



# The H.M.S Hythe Disaster

8<sup>th</sup> October 1915

On the 28th October 1915 whilst at sea and about to land her troops at Cape Helles, Gallipoli the ferry "HYTHE" was struck by a larger vessel and empty troop carrier called the "SARNIA". The Hythe sank in ten minutes and due to a number of reasons, including the lack of life jackets, some 155 souls perished. The majority of those who died were members of the 1st/3rd Kent Field Company, Royal Engineers and men from Kent. Their Captain was David Reginald Hermon Phillip Salomons, he died with his men. I will come back to the tragedy in due course.

My interest began with a simple WW1 Victory medal named to 2543 SPR.T.EDSER R.E. I noticed it on one of the internet auctions whilst looking for medals to a regiment I usually collect. A quick check showed that Reginald Thomas Edser had died as a result of wounds at Alexandria, Egypt on 14th December 1915 following evacuation from Gallipoli. He is buried at Chatby War Cemetery in Alexandria. He was 20 years old and was the son of James and Charlotte Edser from Tunbridge Wells. Having secured the medal I found that Reginald Thomas Edser had resided at 48 Goods Station Yard in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. This address was clearly adjacent to his father's work place. His father is shown as a Railway Engine keeper. He had an elder brother called Albert and a younger sister called Dorothy. These details were correct in 1901 at the census for that year. On the face of it he was one of the many young men lost at the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. But I noticed that his number was quite low for such a large Corps as the Royal Engineers and decided to look a little further. I saw that his Unit was 1/3rd Kent Fortress Company, Royal Engineers. I wondered if this was a locally raised unit because late 1914 and early 1915 saw the establishment of various "pals" battalions. Indeed my own usual collecting is to the Hull pals. I wondered if equivalent units were formed within the Corps of Royal Engineers and indeed they were.

The 1/3rd Kent were founded by Sir David Lionel Salomons (1851-1925) who resided at "Broomhill", Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. He was the Honorary Colonel of the Kent Royal Engineers. He was a scientist and had interests in mechanics. He is quite remarkable in that he acquired the second car ever in England. He lectured in Electricity and had a great interest in transport. He organised the first motor show and was both a Magistrate and Mayor of Tunbridge Wells (1894). The first meal cooked with electricity was prepared at his home. After his son (also) David graduated from Cambridge in 1907, the possibility of establishing a Royal Engineers Territorial Unit was investigated. This was not possible due to the existence of other RE units but it did not stop the formation of a Cadet Unit in Kent and this was raised and established in 1911. It was the fore runner of the 1/3rd Company. David Salomons (Junior) became the officer commanding. Sir David Salomons paid for the conversion of an old gas works in Southborough and this became the drill hall for the new unit. On the 1 May 1914 the 1/3rd Kent Fortress Royal Engineers came into being because the existing No 3 Company in the Medway Area had difficulty recruiting and a decision to disband it was made. Thus was born the 1/3rd Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers. They were initially responsible for the protection of the coastline, for searchlights and defence. They were mobilised on 4th August 1914 at 8pm. They all went home to return the following day at 8am. The war had begun.

During the initial stage of the First World War the company remained at home and continued to train. They were converted to a Field Company from a Works Unit. In July 1915 they were at least 185 strong. The final stages of their training was in Woodlands Camp, Gillingham. Lt. Salomons was promoted to Captain on 11th June 1915. Most of their number were tradesmen. Sappers used their trades and pay was by far greater than the infantry. The infantry earned between 7 and 10 shillings and six pence per week (35p to 52p), whereas the Sapper earned 11 and six to 22 shillings and two pence per week (58p - 111p). Captain Salomons was both well liked and respected. He was generous and looked after his command. There is one report of him buying a round of drinks consisting of 161 pints of beer at 4d per pint plus two lemonades at 2d each for his men..

Royal Engineers were required in the Dardanelles to fill vacancies no doubt caused by the appalling loss there.

The company had a farewell dinner on 11 October 1915 and were cheered by crowds including their relatives as they left on Train Number 13. They went onto Devonport and boarded H.M.T. Scotian (built 1898 Harland and Wolff). They sailed to Malta landing on 20th October 1915, remaining for two days taking on coal, before heading for Lemos Island, Mudros Bay. Orders were received that they were to proceed to Sulva Bay but this was then changed to Cape Helles. Number 1 company was also travelling with them. There were two ships available, one for each company. These were the HMS Redbreast and the HMS Hythe. The 1/3rd were allocated HMS Hythe. In addition to the company were another 30 army personnel of various regiments and of course the Captain and crew of the Hythe.

