

## **COLLISION BETWEEN HMS RELENTLESS & HMS VIGILANT**

Throughout the evening and night of 26th / 27th October 1954, HMS RELENTLESS and HMS VIGILANT, both type 15 frigates, were conducting anti-submarine exercises as they made the transit south through the Minch Channel.

The channel is between 20 and 45 miles wide and some 70 miles long and separates the Hebrides from the Scottish mainland. Today, the channel is a busy shipping lane carrying some 2.5 million tonnes of shipping each year. There is no reason to believe the channel was any less busy in 1954 in terms of the number of ships however, the gross tonnage would have been considerably less.

At approximately 0415 on the 27th, in response to a signal from RELENTLESS, the VIGILANT was manoeuvring to be astern of RELENTLESS when the ships collided. RELENTLESS rammed VIGILANT on her port side taking out the Wardroom Pantry and a not inconsiderable amount of Wardroom and upper deck fittings. Fortunately, there were no injuries, other than to the pride of a number of people.



The damage to the RELENTLESS' bow section was substantial although both ships managed to make Greenock unaided. Both were dry docked and VIGILANT, once repaired was soon back at sea. RELENTLESS however, despite being made seaworthy, was put into refit in Chatham but in May 1955 was paid off into Category One Reserve.

It is unclear from the newspaper reports which follow, how the collision actually happened but the fact that neither ship had navigation lights on may well have been a factor...

The Glasgow Herald, Saturday December 4th 1954.

## FRIGATE'S COMMANDER REPRIMANDED

### Ships' Collision in Minch

Commander Michael Elijah Impey, commanding officer of the anti-submarine frigate Vigilant, appeared before a court-martial at Devonport Naval Barracks yesterday as a result of the collision between his ship and Relentless, another anti-submarine frigate, in the Little Minch channel off the West of Scotland early on October 27. Both ships were taking part in a N.A.T.O. anti-submarine exercise.

The court-martial was the second of four arising from the collision.

He was found not guilty of the second and third charges against him but guilty of the first charge

"in that after 4.21 a.m. he failed to manoeuvre the ship with more caution by not switching on navigation lights and not decreasing speed in the existing visibility and in view of the sea 'clutter' on the bridge radar set" he was adjudged to be reprimanded.

The second charge was that he negligently performed the duty imposed on him as commanding officer, in that he failed to warn the look-outs to be on the alert when taking up station astern of H.M.S. Relentless. The third was of negligent performance of his duty, in that he failed to make full use of radar in the operations room when taking up station astern of H.M.S. Relentless.

### SWUNG TO STARBOARD

Commissioned Gunner Morris Jackson Cook, officer of the watch aboard H.M.S. Vigilant at the time, who on Thursday was acquitted of charges against him arising out of the collision, gave details of the courses steered and of the distance between the Relentless and the Vigilant. The ship was swinging to port, and an order was then received from the Relentless that the Vigilant should act independently, keeping a mile astern, he said. Asked what action was taken when this signal was received, he said Commander Impey gave the order "hard a-starboard" at 4.21 a.m. It steadied the ship, which then started to swing to starboard.

The Vigilant was in collision with the Relentless shortly after 4.22 a.m.

Both ships were darkened and showing no navigation lights. After the collision both switched on their navigation lights.

Answering Captain H C B Coleridge (defending), he said that at the time it was blowing Force five to Force six from the south-south-west. Visibility was poor and it was rough. He had hoped to sight the other ship at half a mile, but did not sight her before the collision. Conditions for sighting from the enclosed bridge of his ship were poor. Look-outs had been posted and were carrying out their duties on the bridge.

Two other witnesses, the port and starboard look-outs of H.M.S. Vigilant, said they had been given no special orders, nor had they received any information about the proximity of any other ship.

Lieutenant Nigel James Mills, officer of the watch on board the Relentless, said the enclosed bridge in ships such as his own and the Vigilant was not an easy place from which to maintain a look-out. The Vigilant was not sighted before the collision.

Lieutenant-Commander A. F. Milne, navigation expert, produced drawings of the tracks of the two ships, based on the data available, and said he was unable to make turning circles to fit to make the two ships collide. It seemed the data could not all be reconciled. Commander Impey, in evidence, said he had been asleep just before being called to the bridge about 4.15 a.m. The night was dark and overcast, the sea rough, and a south-south-westerly wind was blowing at Force five.

He had no reason to doubt the look-outs were alert, and was convinced that no one on

the bridge could have been unaware of what was happening. He could not explain how a collision could occur after the manoeuvres which had been made.

Asked why he not used the information available from the radar set un the operations room, he said that when he left the radar set on the bridge the ship was being manoeuvred into a position where there was no possible risk of collision.

After the court-martial had given their decision Captain Coleridge said that Commander Impey was one of the few officers who could claim the certain destruction of seven U-boats and the infliction of severe damage on many more. He had been appointed to command the ship on October 5, and the day of the collision was his third day at sea.

