident. The *Warspite*’s steering-gear became jammed [temporarily as it turned out], and she steamed round and round, shielding us all the while. Protected in this manner, the *Warrior* crept slowly out of action on her port engine, the only one she had left working.

Percy Molteno explained what was happening. ‘The engine room was full of water up to the top with steam rushing out from the severed pipes. The engineers worked heroically and kept the engines running, nearly perishing in the struggle, and [they] had to be drawn out from under the gratings burnt with steam and having to put their heads under the water to keep from being killed by it. In this way they managed to keep the [remaining] engines running for 1½ hours and this saved her as it carried her out of the zone of terrific fire.’

Just before the port engines also failed, the *Warrior* came across the sea-plane carrier, *Engadine*, which stood by to help. All this time Barkly had the 700 crew members who had not been killed or wounded trying to keep their ship afloat as well as making preparations in case they had to abandon her. Since all the ship’s boats had been destroyed, he set some men to constructing rafts. Others prepared cables for the *Engadine* to take the *Warrior* in tow which she had to do around 8pm that evening. The wounded were brought up on deck and prepared for transfer. Other crew members, led by the four men in the 15-strong carpenter’s party who were still alive, desperately tried to plug the holes that the shells had torn in the ship’s armour-plated sides. All through the night, however,

⁷ *Warrior*’s executive officer, quoted in H. H. Front, *The Battle of Jutland*, op. cit., p. 318.

⁸ Clippings from the London papers, UCT Special Collection, BC330, Box 88. Probably *Daily Mail*, 5 June 1916.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the stricken ship settled lower and lower in the water despite the crew bailing water by hand from the mess-deck. As dawn broke, she developed a heavy list to port and her decks were almost awash. Crew members had constantly to lift up the cots in which the wounded lay in order to prevent them from being soaked by the waves now washing over the upper deck.

Barkly now felt compelled to order the evacuation of the ship. All the crew, including the wounded, were safely transferred to the *Engadine* and he was the last man to leave the *Warrior*. As the *Engadine* steamed past the sinking vessel, they all cheered her and sang the ship's song, 'It's a Long Way to the *Warrior*', to the tune of 'Tipperary'. When they at last reached Rosyth in Scotland, Barkly addressed everyone from the bridge of the *Engadine*. He complimented them on the way they had all performed their duties, and said how proud he was of them. He also 'made touching reference to the mess-mates we had lost, and spoke in terms of praise about the engine-room complement and the carpenters' party who had worked so hard to keep the *Warrior* afloat.'

Once on shore, he with great difficulty got fresh clothes for everyone. Next morning they assembled and again cheered their Captain. Many of the men were put on a train down to London where, on arrival at Victoria Station, people were waiting to welcome them. 'Good old Jacks', shouted a sergeant in khaki. Cheers from the crowd. Then crew members shouting: 'Three cheers for the Captain of the *Warrior* – the finest Captain in the British Navy'. And on their way to the ticket office in the Underground, they sang 'It's a long, long way to the *Warrior*, But our heart's right there' and 'For he's a jolly good fellow'.¹⁰

Barkly was an Officer who took great care of his men, and he now a letter to every single member of the crew:¹¹

We have just experienced a time the like of which has never been known during English history. You behaved magnificently and I have applied to the Admiralty to keep you all together and put me in command of you warriors. I have also asked for leave for all of you to go home and see your friends, and you can be cock-a-chest for you will get at least 10 days. Your courage was magnificent. Not one had any thought for himself, but everyone tried to save the ship and render aid to the wounded and dying.

I would not have believed it would be possible to get a ship into such a hell and come out again with so many survivors. We have the satisfaction of knowing that we sank a large German cruiser before we were disabled, and don't forget that we were under fire for 17½ minutes from nine of their latest ships before we retired from the battle.

As for the family, the first intimation that something had happened in the North Sea was a telegram that arrived at 2pm on the Friday for Barkly's niece, Brenda Molteno. She and her mother Ella were staying with Percy and Bessie Molteno in London. The wire was from her fiance, Tommy Thomas. He was a young naval officer serving on the *Warspite* and he said he was safe and 'Uncle

¹⁰ Newspaper cutting, probably *Daily Mail*, 6 June 1916.

¹¹ Letter to Petty Officer Albert Boyce, reproduced in the *Guardian*, 19 Sept. 2016.

proceeding slowly safely'.¹² Percy realised a serious engagement must have taken place and that Barkly's ship was damaged. Taking advantage of his position as a Member of Parliament, he rushed to the Admiralty 'but could not hear anything'.¹³ At 6 the next morning, another telegram arrived; this one said 'Quite well, Barkly'. Barkly then arrived in London on the Sunday 'still in his uniform in which he had fought the action', and in Percy's words, having gone through 'the most terrible experiences' and 'not [having] had any sleep since the ship left port the previous Tuesday'. Admiral Packenham had lent him his overcoat in which to travel down from Scotland.

One fact in this drama unknown to Barkly was that, among the tens of thousands of men who had endured the battle, were not only Tommy Thomas who was engaged to marry Brenda Molteno, but a cousin of theirs. This was Fred Molteno. He was from Guernsey, had volunteered on the outbreak of war, and was a stoker on board one of the other Royal Navy ships at Jutland. Luckily he was unharmed; indeed he came through the entire War unwounded. Fred was a great grandson of James Anthony Molteno, the elder brother of Barkly's grandfather, John Molteno. But by the early 20th century, these two branches of Moltenos had lost all contact with one another.

Nor was Barkly to know that, exactly 100 years after the sinking of the *Warrior*, a marine archaeologist with colleagues from the Sea War Museum Jutland would discover his ship in 83 metres of water on the floor of the North Sea. Unlike most of the 24 other wrecks from the battle he had seen which had been looted by commercial metal salvage companies, *Warrior* was lying undisturbed with shoals of cod swimming around her upturned hull and gigantic propellers. One of Barkly's great grandsons, Andrew Biggs, made the point that these ships are 'war graves. They should be left alone to show respect'.¹⁴

The Battle of Jutland lasted only hours. But over 8,500 sailors lost their lives. The cost in terms of huge Dreadnoughts and other ships going to the bottom was almost incalculable. There was even controversy as to which side had actually won the battle although, in strategic terms, it led to the German High Fleet remaining in port for the rest of the War. There is one other conclusion worth drawing attention to. As the *Warrior's* travails show, the experience of the First World War for those who fought in it was so totally different, depending on whether one served on land or sea, in a large battle fleet or alone in a submarine. Molteno family members served on almost every front and in every branch of the armed forces during the terrible 4 ½ years of this War and endured its terrible diversity.

¹² Tommy Thomas married Frank and Ella Molteno's daughter, Brenda, at the War's end and settled in Elgin. See Chapter 19 (CORRECT CH NUMBER)

¹³ All this is related in Percy's letter to his and Barkly's eldest brother, Charlie Molteno, at the Cape, 8 Jun 1916.

¹⁴ The *Guardian*, op. cit.