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The Barham Conspiracy

By Jason Stevenson

In late November 1941 the British battleship HMS *Barham* was attacked and sunk by a U-boat off the coast of Egypt. In March of 1944 Mrs. Helen Duncan, a well-known Scottish spiritualist and medium, went on trial in London's Old Bailey for conspiracy to violate the 1735 Witchcraft Act.



In the intervening years these two seemingly disparate events became woven together in a complicated wartime tale of naval disaster, government coverup, a drowned sailor purportedly speaking from a watery grave, and a modern-day witch trial that Winston Churchill described as “absolute tomfoolery.”

An Afternoon Tragedy

On the afternoon of November 25, 1941 *Barham* and two other battleships of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet cruised off the Egyptian coast of Cyrenaica to provide distant cover for an attack on Italian convoys. Though constantly zigzagging and screened by eight destroyers, the battleships sailed into peril. Undetected beneath the calm water, Kplt. Hans-Diedrich Von Tiesenhausen maneuvered his U-331 inside the British destroyers and launched four torpedoes at a battleship looming in his periscope.

The 31,000 ton *Barham* stood no chance when three of the torpedoes exploded against her port side. Obscured by enormous spouts of water, the stricken warship lost all electrical power and began listing heavily; a scene recorded by a cameraman aboard the nearby battleship HMS *Valiant*. Still plowing forward into the sea, *Barham* rolled onto her beam ends and blew up in a tremendous magazine explosion just four minutes after the first torpedo struck. The blast flung men and debris hundreds of feet into the air, leaving behind stunned survivors churning in a thick oil slick. 861 sailors and officers lost their lives in the disaster, while 395 were rescued.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham, was having tea aboard his flagship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* when he heard the roar of the torpedo detonations. Cunningham rushed to the deck to witness *Barham*'s final moments, a sight he recorded in his autobiography as “a horrible and awe-inspiring spectacle when one realized what it meant.”

Kplt. Von Tiesenhausen, however, could hardly savor his success. The ejection of the torpedoes compromised U-331's buoyancy and caused the periscope and conning tower of the Type VIIC boat to broach the surface just 150 yards from the now provoked *Valiant*. The battleship heeled

over to ram the U-boat as its starboard pom-pom guns fired 19 rounds that, due to the submarine's proximity, flew harmlessly overhead. To save his boat, Von Tiesenhausen ordered a crash dive that took the submarine to a depth of 265 meters, over a hundred meters below its maximum safety depth. The proximity of *Barham's* swimming survivors prevented the destroyers from attacking with depth charges, allowing U-331 to slowly escape to the north. The chaotic aftermath, however, also prevented Von Tiesenhausen from knowing the outcome of his attack. The rapid torpedo explosions were audible inside the submarine, but he had no knowledge of the *Barham's* fate. He later radioed his superiors that he had torpedoed a battleship with unknown results, a message intercepted by British code-breakers. His official report on December 3 made the modest claim of one torpedo hit on an unknown British battleship.

The Admiralty Reversal

Since the sinking of the battleship HMS *Royal Oak* in October 1939, also by a daring U-boat commander, the Admiralty established the policy of immediately announcing all major warship losses. When the German battleship *Bismarck* blew up HMS *Hood* in the Denmark Strait in May 1941 the government somberly broadcast the loss of the famous battlecruiser on the same day it was sunk.



But when the British realized the Germans remained unaware of *Barham's* destruction, they quickly reversed this policy. Royal Navy naval forces in the Atlantic and Mediterranean were already under strength, and although they did not know it, new disasters lurked on the horizon. In less than a month the two remaining battleships in the Eastern Mediterranean, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant*, would be mined and severely damaged in Alexandria harbor by Italian "human torpedoes." Their long-term repairs would leave the Royal Navy incapable of intervening during a crucial Axis buildup in the Desert War. And three days after *Barham's* loss, HMS *Prince of Wales* would meet HMS *Repulse* in the Indian Ocean before proceeding to Singapore on their fateful mission to deter an increasingly belligerent Japan. Both warships would be sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers within two weeks. It was what the London newspaper *The Daily Express* later called "the blackest fortnight in Britain's naval history in world wars."

