

The Adventures of *HMS Ben-My-Chree* in the Wine-Dark Sea

by Nicholas Pappas

In a great modern Greek marine drama, the tragic and the comic muse vied over the sinking of a British aircraft carrier at Castellorizo in 1917.

Few people know that the largest and fastest coastal steamer of her day, the *HMS Ben-My-Chree*, which was later amongst the first seaplane carriers to be commissioned, was sunk in 1917 in the harbour of Castellorizo in one of the more interesting naval encounters of World War I between Turkish forces and the Allies. In fact, the vessel's nine year history reads like one adventure story after another, first in the peacetime service she provided and, later, and more importantly, in the wine-dark seas of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean, until her disastrous shelling in the usually accommodating harbour of this distant Greek isle.

Launched in 1908 at Barrow by Vicker, Sons & Maxim Limited, the *HMS Ben-My-Chree* was originally a twin-funnelled coastal passenger steamer owned and operated by the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company for Irish Channel crossings between Liverpool and Douglas. She measured 375 feet in length, 46.2 feet in breadth and weighed 2651 tons. Fitted with 3 Vickers & Maxim steam turbines and 4 double-ended boilers, she had an extraordinary top speed of 26 knots with a peacetime complement of 119 crew. Her passenger capacity of 2651 was the largest of her day amongst coastal passenger steamers and her record speed of 26.92 knots during her trials off the Scottish coast in 1907 was not to be eclipsed for a number of years. Her years of service as a coastal steamer between 1908 and 1914 were otherwise eventful only for the vessel's consistent punctuality and speed, breaking the Irish Channel crossing record time on a number of occasions.

However, her strong record of achievement during peacetime was to be easily outdone after she was chartered as a seaplane carrier in early 1915. To achieve this, considerable structural alterations were carried out by removing all upper structures on the vessel to the rear of the funnels in order to accommodate a large seaplane hangar to house up to six Short & Shopwith seaplanes. A well-equipped workshop was included below the hangar to provide all manner of repair and replacement to aircraft and armaments alike.

In May 1915, with the works complete, the *HMS Ben-My-Chree* was dispatched to the Dardanelles from Plymouth to assist in the ultimately doomed Allied operations. Her role was to provide seaplane reconnaissance in the Aegean and to take part in a number of coastal bombardments. Until August she was stationed off Tenedos, and later Smyrna, and during this time she made numerous spirited coastal bombing raids with her seaplanes pro-