HMS Hythe was a former cross channel (Dover-Calais) steamer. She was a cargo carrier owned by South East and Chatham Railways. She had no passenger accommodation. She had been converted to a minesweeper in October 1914 and she had two 12 pounder guns fitted. Her Captain was Lt Commander Arthur H Bird Royal Naval Reserve. The navy was using vessels like her because the German and Turkish submarines had been sinking British/French shipping. By using shallow draught craft it was hoped that torpedoes would pass beneath a ship and represent a small target. Hythe was launched in 1905 and cost £19,575 (Admiralty compensated her owners to the amount of £12,500 following the disaster).

Because the Hythe had no passenger accommodation a fabric awning was rigged on her deck to help protect the crowded deck from spray and the weather. Considering her size and construction the ship was very top heavy. The officers would be allowed in the engine room area to keep warm. However before sailing the Company witnessed a public Courts Martial. This took place in Port on her deck. Apparently a sailor had refused orders and was awarded 81 days imprisonment. Some 5 officers and 213 men boarded the Hythe plus 30 other personnel. The Hythe left Mudros at 4pm and had 50 miles to go to Cape Helles. It was travelling in a darkened state to avoid enemy bombardment. They were due to land and some forty minutes remained of their journey. At about 8pm there was a warning that another ship was bearing down on them. This other ship was HMS Sarnia. She was also a steamer, but larger than the Hythe. She had landed her cargo and troops and was leaving the Peninsula. She was steering a course S67W and the Hythe was steering a course N82E. This was near head on. Both ships were travelling in excess of 12 knots. Several attempts at a change of course by both ships, failed to avoid a collision. The Sarnia struck the Hythe 25 feet from the bow on her Port side. The force was so great that the Hythe stopped dead in the water. The foremast on the Hythe fell onto the fabric awning. The impact and devastation resulted in many fatalities on the deck of the Hythe. The force of the impact caused the Hythe to swing around by the stern and break free. The gapping hole in her Port was instantly filled by the cold sea water. She immediately began to sink and would go down in ten minutes flat. On the deck some managed to step onto the Sarnia as she remained alongside for several minutes. Others leapt into the cold sea, no life jackets, only debris to hold onto. Captain Salomons was reported as trying to save his men. He handed over his life jacket to another soldier. The Captain of the Hythe ordered "everyman for himself". There does not appear to be any co-ordinated attempt to organise the rescue. Sarnia put out a boat and saved some life. She was herself holed and would return back to port, steaming stern first to avoid taking water. Captain Salomons drowned and he was not recovered. A further 128 members of 1/3rd Company

were lost plus 15 other Army personnel and 11 crew from the Hythe. Only 103 members of the 1/3rd Company survived. The disaster was compounded by the lack of life jackets/emergency lifeboats/poor organisation and could have been avoided by shipping following a set route inward and outward bound from Cape Helles. The Court of enquiry recommended that no soldier should travel on a ship without having a life jacket with him. It is hard to imagine the effect that this disaster had on the people of Kent. Several pairs of brother were lost. A father and son drowned together. Some 99 children had no father.

After some further research I discovered that Sapper Edser was on the Hythe and that he had survived. Sapper Reginald Still wrote home and told of their experience on the Hythe. He says "Reg. Edser is quite safe, in fact he is with me now, writing."

The Company had some rest and leave then went onto Gallipoli. On 24th November 1915 two sappers were injured by a bomb thrown by the Turks and were removed to hospital in Egypt. One of these was Reginald Thomas Edser. He is recorded as writing home to his mother. He claimed that his wounds were not serious, however he died in hospital on 14th December 1915.

The Salomons family lost their only male heir. Several memorials followed. In the Second World War a mobile canteen served troops in North Africa. On the side was the inscription "David R. Salomons 1885-1915". This was paid for by his sister Vera Bryce Salomons.

Between the wars the people of Southborough held a "Hythe Sunday". In church services they remembered the disaster on or near to 28 October. It is not known when this act of remembrance ended. There are several street names in Southborough with a "Hythe" theme.