The Glasgow Herald, Thursday December 9th 1954.

REPRIMAND FOR R.N. OFFICER

Ships in Collision

Commander George Osborn Symonds, D.S.C., described in Service certificates read to the Court, as "a brilliant and able officer", was sentenced to be reprimanded by a Devonport court-martial yesterday after being found guilty on three charges arising out of the collision between his ship, the frigate Relentless, and another frigate, the Vigilant.

It was the fourth court-martial after the collision in the Minches off the west coast of Scotland, during a N.A.T.O. exercise.

Commander Symonds had pled not guilty to failing to take adequate precautions or the safe conduct of the ships by not ensuring that the Vigilant was reported by radar at more frequent intervals when she was carrying out his order to take station astern, failing to ensure that a sufficient visual look-out was maintained, and failing to ensure that a continuous watch was kept on radar.

#### **NOTES:**

Unfortunately, I can find no other information on the incident other than that reported above and the following brief comments from the Register of Courts Martial.

It would appear that full details of the incident, including both Ships' Logs, are still under lock and key.

1. 7153. 2nd December 1954. Commissioned Gunner(TAS) Morris Jackson COOK, OOW, HMS Vigilant.

First charge: Negligently or by default hazard HMS Vigilant.

Second, Third, Fourth: Negligent performance of duty.

Accused found not guilty on all charges and acquitted accordingly.

2. 7155. 3rd December 1954. Commander Michael Elijah IMPEY, CO, HMS Vigilant

First charge: Negligently or by default hazard HMS Vigilant.

Second and Third: Negligent performance of duty.

Accused found not guilty on second and third charges, but found guilty on first charge.

Adjudged to be reprimanded.

3. 7156. 7th December 1954. Lieutenant Nigel James MILLS, OOW, HMS Relentless

First and Second: Negligent performance of duty

Accused was found not guilty on all charges and acquitted accordingly.

4. 7157. 8th December 1954. Commander George Osborne SYMONDS, CO, HMS  
Relentless  
First, Second and Third: Negligent performance of duty.  
Accused was found guilty on all charges. Adjudged to be reprimanded.

Now have a look at the Ship's Log of HMS Relentless...

Date	Position	Log Entry
		<p><b>No Ship's Log available for October 1954</b>  <i>The entries for 27<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> Oct are taken from the November Log</i>  <i>The entries for 27<sup>th</sup> &amp; 28<sup>th</sup> Oct are verbatim transcriptions</i></p>
<p>27 Oct 1954</p>	<p><i>Position is in the Minch Channel between the Inner and Outer Hebrides.</i></p> <p><i>Whilst transiting the Minch Channel southbound, RELENTLESS has been conducting ASW exercises with VIGILANT</i></p> <p>Position at 0800 5729.5N 0655.5W</p> <p>Position at 1200 5730.6N 0650.4W</p> <p>Position at 2000 5653.8N 0706.5W</p>	<p><i>(P Emmet S/Lt Navigating Officer).</i></p> <p>FIRST ENTRY</p> <p>"0422 In collision with HMS VIGILANT. Hands to Emergency Stations. Bows buckled and holed in a number of places. Minor flooding in the bows.</p> <p>0519 Neist Pt 063° 7.3</p> <p>0533 Hands employed shoring up damage forward and emptying paint store</p> <p>0620 Neist Pt 094° 5.8</p> <p>0750 Neist Pt 135° 5.5</p> <p>0830 Neist Pt 142½° 7.7</p> <p>0930 Neist Pt 155½° 9.0</p> <p>0938 Stern ahead and turning shortly into the wind</p> <p>0945 Ship stopped to do more shoring. Tide at 0900 020°/2.5kts</p> <p>1032 Going ahead for trial</p> <p>1050 Stopped for final shoring. Position 57°33'N 06°51'W. 1050 Visual Fix</p> <p>1120 Slow ahead both engines. a/c 190° 1135 sp 8 kts</p> <p>1223 A/C 205°</p> <p>1256 A/C 200°. Making good 6 kts. Ship carrying 10° of starboard helm</p> <p>1300 Neist Pt Lt Ho brg 085° 4.2</p> <p>1400 Position by Radar 57°19½'N 06°58½'W</p> <p>1500 Position by Radar 57°15'N 07°02'W</p> <p>1525 A/C 195° 1525 A/C 190° Vessel pitching easily &amp; shipping light spray on Focs'l</p> <p>1600 Position by Radar 57°09¼'N 07°04½'W</p> <p>1700 Switched on Navigation lights &amp; NUC lights</p> <p>1722 A/C 195° 1734 Slow ahead both engines</p> <p>1745 A/C 190° 1750 50 revs A/C 195°</p> <p>1800 Position by Radar 57°0.7'N 07°5.0'W</p> <p>1830 Position by Radar 56°59'N 07°5.4'W</p> <p>NAVIGATOR FIXING FROM OPS ROOM</p> <p>2028 Abandoned paint shop shut No. 9 Blk Hd Door</p> <p>2039 Raised Barra Head Lt Brg 258°</p> <p>2040 Wind increasing Force 7</p> <p>2103 A/C 200°</p> <p>2110 Strengthening shoring in for'd Naval Store 2155 A/C 210°</p>