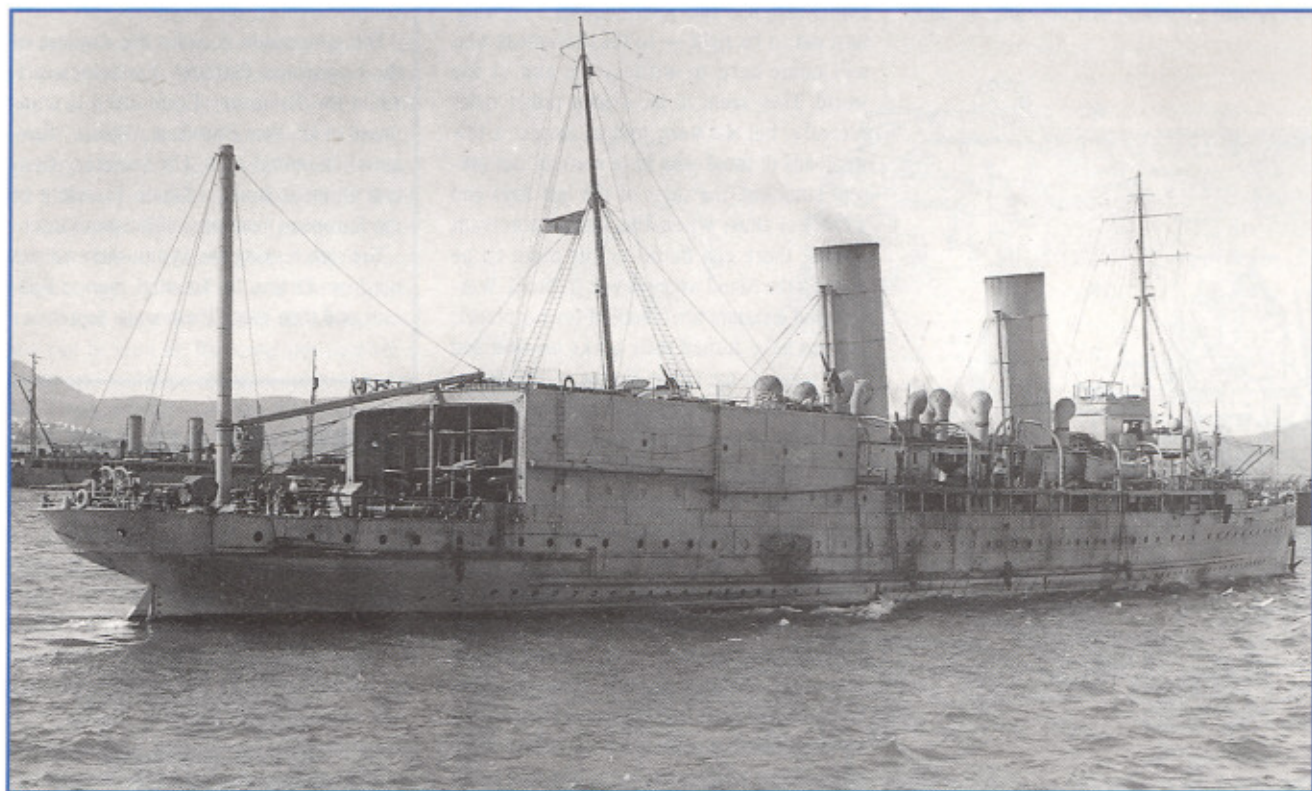


Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum.

The Ben-My-Chree pictured at Mudros on Lemnos in November 1915. Note her large seaplane hangars and hoist for the lowering of the seaplanes into the water.