## **By David A Ellis. June 2008**

On 10 October 1915 the British War Cabinet had taken the decision to stop sending more troops to Gallipoli, but despite that decision the following day 231 personnel of the 1st/3rd (Kent) Field Company, Royal Engineers sailed from Devonport Docks onboard H.M.S. Scotian heading for the eastern Mediterranean and Gallipoli. At Mudros Bay, Turkey, the soldiers were transferred to smaller ships to actually take them on to Helles. With a displacement of 509 tons, H.M.S. Hythe, a former cross-channel paddle-driven ferry built in 1905 for the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company to work the Dover-Calais route had been requisitioned by the Admiralty on 8 October 1914, and became a minesweeper with the Pennant No. M38, armed with a couple of twelve pounder guns she was later based at Scapa Flow, but in 1915 she was sent to work on troop movements in the Dardanelles. With only two transports being available after leaving H.M.S. Scotian, they being H.M.S. Hythe and H.M.S. Redbreast, the story goes that the company commanders had tossed a coin to decide which vessel their respective companies would take, and that Captain David 'Reggie' Salomons, the son of Sir David Lionel Goldsmith-Stern-Salomons and Lady Laura Julia Salomons, won the toss and 1/3rd Company which he commanded with Major Rushton took H.M.S. Hythe. With the 1/3rd Company personnel were officers and other ranks of the 1/2nd Kent Fortress Company Royal Engineers who were bound for the same destination. When H.M.S. Hythe left Mudros Bay at approximately 1600 hours on 28 October 1915 she was severely overloaded with men packed on the decks, many of them huddling under an awning that had been rigged up in an attempt to give a little relief from rain and spray. At approximately 2000 hours as they neared their destination men donned their kit, drivers went to their vehicles, and the ship doused all her lights. Within minutes the also lightless vessel H.M.S. Sarnia was spotted which was steaming back empty to Mudros Bay from Cape Helles and on a collision course with H.M.S. Hythe. As with many books or data sources consulted relating to specific notable wartime events, depending on what is read, different versions of the loss of H.M.S. Hythe are shown, and some accounts suggest that H.M.S. Sarnia mistook H.M.S. Hythe for an enemy submarine and rammed her deliberately. Subsequent enquiries following the tragic loss of H.M.S. Hythe revealed that both vessels made at least one change of course, but it seems that neither actually slowed down. H.M.S. Sarnia struck the port side

of H.M.S. Hythe with such force that its bows cut halfway through the ship bringing H.M.S. Hythe to a dead stop, and caused its foremast to collapse on the protective awning. Many soldiers and sailors were killed instantly by the bows of H.M.S. Sarnia and by the collapsed foremast, but most of the others fared little better, as due to the massive amount of damage she sustained, H.M.S. Hythe rapidly sunk, and it was all over in about ten minutes. Many soldiers were drowned trapped under the protective awning or in the cabs of their vehicles, and most of the others had little or no time to gain the railings, or able to throw off their kit before they were in the sea. Out of the company's five officers and 231 other ranks one officer and 128 men were known to have drowned. As always seems to be the case, men had mixed fortunes at the time of the sinking, and a few managed to scramble from one vessel to the other literally without even getting their feet wet, whilst others were left struggling in the sea, or hanging on to spars and other floating matter. In addition to the soldiers who died, which included about a dozen non Royal Engineers who were mainly Military Policemen, eleven members of the ships crew also perished who were (Royal and Mercantile) Naval Reservists. A boat from H.M.S. Sarnia manned by a Midshipman and a Cook did all they could and picked up eighty two survivors. H.M.S. Sarnia was also a requisitioned ferry built in 1910 for the London and South Western Railway, and for her war service she became an armed boarding steamer. With a displacement of 1498 tons and a top speed of 20.5 knots, she was a much larger and more powerful vessel than H.M.S. Hythe, which had a maximum speed of only 12 knots. H.M.S. Sarnia having survived the collision with H.M.S. Hythe was lost on 12 September 1918 when she was torpedoed and sunk by a German u-boat in the Mediterranean. Brief reference was made above to Sir David Lionel Goldsmith-Stern-Salomons (1851-1925), and his son Captain David 'Reggie' Salomons, who was amongst the officers and other ranks of the 1/3rd Kent Fortress Company, Royal Engineers that perished during the loss of H.M.S. Hythe. In addition to the personal grief which was experienced by Sir David and Lady Julia Goldsmith-Stern-Salomons after the loss of their son, was their grief felt for the other families of those who died, as Sir David had played a major part in the raising of the 1/3rd Kent Fortress Company. Sir David later commissioned and paid for a marble memorial plaque that commemorates 'his' soldiers that were lost on H.M.S. Hythe, and was initially located in the Drill Hall, Speldhurst Road. When the Drill Hall fell into disuse and went the way of most of the other Kent Drill Halls, thankfully the memorial eventually ended up in the parish church of St. Matthew's, High Brooms, Royal Tunbridge Wells. The H.M.S. Hythe tragedy is also commemorated by the naming of Hythe Close, (off the A26 London Road) Southborough, Royal Tunbridge Wells, situated within the area of the former Salomons Estate. In 1938 the name of Broomhill was changed by Vera Bryce Salomons (1888-1969) the last surviving daughter of Sir David and Lady Julia Goldsmith-Stern-Salomons to David Salomons House, in remembrance of her late brother when it was presented to Kent County Council.