Realizing an opportunity to mislead their enemies and protect home-front morale, the Admiralty censored *Barham's* sinking. News of the loss of one of the Royal Navy's fifteen remaining capital ships was confined to the chambers Admiralty and White Hall – or so they believed.

A Summoned Sailor

Helen Duncan did not fit the subversive type. Born in 1897 in Scotland, she married a struggling cabinet-maker and had six children, losing six others as infants. Duncan, who weighed 300 pounds and was plagued by constant poor health, gained notoriety in the UK during the 1930s and 40's for her séances. Her particular skill involved "materialization," a process in which

streams of ectoplasm would issue from her mouth and take on forms of the dead. Skeptics called her a fraud, claiming she regurgitated cheesecloth to simulate the ectoplasm. In the early 1930s she was put on trial in Scotland and fined for falsely claiming to communicate with dead spirits. Despite her court appearance, Duncan remained a popular spiritualist and much sought-after medium during the war. She organized frequent séances for people seeking to communicate with deceased relatives. During one séance held shortly after the *Barham's* loss in late 1941 she reportedly summoned the spirit of a sailor who announced, "My ship is sunk" to the astonished audience. The sailor reportedly wore a Royal Navy hatband with the name "HMS Barham." This episode occurred while *Barham's* loss remained a heavily guarded secret. When news of the event reached the Admiralty, they feared Duncan's séances would unravel their extensive measures of concealment.

Keeping Secrets

On November 27, two days after *Barham's* loss, Winston Churchill telegraphed Australian Prime Minister John Curtin to describe the objectives of the censorship campaign: "This [the loss of *Barham*] is being kept strictly secret at present as the enemy do not seem to know, and the event would only encourage Japan."¹ Under the strain of two years of constant war, the embattled leaders of Britain grasped every advantage they could.

Many steps, both elaborate and subtle, were taken to prevent the truth from reaching the public or the Axis powers. One extraordinary measure included the printing and mailing of Christmas and New Year's cards for the crew of the sunken battleship, even those who had perished.²

Admiralty officials realized that withholding the cards would have raised suspicions about the *Barham's* status.

More traditional forms of deception were employed as well. On January 8, 1942 Adm. Cunningham reassured the readers of the Glasgow *Herald* with an article headlined "All's well with the Navy in the Mediterranean." Although Cunningham admitted his forces "had to fight and win against some pretty long odds at times," his upbeat appraisal hardly reflected the actual situation of three British battleships in the Mediterranean sunk or disabled in as many months.³

The censorship campaign also extended to the Admiralty's monthly "Naval Supply and Production" statistics. These documents charted the number and types of British warships ordered, launched, damaged and destroyed for each month during the war. The supply and production records for November 1941 failed to register the loss of the battleship *Barham*, although the December 1941 statistics accounted for the sinking of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in the South China Sea.⁴ Since these documents were circulated throughout the Admiralty, all traces of the *Barham's* loss had to be removed.

After a delay of several weeks, the War Office decided to alert the next of kin of *Barham's* dead, but they added a special request for secrecy. The notification letters included a warning not to discuss the loss of the ship with anyone but close relatives, stating it was "most essential that information of the event which led to the loss of your husband's life should not find its way to the enemy until such time as it is announced officially..." The wives and families receiving these

¹ CP 20/45, WSC telegram to John Curtin. 27 November 1941. Gilbert, 2000. p. 1540.

² Historian Iain Ballantyne recorded this fact in his history of *Barham's* sister-ship HMS *Warspite*: "such as the secrecy over *Barham's* dreadful loss that special Christmas and New Year card greetings, prepared for her crew, were still printed." Ballantyne, Iain. *Warspite*. Leo Cooper: London, 2001.