		<p>2130 Barra Hd 265° 17.5 2200 Slow ahead both engines  2215 Hove to both engines stopped. Average roll 15° wind increased to Force 8  2301 Barra Hd 268° 17</p>
28 Oct	<p>Position at  0800 5725½N 06 59½W</p> <p>Position at 1200  5730.4N 0653.6W</p> <p>Position at 2000  5737.7 0655W</p>	<p>0100 Situation unchanged. Ship hove to across sea. Wind force 8  Ship's position whilst hove to:-  0105 56°49'N 07°05'W  0130 56°50.5'N 07°04.5'W  0200 56°51.2'N 07°04'W  0225 ½ ahead stbd ½ astern port 70 revs turning to n'ward to shelter in the Minches. Extreme difficulty expected in turning the ship.  0330 Increased to 70 Revs 0350 A/C to 355°  0445 57°03'N 06°59'W  0500 Revs reduced to 70. Sea quartering. Shoring in bows satisfactory 0525 Revs reduced to 68  0545 57°12'N 06°59.4'W Passed HMS Indomitable towed by five tugs on port beam  0545 Revs reduced to 66  0600 Pos'n: Usinish Pt Lt Brg 298° 7.4  0700 Pos'n: Usinish Pt Lt Brg 236½° 7.4  0720 Commenced turn to Port. Reduced to 50 revs  0720 Pos'n: Neist Pt Lt Brg 086° 7.5 Vessel hove to with wind &amp; sea 5 points on Port bow. Stopped both engines.  Vessel hove to, Wind &amp; Sea on Port Beam. Both watches of hands cleaning ship  0915 57°27.6'N 06°57.5'W visual Fix. Tide now negligible  1010 Reverted to 5 minutes notice for steam  1025 Severe squalls  1100 Weather cleared. Drifted NE 2 miles during past hour  1100 57°29.6'N 06°55.2'W Visual Fix  1200 57°30.4'N 06°53.6'W Visual Fix. 2<sup>nd</sup> boiler at 1 hours notice for steam  1245 Tug Prosperous sighted  1250 Exchanged identities with Maidstone  (FURTHER position fixes)  1430 Passing squalls 1445 Immediate notice for steam  1454 Slow ahead both engines 1455 ½ ahead 50 revs  1635 Stopped both engines. Hove to.  Position at 1645 133° Neist Lt 9¼  Position at 1800 107.5° Dunvegan Head 9¼. Ship drifting to N'ward at approx. 2 knots  2000 Weave Pt Lt 257½° 6.5' Ship drifting in pos'n 029° 2 kts.  Main engines at 5 mins notice  Vessel hove to, wind &amp; sea on Port beam. Drifting approx. 035°</p>

		at 1½ kts 2300 Vaternish Pt Lt 143° Glas Eilean Lt 027° Vessel setting approx. 030° at 1.7 kts"
29 Oct	Stornoway	0010 Underway Co 040° Revs 60 Prosperous in company 0618 Ship hove to off Stornoway 0730 BWH prepared for entering harbour 0840 Secured starboard side to at Stornoway 1021 HM Tug Prosperous slipped from alongside 1500 Captain's Requestmen & Defaulters mustered 1645-1915 Free gangway open
30 Oct	Stornoway	(0700) ER Dept patching up hole in bow 1030 Captain's mess deck rounds 1030 Stbd anchor removed from FX and stowed amidships 1115-1158 Captain called on Provost 1750 HMS M1112 entered harbour 1908 HMS M1111 entered harbour 1910 HMS M1101 entered harbour 1912 HMS M1114 entered harbour 1945 3 ratings on draft to M1111 2200 Sur Lt Bamwell RNVR left ship to join URCHIN with 3 Telegraphists for passage to Loch Ewe. Motor cutter left ship for URCHIN 2245 Motor cutter returned and secured for the night
31 Oct	Stornoway > Greenock	0800 Hoisted motor cutter 0810-0844 M1101, M 1114, M1111, M1112 left harbour 0837 PROSPEROUS secured alongside port side 0902 Slipped & proceeded Position at 1100: 57°58.9'N 06°19.4'W 1144 Altered course to 242° to avoid trawler. FD44 reprimanded by light for not taking earlier action and not obeying Rule of the Road 1545 Visual Fix – Neist Pt Lt bore 038°/8.5nm Very slight suggestion of swell. One Shackleton sighted on a southerly course Position at 2000 56°41.4'N 07°17'W
01 Nov	Stornoway >Greenock Position at 0800 5517N 0559W 1200 5527N 0501.5W	1100 Ground haze fairly thick. Viz about 5 miles 1225 Passed TERMAGENT on port beam 1 mile 1548 Secured alongside Deepwater jetty Greenock