**By David W Hughes. June 2008**



This is just one of the men who perished -

## MILLS H

**Sapper 2021 Herbert MILLS. 1/3<sup>rd</sup> Field Company, Kent Fortress Royal Engineers (KFRE). H.M.S HYTHE.** Died at sea 28<sup>th</sup> October 1915. Born Hawkhurst. Enlisted Gillingham. Resided Tunbridge Wells. Brother in Law of M.M Hollands of 30, Woodland Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Herbert has no known grave. His name appears on the Helles Memorial, Gallipoli, Turkey. Panel reference – 23.24.25.325-328.

Commemorated on the Hawkhurst village war memorial Kent.

Herbert was drowned at sea off the cost of Gallipoli Turkey.

The Hythe was a cross-channel paddle-driven ferry, with a displacement of 509 tons. She was built in 1905 for the South Eastern and Chatham Railway, and worked the Dover-Calais route. The vessel was requisitioned at the outbreak of war and became a minesweeper, based at Scapa Flow. In 1915, the Hythe was sent to work on troop movements in the Dardanelles. The Hythe left Mudros Bay at about 16:00 on 28 October 1915. She was severely overloaded. Men were packed on the decks, many huddling under an awning that had been rigged to give a little relief from rain and spray. At about 20:00, as they neared their destination, men donned their kit, drivers went to their vehicles, and the Hythe doused all lights. Within minutes the lightless Sarnia was spotted, steaming back empty to Mudros Bay from Cape Helles, and on a collision course. Some accounts suggest that Sarnia mistook the Hythe for a submarine and rammed her deliberately. I doubt it. We know that both vessels made at least one change of course but it seems that neither slowed down. The Sarnia struck the port side of the Hythe with such force that its bows cut halfway through the ship. That brought the Hythe to a dead stop and caused its mast to collapse on the awning. Many were killed instantly by the bows and the mast but the others fared little better because the immense damage caused the Hythe to sink rapidly. It was all over in a little as ten minutes. Many drowned trapped under the awning or in the cabs of their vehicles. The others had little or no time to gain the railings and throw off their kit before they were in the sea. As always, fortunes varied. A lucky few scrambled from one vessel to the other without getting their feet wet. The Parrott twins were parted: Wilfred died, Charles survived both the Hythe disaster and the war.

The Sarnia also began life as a ferry, in 1910 for the London and South Western Railway. In war service she became an armed boarding steamer. With a displacement of 1498 tons and a top speed of 20.5 knots, Sarnia was a much larger and more powerful vessel than the Hythe, whose limit was only 12 knots. Sarnia survived the collision with the Hythe, only to be sunk by torpedo in the Mediterranean on 12 September 1918.

The men of the 1/3 Kent Field Company Royal Engineers boarded the Hythe at Mudros Bay, en route for Cape Helles. With them was 1/2 Kent Field Company Royal Engineers, bound for the same destination. Two transports were available – the Hythe and the Redbreast. The story goes that the company commanders tossed a coin to decide which vessel each company would take. Captain Reggie Salomons and 3 Company took the Hythe.

## **129 CASUALTIES LISTED ON Soldiers Died Great War!**

**NOTE THIS WORK IS INCOMPLETE, FURTHER DETAILS WILL BE PUBLISHED HERE WHEN THE ROLL OF HONOUR IS COMPLETED.**