

Perils of War – The Life Of A Diver



My grandfather, Edward Luxton (diver suit left) in 1918

The Heroic work being carried on by minesweepers off the coast of Britain revived memories of minesweeping in the First World War for my grandfather, Mr. Edward Luxton of Carrington NSW. Mr. Luxton was a member of the famous Dover Patrol, one of the most perilous enterprises in the war at sea.

Mr. Luxton had many narrow escapes while on the patrol. His brother was killed in the Battle of Jutland and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Mr. Luxton joined the patrol early in 1915 and was sent on a trawler to duty in the English Channel. For some months he carried out salvage work as a diver. He saw many terrible scenes in ships which he entered on the bed of the ocean. Having brought the bodies of victims to the surface, he attached lines to the sunken vessels and determined the best positions for the placing of pumps.

In February 1916, the Maloja was sunk and 150 lives were lost. He took an active part in rescue work. *"The sinking of a ship was almost a daily occurrence, we picked up 100's of survivors"* Mr. Luxton had said.

"I preferred salvage work to minesweeping, it was much safer. A minesweeper never knew when his time would come. We became resigned to it after a while, and were ready for the worst. We did not know where mines were, we had to find them in all sorts of weather even when the destroyers were unable to leave port"

A NARROW ESCAPE

Though deep-sea diving on sunken vessels was risky work, Mr. Luxton's narrowest escape was on a minesweeper early in 1916. During a sweep, it was normal practice to explode a mine with a smaller mine. During the attachment of the smaller mine the two trawlers being used caused the cable to slip. The small mine shot up the cable, passed the stern of the ship and narrowly missed the ship's rail. Mr. Luxton was standing a few inches away. Had the mine struck the rail, he would have been blown to pieces.

Providence, he thinks, saved him from fate which befell the Carleton, a minesweeper on which he had worked for many months. While the trawler was preparing to leave, he was suddenly ordered to shore duty. He left with half his belongings still on board. The next day, news came through that the Carleton had been sunk, only two of the crew survived. Diver Luxton had been assigned the job of descending to the submerged ship to recover the bodies of his former comrades.

Mr. Luxton also dived on other well known ships that were sunk by German torpedoes including the Royal Sceptre and Nyanza. The Nyanza was hit by torpedoes on three occasions with him helping with the salvage work each time.

Many minesweepers went down with all hands. While on patrol with the trawler Vivante, and about four miles behind them on the Barle, Mr. Luxton heard an explosion. They looked up to see the Vivante disappearing in a cloud of smoke. All onboard perished. A mine was thought to be responsible.

He tells of an amazing incident that almost proved tragic. A boy of about 15 years was placed on lookout duty, possibly because he dozed off, he failed to notice that the trawler was approaching a mine. The man at the wheel saw it, and swung the helm to the limit. The trawler sailed clear of the mine, *"but the boy was in for it"* said Mr. Luxton *"The old man clouted him good and hard"*

During his two years on minesweepers, Mr. Luxton did not see a submarine. *"We were always watching for them however,"* he said. *"But they kept clear of minesweepers. It was a waste to spend a torpedo on sinking a trawler; besides, they knew it was not worth while exposing themselves, and being attacked by destroyers"*

Interest was provided by a diary which Mr. Luxton kept during the Great War, one entry reads "January 1 – was sweeping from Folkestone to Varne, sweep wire parted between the two ships, too rough to couple up again. Went about five miles apart, no mines found. Hottest New Years Day ever experienced, and the first in English waters for eight years"

To capture a dozen mines was a good day's work for two minesweepers. One trawler's haul for one day was 24.

A DANGEROUS LIFE ON LAND AS WELL

While on shore at Dover, Mr. Luxton and his wife experienced a German air raid. Several people were killed, a brewery and a number of houses were burnt. A German bomb fell a few doors from their home but failed to explode.

AFTER THE WAR

Edward Luxton participated in numerous rescue and salvage bids on shipwrecks in Sydney, Newcastle and to the north. He also assisted in the laying of shark netting along coastal beaches and the construction of the Manly Harbour Pool.

My grandfather, Edward Luxton, died in 1948



Mr. Edward Luxton during the construction of the Manly Harbour Pool