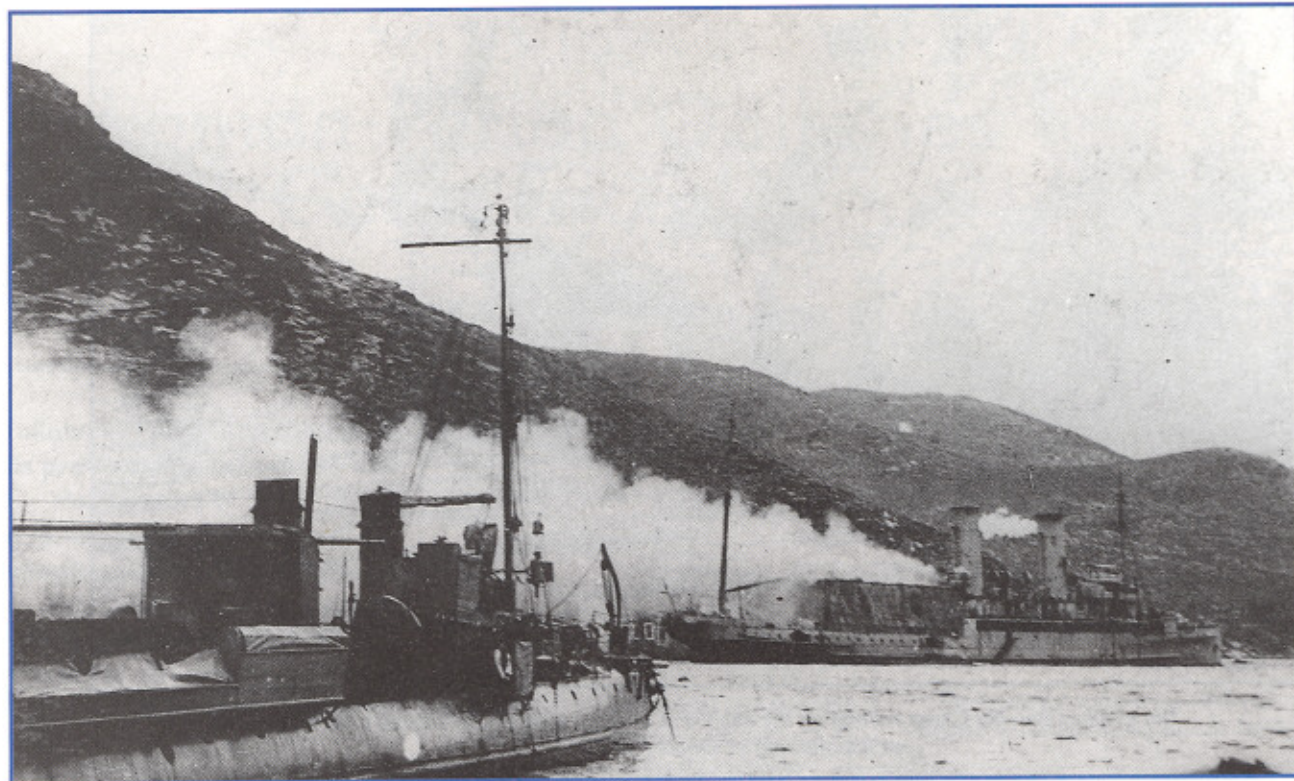


Photo courtesy of: Imperial War Museum.

The Ben-My-Chree (right) at Castellorizo minutes after she was hit by Turkish artillery on the afternoon of January 9, 1917. To the left, a French vessel approaches to render assistance.

viding the much valued reconnaissance to those below. On August 12, 1915, a seaplane from the carrier made history by being the first to successfully attack a ship with a torpedo. This was a totally new form of warfare at the time and the event attracted international interest. The victim was a 5000 ton Turkish supply ship lying in the Gulf of Xeros and it sank soon after. Five days later, a similar attack was mounted on two other Turkish vessels — wartime aviation was never to be the same.

More action followed between September and December 1915, when the *Ben-My-Chree* patrolled off Gallipoli in the Dardanelles and even rescued Greek refugees fleeing from the Turks near Smyrna. Amongst the Greek population of the littoral islands off the coast of Turkey she became a welcome and popular sight and it was not uncommon for her brass band to 'entertain' the locals with western hymns and ballads while her sailors were on shore leave.

More dramatic events, however, demanded her crew's close attention and in December 1915 she returned to Gallipoli to assist in the withdrawal of the Allied troops after their disastrous foray into Anatolia. In January 1916, she was the last boat to leave after the evacuation of Cape Helles and Suvla Bay and the destruction of the British base.

Between January and May 1916, she contin-

ued to operate in the Aegean, frequently with French forces, and along the southern shores of Turkey, off Syria and Palestine, based either at Cyprus or Port Said. Turkish coastal batteries, railways, troop concentrations and other targets were frequently bombed by the *Ben-My-Chree's* guns or by torpedoes from her seaplanes.

