HMS GLADIATOR WRECKED OFF YARMOUTH

ISLE OF WIGHT 1908

HMS *Gladiator* was a second class protected cruiser of the Royal Navy, launched on 8 December 1896 at Portsmouth, England. She was of the *Arrogant* class rated at 5,750 long tons (5,840 t) displacement, with a crew of 250 officers and men. She had three distinctive stacks amidships with a conspicuous bridge well forward.

Gladiator was ordered to be commissioned at Portsmouth on 15 February 1900 to take out relief crews for the Australia Station.

She served with the Mediterranean Squadron under the command of Captain Frederick Owen Pike, when she visited Larnaka in June 1902, and Lemnos in August 1902. Captain T. B. S. Adair was appointed in command on 22 September 1902.

During a late snowstorm off the Isle of Wight on 25 April 1908, *Gladiator* was heading into port when she struck the outbound American steamer SS *Saint Paul*. Visibility was down to 800 yds. (730 m), but the strong tides and gale force winds required both ships to maintain high speeds to maintain steerage.

Lookouts on each vessel saw the approaching danger off Hurst Point. The American ship attempted to pass to the port side, the standard procedure in such a situation. Lacking room for the manoeuvre, Captain William Lumsden choose to turn the opposite direction, ensuring a collision. Both ships attempted to slow but both were exceptionally heavy (*Saint Paul* was built for conversion in wartime to a cruiser). They hit at about 3 knots (5.6 km/h; 3.5 mph). *Saint Paul* struck *Gladiator* just aft of her engine room.

The glancing blow ripped open the sides of both ships. HMS Gladiator foundered at once, or beached off Black Rock Buoy, off the Isle of Wight, while the American was able to remain afloat and launch lifeboats. Royal Engineers stationed at Fort Victoria in nearby Yarmouth heard a loud noise and realized that there had been a collision or a ship had hit some rocks. They were quickly out of their barrack and rushed down to the shore to give assistance.

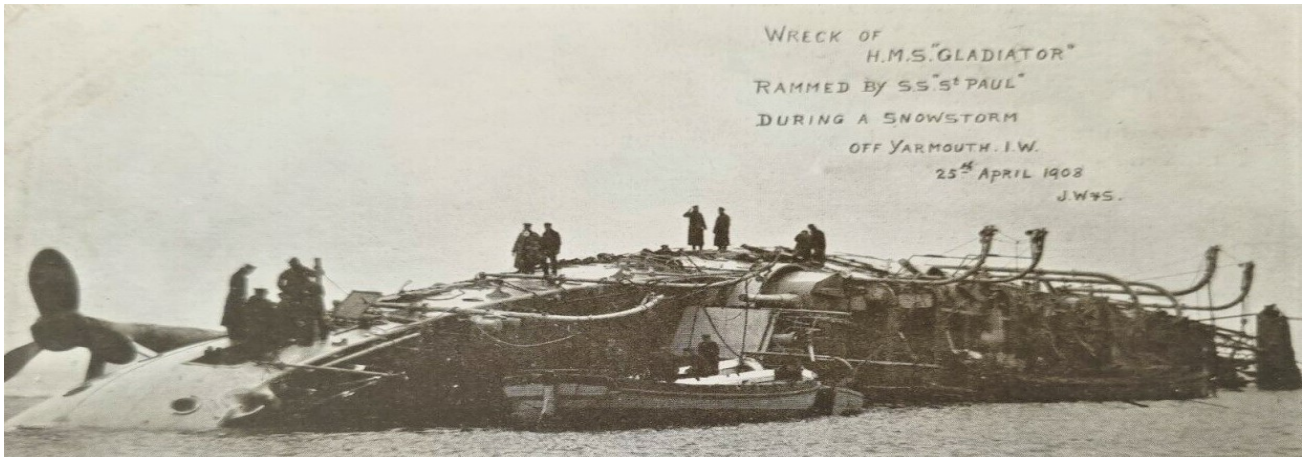
The soldiers saw some of the crew jump into the rough sea and try to swim for the shore, others scrambled up the side of the listing ship. As the warship slowly capsized water reached the engine room and boilers, they exploded and the ship was enveloped on clouds of steam. Those on shore saw two whalers being launch from the ship and ran to help one as it reached the beach. It was found to contain those who were injured and from the sick bay [these were later transferred to the military hospital at Golden Fort which was nearby], the other boat was swept into the nearby Yarmouth harbour, The soldiers watching events on the shore released that that those swimming in the sea were having trouble reaching the shore due to the sea state, they tried relaunching Gladiators whaler, but each time they got the bow pointing out to sea, the waves swung the boat sideways. They then rushed to launch their own boat and found it was being repaired with a plank missing; they managed to make it seaworthy and launched it. They reached those swimming in the sea but the nearest sailors grabbed hold of the oars and the boat became unmanageable and was swept back to the shore this happened eight times, luckily each time with the boat crew and sailors. By this time some of the sailors had been swept farther out to sea, and due the sea state and lack of a suitable boat the soldiers were unable to rescue them. In was not possible to rescue those that had climbed onto the side of the ship and they had to hang on until ships from Portsmouth arrived.

The person who organizes the beach rescue efforts was a Lance Corporal Crips together with the soldiers for 22nd Company Royal Engineers at Fort Victoria. They managed to save several men, a total of 28 sailors were lost, but only three bodies were recovered. Later in 1908 L/Corp. Crisp received an army posting to Sierra Leone, however he managed to see the Gladiator raised and towed away before leaving Fort Victoria, as a mark of respect he was rowed across to the mainland in the captain's gig and was heard to remark "if we had been able to use the boat on the day of the collision we would have saved all the sailors". L/Corp Crisp served in the army for another nineteen years, retiring in 1927 with the rank of Warrant Officer. The army also awarded him an increase of six pence per day on his army pension.