³ The two other battleships were *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant*, both damaged on 19 December 1941 at Alexandria Harbor.

⁴ ADM 167/114-115, "Naval Supply and Production – November 1941"

letters were undoubtedly devastated by their grief yet were prevented from making any public announcement of their loss.

Since the sinking of *Barham* occurred in the late afternoon with many other warships present, it was one of the best-recorded and investigated naval disasters of the war. A Reuters correspondent who witnessed the torpedoing and explosion later wrote, "It was something like one sees on film." His analogy proved prescient when it was revealed that a Gaumont-British cameraman named John Turner filmed the last minutes of *Barham*. The navy impounded the footage shortly after the sinking, holding it until 1945. Today, Turner's film of the stricken battleship keeling over and exploding comprise one of the most compelling short movies of the war.

Only when the German High Command guessed at *Barham*'s loss in late January 1942 did the British government acknowledge the truth. The Admiralty informed the press on January 27, 1942 and explained their rationale for withholding the news. By then, with crushing Allied defeats mounting in the new Pacific war, newspapers wrote little about the torpedoed battleship or the censorship. The January 28, 1942 edition of the Glasgow *Herald* resembled most newspapers when it accepted the Admiralty's decision to censor the loss, writing "it was important to make certain disposition before the loss of this ship was made public."⁵ When the news of the *Barham*'s sinking was confirmed in Germany, Kpl. Von Tiesenhausen received the award of a Knight's Cross.



A Modern Witchcraft Trial

Helen Duncan was not arrested in the aftermath of the *Barham* incident, and she continued to organize séances throughout the country. But authorities watched her more closely. In 1942 Duncan began to lead spiritualist demonstrations in Portsmouth, a naval town on England's southern coast. She was conducting a séance in Portsmouth on January 19, 1944 when suddenly a whistle blew and a participant rushed forward to grab the floating ectoplasm. Others in the audience turned on the lights and ushered in the police. Undercover naval and police officers had infiltrated the meeting, and

Duncan and three other shocked participants were arrested and charged with vagrancy before the Portsmouth magistrates.

Higher authorities intervened, however, and the police transported Duncan to London to face charges from the Director of Public Prosecutions. The more serious accusation of conspiracy, punishable by death in wartime, replaced her original infraction. Finally, the prosecutors decided to charge her with violating the 1735 Witchcraft Act, a law originally passed during the reign of King George II that had lain dormant for a hundred years.

Duncan's trial at London's Old Bailey court began on March 23, 1944 and lasted a week. It was a tabloid trial, attracting widespread coverage in the newspapers for its characters and accusations quite unusual for a 20th century court. The undercover agents who broke up the Portsmouth séance testified against Duncan, and the chief of the Portsmouth police called her "an unmitigated humbug and pest." The prosecutors introduced evidence that Duncan revealed the loss of *Barham* in 1941 while it remained an Admiralty secret. For her defense the jury heard from 19 witnesses who testified that Duncan had summoned the spirits of their dead relatives and

⁵ "HMS *Barham* Sunk in Mediterranean / Clyde-built battleship veteran of last war / News withheld from enemy." Glasgow *Herald*. 28 January 1942.

friends. The defense team also proposed that Duncan hold a séance in the courtroom, but the prosecution, realizing the mockery that could result from the stunt, refused their offer.

Despite her surprisingly strong defense, a jury found Duncan and her associates guilty of a conspiracy to violate the Witchcraft Act and a judge sentenced her to nine months in London's Holloway women's prison. In a surprising move she was denied the right of appeal to the House of Lords, a common appeals practice. It has been suggested that Duncan's prosecution was motivated by concern that her Portsmouth séances would reveal the timing of the approaching D-Day invasion. The government considered her inexplicable knowledge of *Barham's* sinking as evidence to the danger she posed to wartime secrets. Yet to many observers, sending an uneducated and invalid witch to jail seemed an odd pursuit for a nation finally turning the corner of a terrible war.