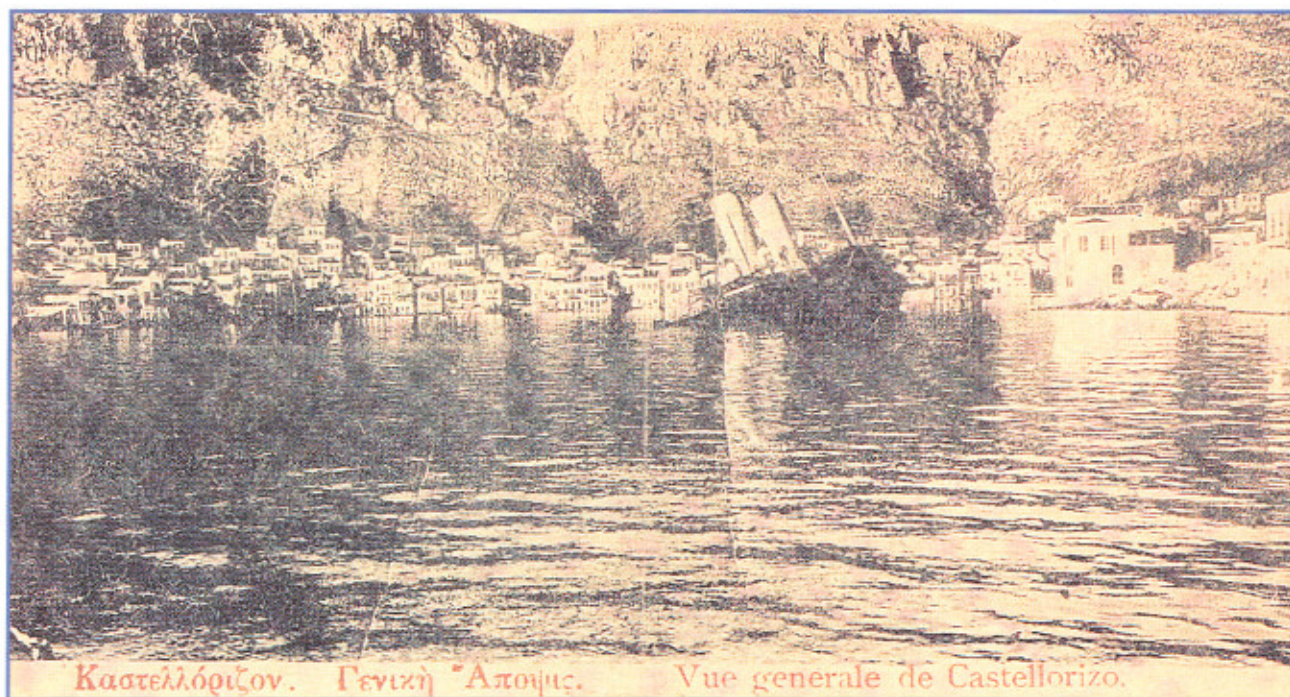
The second part of 1916 saw the *Ben-My-Chree* off Jeddah and the Sinai coast with bombing raids carried out on the Gaza area, Nazareth, Tripoli, Beirut, Haifa, Jerusalem and Jaffa with great success. Under the tenacious command of Charles Samson, one of the outstanding naval aviators of World War I, the *Ben-My-Chree* proved to be one of the most enterprising vessels in the eastern Mediterranean with an elusiveness that attracted the wrath of the Turks.

The end of 1916 saw the vessel at Suez for a brief overhaul and, in the first days of 1917, she received orders to sail for reconnaissance of an area in the region of Castellorizo, then under French naval occupation. The island had been occupied by the French naval forces from December 1915 when they seized upon a double opportunity presented to them by a local revolution against the Turks and the Greek government's reluctance to accede to the islander's pleas for incorporation into 'Mother Hellas'.

French occupation of Castellorizo proved to

be a thorn in the side of the Turkish forces as the island's proximity to the mainland allowed for occasional spirited sorties of French troops accompanied by local *pallikaria* who had intimate knowledge of the terrain. There was a downside, of course, and it unfortunately coincided with the *Ben-My-Chree's* arrival in the harbour of the island, with a French escort destroyer, the *Ariadne*, on the morning of January 9, 1917. It was sadly ironic that despite the fact that she had continually braved enemy waters and survived unscathed, in this most hospitable of harbours, the *Ben-My-Chree* was to meet her end while innocently discharging supplies to the island's French garrison. For the Turkish guns high in the mountains above Antifilo (now the Turkish town of Kas) some six kilometres away, it was a target literally too good to be missed.

