

Although the *Bella* was blown up by a U-boat in 1916, and the crew were imprisoned in Prussia for years, Skipper James Ritchie and his men, as civilians received no recognition.



BRANDENBURG P.O.W. CAMP: The crew of the *Bella*, in a work party felling trees. Left to right, David Cargill, John Cargill, James Ritchie junior, James Ritchie, James F. Ritchie, William Ritchie.

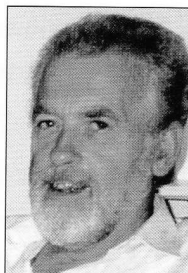
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NEIL RITCHIE

Auld Brimmy's boats

My interest in the wartime loss of the small fishing-boat *Bella* was aroused by an account in *Grampian Lives* by David Northcroft [Leopard Press].

I was fortunate to locate the grandson of the skipper of the *Bella*, Neil Ritchie, and visited him at his home in Gourdon, Kincardineshire. He was very friendly and forthcoming.

Skipper James Ritchie, aged 51, was known to one and all as Auld Brimmy. He earned the nickname after his previous vessel, the *Brimming River*, was wrecked on the rocks



BY
JOHN
MATHIESON

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trying to enter Gourdon harbour in rough seas. The skipper, who had been at sea since he was

14, was accompanied by his 17 year-old son, also called James. Then there was the mate, John Cargill age 57, known as Auld Johnny, and his son David aged 17; there was yet another 17 year-old, James Freeman Ritchie. The final crew member was William Ritchie, aged 43. All the men lived in Gourdon.

On 25 September 1916, the crew of the *Bella* were shooting their lines off Todd Head lighthouse near Catterline. Visibility was restricted and fog-banks obscured the rest of the fleet. ▶

LOSS OF THE BELLA

James Ritchie said to his father, "There's a periscope", to which the skipper replied, "Ach, awa, it's nithing," no doubt with a few expletives.

Suddenly, a U-boat surfaced and the German sailors rushed to the deck gun. The commander, Kapitanleutnant Robert Moraht, appeared on the conning tower and in good English ordered the *Bella* to stop. U64 came alongside and took the crew off the *Bella*.

A bomb with a timing device was placed on the fishing boat; the submarine withdrew to a safe distance and blew the *Bella* up. As the U-boat proceeded down the coast and came within sight of Gourdon, the commander allowed the crew members to remain on deck for one last look at their village before sailing into captivity. Truly a bizarre event.

Remarkably, there were no witnesses to the destruction of the *Bella*. Neil commented that there were minefields along the coast and occasionally a mine would come adrift from its mooring, sometimes resulting in an explosion, the inference being that local people were accustomed to noises offshore.

When the *Bella* did not return that afternoon the wives became concerned about their menfolk; the following day their worse fears were confirmed when wreckage was washed up on the shore. *The Mearns Leader* reported the vessel lost, presumably foundered, and the disaster left three women widowed in Gourdon, grieving the loss of the breadwinner. It would be a year before they were to learn that their husbands were prisoners of war.

Meanwhile U64 continued on her patrol. Emprisoned in the claustrophobic surroundings of the submarine, the fishermen had ample time to dwell on their fate. Regardless, according to Neil Ritchie, the prisoners were well treated by their captors.

On 28 September U64 struck again in the North Sea, capturing the *Loch Ryan*, a much larger fishing vessel of 186 tons, off the Tyne. Commander Mohrat put a prize crew on board the trawler, plus the crew of the *Bella*; for them the war was well and truly over.

Once in Germany the prisoners were taken to Dulmen in Westphalia by train, confined in box cars intended for livestock. According to an account by the second mate of the *Loch Ryan*, the unfortunate prisoners were paraded through the streets of Berlin while hostile crowds hurled insults and worse at them. The naval blockade of Germany by the Royal Navy

was very successful, resulting in severe food shortages for the German people, so no doubt the Berliners felt justified in giving vent to their anger at the sight of British seamen.

Dulmen was a transit camp only 25 miles from the Dutch border, with high barbed-wire barriers and sentry towers to prevent escape. Once processed the Gourdon men were transferred to Brandenburg in Prussia, about 40 miles from the centre of Berlin. The camp held Royal Navy ratings – mainly survivors from destroyers sunk during the Battle of Jutland – British merchant seamen, including fishermen, French soldiers and 3,000 Russians.

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Neil Ritchie mentioned that his grandfather, being the skipper, was treated as an 'officer and a gentlemen'. He had a separate room and a personal guard, an elderly soldier, and was not required to attend work parades.

The prisoners were employed on work parties felling trees, and a photograph survives of the crew of the *Bella* with rows of tall trees in the background.

An article in a naval journal revealed that the pictures were taken by an enterprising local photographer who was allowed unlimited access to the camp. How the photographer was paid we do not know – the practice was not approved by either the German authorities or the Red Cross – but with the Germans desperate for essentials, let alone luxuries, barter would be unavoidable.

Rations issued by the Germans were insufficient, usually watery soup and black bread made from potato flour. Fortunately the meagre diet was supplemented by the food parcels organized by regimental and local associations, through donations were received from families, friends and benevolent strangers. The process was administered by the Red Cross and parcels were addressed to the

individual prisoner.

James Senior received his parcels thanks to three benevolent spinster sisters in Cornwall, who would have 'adopted' him through the services of one of the agencies involved. After the war the Ritchies travelled to Cornwall and for many years the sisters continued to send a box of apples up to Gourdon every Christmas.

Brandenburgh camp operated a repressive regime and the issue of food parcels was withheld to punish misdeeds, such as escape attempts. On occasion, under the pretence of checking for contraband, the guards would open all the tins and dump the contents in a bucket, handing over the empty package.

Neil recounted how the prisoners were ordered to fall in on a work parade one Sunday morning and refused, maintaining they never worked on the Sabbath. The commandant was called and appealed to them three times. Still they refused and so a detachment of cavalry was ordered to charge.

The strikers scattered. Neil's father, James Ritchie Junior, ran through a small gate as a guard with fixed bayonet attempted to stop him. James fell, suffering a slight bayonet wound to his forearm, and decided the best option was to stay on the ground. The sentry poised above him, preparing to lunge with the rifle, but he refrained. The outcome was that British prisoners were not forced to work on Sundays.

In mid-December 1918 Brandenburgh camp was finally cleared of prisoners, who were homeward bound at last. Although the crew of the *Bella* all survived the war, Neil Ritchie, trawling through back issues of *The Mearns Leader*, could find no reference to their return.

James Ritchie, skipper and owner, received compensation for the loss of the *Bella* and bought a replacement boat which he named *The Happy Return*. His new boat was manned by a reduced crew of his three sons who had sailed on the *Bella* prior to being called up into the Royal Naval Reserve at the outbreak of war.

Despite their ordeal, the Ritchies and Cargills received no recognition. The *Bella* was such a small craft that the crew did not come under the authority of the Board of Trade so they were, in fact, civilians.

JOHN MATHIESON is a retired aircraft engineer. Born in Aberdeen, he served in the Merchant Navy and RAF. Emigrated to Rhodesia, but has lived in Drumoak since 1977.