The Royal Humane Society gave the soldiers at Fort Victoria a vellum certificate and there were other awards. It is reported the soldiers were also presented with the captain's gig from H.M.S. Gladiator and a silver salver in appreciation of their efforts in rescuing sailors from the ship. Another unsung hero of that day was a nearby resident a Mrs Twaddle, who provided blankets and hot tea to those on the beach.

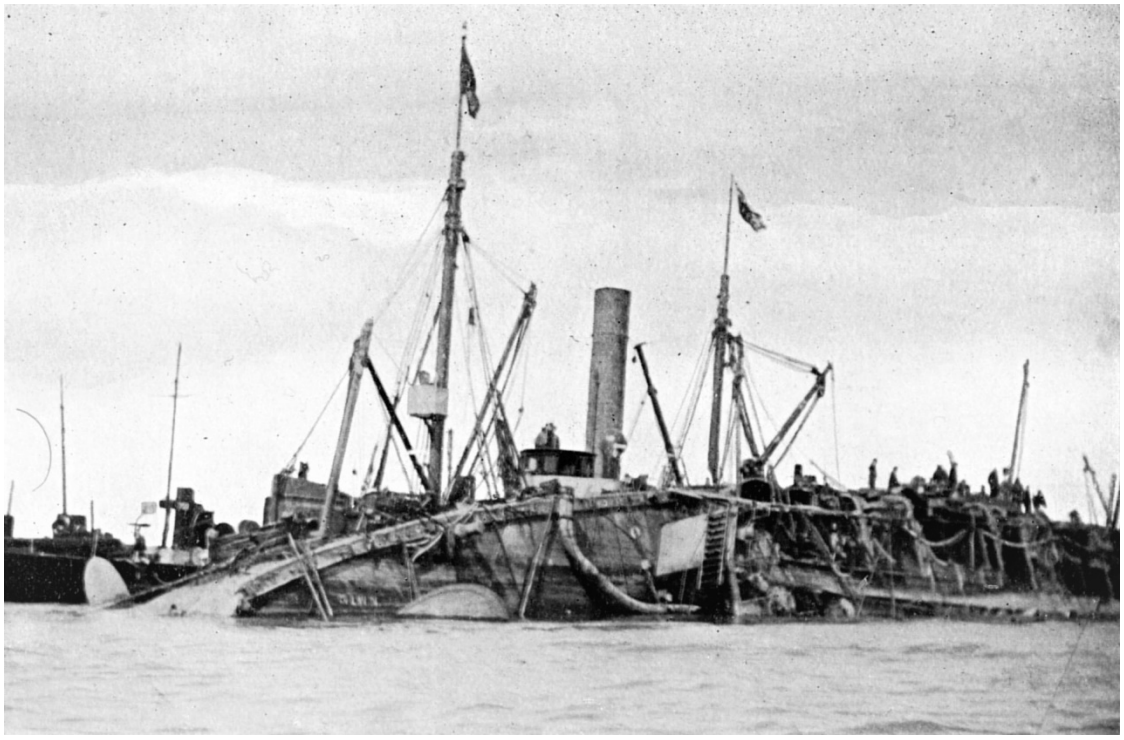
THE WRECK

Gladiator settled on her starboard side in shallow water close to Fort Victoria.
The damage to the Gladiator by the St Paul in the collision was a gash in the side of the ship some 40 foot by 20 foot penetrating some 12 feet into the ship. The extent of this damage caused Captain Lumsden to steer the ship towards the shore and try to beach the ship on a sandbank, but the damage was too great and the ship floundered and finished resting on the side of the sand bank.



SALVAGE OPERATION.

Salvage work began almost at once but it took over five months to right the ship, re-float it and tow it back to Portsmouth.



The work of salvaging the Gladiator, posed many new problems in salvage operations for that period of time, the ship was lying on its side and there was a possibility that it could slide into deeper water. Therefore a scheme had to be devised to stop the ship moving while efforts to re float her took place. The contract to salvage the ship was won by the Liverpool Salvage Association and they appointed Captain Young to be salvage master. The scheme proposed and accepted, was to use shore based steam winches bolted on specially reinforced concrete pads, to which hawsers would be attached to the ship. Underwater framework would be constructed to houses hydraulic rams to retain the ship in position whilst the salvage operation took place. The guns were removed and divers cut away as much of the superstructure as they could, to make the lift easier. The day of the salvage arrived, the underwater rams were activated and positioned against the ship's hull, the hawser took up the strain and slowly the ship was raised upright. The next task was to pump out the water and repair the damaged hull so that the warship could be towed away. This took place in October 1908, it is reported that the operation cost £64,000 pounds and a further £500 to make the ship seaworthy, but as the ship's design was considered obsolete, she was scrapped rather than repaired. Gladiator was sold to a Dutch firm for only £15,000.

A court of inquiry reprimanded Captain Lumsden in July 1908, but held *Saint Paul* responsible for the collision. However, when the Admiralty sued the owners of the liner, a high court held *Gladiator* responsible.

THE SS St PAUL

Damage to St Paul was confined to the bow and she was able to make her way back to Southampton under her own steam. On the 25th April 1918 the St Paul was in harbour at New York, she had been converted to a troop carrier and was awaiting the arrival of her complement of troops. Suddenly she slowly capsized without any reason. The salvage was difficult because of her position in the dock. The really strange thing is that she capsized 10 years to the day of the collision with the Gladiator.

SS St PAUL CAPSIZED IN NEW YORK APRIL 1918.

Source;- County Press archives

References:

HMS Gladiator (battleships-cruisers.co.uk)

wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Gladiator_(1896)

Wootton Bridge News and Information.