That morning things proceeded smoothly enough without any sign of the calamity to come. Whilst Commander Samson had been reluctant to comply with the French Admiral's instructions to dock in the harbour, he carried them out nevertheless. As supplies were unloaded by the British sailors to their thankful French allies, the locals were entertained by the vessel's brass band which had been invited to play in the main *plateia* of the town. Meanwhile, the enormous carrier stood in the horseshoe-shaped harbour — an all too obvious target for the Turkish four-inch battery



The stricken Ben-My-Chree resting on the shallower western side of Castellorizo's harbour on the morning of January 10, 1917.

opposite which quietly set about its task.

Suddenly, at 2.10 pm a blast was heard from the Anatolian shore and, seconds later, the shell exploded harmlessly in the harbour some distance from the ship. At first, the crew and surprised Castellorizians thought it was an air attack but three minutes later their worst suspicions were confirmed when two further shells landed in the water close to the bow of the *Ben-My-Chree*. Before seaplanes could be launched, a further shell exploded into the ship's hangar setting it on fire. Within minutes, the fire was out of control as it penetrated the petrol stores, engine room and, some minutes later, the bridge. Before long, with the steering gear and communication system out of action, Samson had no alternative but to raise the call "abandon ship" at 2.45 pm as the shelling continued.

Meanwhile, on shore, panic and chaos had set in as the frantic locals ran to their homes or searched for loved ones in the narrow alleyways. The French Governor and his marines ran powerless amongst them trying to restore order but the occasional shell fell wide of its mark and invariably landed on the harbour-front homes which were not built to withstand bombardment of this sort. Other shells fell on the wireless station and in the surrounding dwellings causing loss of life amongst the locals. Many locked their houses and immediately made for the steep paths leading to the safety of the plateau beyond the island's heights. Other, more intrepid, local

youths are reported to have dived into the harbour when, amidst the chaos, word spread that a store of English pounds from the *Ben-My-Chree* had opened, spilling its contents into the harbour.

While this continued, the 250 able and lightly injured crew of the vessel swam the 80-or-so metres to the shore. Those more seriously injured were conveyed frantically by the crew in the one remaining lifeboat together with the assistance of some selfless locals. By now, the once grand *Ben-My-Chree* had settled on the shallow waters of the harbour and only its charred and blackened superstructure remained visible. The vessel which had once been the menace of the Turks had now met its end.

And yet, amidst this tragedy, there was no absence of comedy. An eyewitness later recalled how Commander Samson had been the last one off the vessel. He had swum ashore only to find that the inhabitants of a nearby dwelling "had rushed to his assistance and in an excess of hospitality had divested him of his dripping uniform and supplied him with a costume of local design. His knowledge of modern Greek was limited to two words which he couldn't pronounce and they couldn't understand, and no extraction could dissuade them from their purpose of drying his own clothes and decking him out in theirs. It was in this rag that he paraded in the marketplace."

Bombardment continued on the 10th and

11th of January and, with little choice left to him, a systematic civilian evacuation of the town was then organized by the French governor to the relative safety of the mountain monasteries and churches, some even opting for the dubious protection offered by caves and crevices in the limestone formations of the island. Others took to their sailing ships and set sail for Egypt and Crete, some never to return again.

As a seabound invasion was feared, the British and French troops teamed together in the days following to form garrisons and watches around the island to ward off the Turkish assault that was never to come. Houses on the seafront were requisitioned to house field hospitals, radio stations, workshops and lookout posts as the town became a military fort bearing little resemblance to its pre-war days.

For the Turks, however, their objective had been achieved and, aside from further bombardment in coming weeks, the seaborne attack of the Turks never took place. The *Ben-My-Chree*, one of Britain's most feared vessels, had been put out of action in retribution for the havoc she had caused Turkish forces in the previous two years while operating in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

It is an ironic final twist to the story that the *Ben-My-Chree* was refloated after the war, only to be towed to Piraeus, where she was sold to the Germans, supposedly for scrap, and never heard of again. □