The efforts to convict Helen Duncan did not please everyone in the government. Most notably, the witchcraft trial caused Winston Churchill to write to his Home Secretary to criticize the resources wasted on a prosecution he described as "absolute tomfoolery to the detriment of the necessary work of the court." Modern-day defenders of Helen Duncan claim that Churchill held spiritualist sympathies, and it was his second government that eventually repealed the ancient Witchcraft Act in 1951, replacing it with the Fraudulent Mediums Act. However, it is equally likely that Churchill considered the trial a distraction from the war effort, and an embarrassment to his government.

Legacies of the Loss

The entwined legacies of the *Barham* and Helen Duncan keep this story very much alive in the UK. An official memorial to the battleship lies in one of the country's most sacred places, Westminster Abbey. Tall gold candlesticks flank the entrance to the choir, placed there in February 1943 during an official dedication. The Abbey hosts a service of remembrance on the second to last Saturday in November when survivors and their families can view a special book of remembrance.

Although Duncan died almost fifty years ago in 1956, the story of her trial and imprisonment continues to inspire her admirers on both sides of the Atlantic to win her a post-humus pardon. In 1997 a spiritualist fellowship presented a bust of Helen Duncan to Callander, Scotland, the town of her birth. Council officials attempted to display the bust in the town's Rob Roy Visitors Center, located in a former church, but some locals objected to Duncan's spiritualist past. Currently, a bronze cast of the bust is displayed at the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, which also stores the original copy in its basement.

In 1957 a group of *Barham* veterans founded the HMS Barham Survivors Association. Every May the few remaining survivors and their relatives hold a reunion dinner in Portsmouth where they toast the memory of the ship and those that died. One surprising attendee at early reunions of the Barham Association was U-331 commander Hans-Diedrich Von Tiesenhausen, who survived the war as a prisoner and lived until his death in 2000 in western Canada working as an interior decorator and painting many of his war memories.

Al Collier, a Little Rock, Arkansas resident and expert in Helen Duncan's story, interviewed the elderly Tiesenhausen in January 1998 with help from the former submariner's wife. According to Collier, Tiesenhausen expressed dismay at the story of Helen Duncan and her witchcraft trial. "No government," he reportedly said, "should be allowed to treat a poor woman so terribly." If some of the *Barham's* surviving sailors can accept the U-boat captain who sank their battleship, perhaps the British government will pardon a witch who guessed at too many wartime secrets.

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About the battleship HMS *Barham*

The battleship HMS *Barham* was launched in October 1914 and was present at the Battle of Jutland in 1916 where she received six hits and suffered 63 casualties. She was one of the five battleships of the “Queen Elizabeth” class to serve in the Second World War. *Barham* was named for the Nelson-era First Sea Lord who introduced lemon juice to Royal Navy sailors to combat scurvy, thereafter giving them the nickname of “Limeys.”

Mounting eight 15-inch guns and displacing 35,000 tons, *Barham* received several updates during the 1920s and 30’s, although her second major refit was delayed by the outbreak of hostilities in 1939. During the first year of the war she escorted Canadian troop convoys to Britain and supported the unsuccessful attempt to land Free French forces at Dakar, Senegal in September 1940.

Barham joined the Mediterranean fleet in November 1940 and came under the command of Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham. Her last year afloat proved an active one, in which *Barham* took part in the Taranto raid, bombarded Axis strongholds at Tripoli and Bardia, engaged Italian naval forces in the Battle of Cape Matapan, and was damaged by a Stuka dive-bomber during the Battle of Crete. *Barham* was sunk by U-331 on November 25, 1941 while providing cover for an attack on Italian convoys. She was the first British battleship sunk at sea in the Second World War.