



knew of the danger was when they saw “breakers”. By then, it was already too late for seven of them.

One of the first to ground was the 2,684-ton French collier SS Gallois. Second Officer M Belcher heard the chief officer call out “Hard aport” and then “Full speed astern”. But with her holds filled with 3,600 tons of coal, Gallois had barely started to turn when she struck sand. In those desperate moments, Belcher noticed “a ship ahead going round to port, but she was ashore within a couple of minutes”.

Almost simultaneously with the chief officer blowing three warning blasts, another ship slew round on the port quarter and grounded within sight of the Frenchman.

At 4am, Chief Officer Robert Pickering was just starting the morning watch aboard the 1,241-ton Oxshott when breakers were seen “very close” dead ahead. The master, Captain William Howat, ordered “Full astern”, but almost immediately “the ship struck”.

For 10 minutes, they struggled to wriggle clear before the engines failed. “The steamer drove further on to the sands,” observed Pickering, “took a list to starboard and, with the heavy sea, started to break up right away.”

It was much the same story for the SS Deerwood, SS Aberhill and SS Afon Towy. Only the Estonian-registered SS Taara and the SS Betty Hindley had any chance of escaping the fate of the others.

In the case of the Taara the master’s caution may have contributed to her grinding ashore. Seeing a ship, almost certainly the Gallois, looming ahead, the chief officer urged his captain to go “hard astarboard, hard astarboard”, but he insisted “not yet, not yet”.

Without deviating, Taara steamed steadily on and, five minutes after seeing “breakers”, drove on to the eastern edge of the Middle Haisborough, on the opposite side of the sands to the brand new Betty Hindley. In the course of her final desperate manoeuvres, the master of the Betty Hindley twice had to dodge other vessels before riding up on the southern half of the sandbank.

The time was 4.20am and the carnage of a little more than 20 minutes had reduced seven ships to wrecks with terrible consequences for their marooned crews. But the tragedy of Convoy FS 559 had not yet run its full course.

Some 10 minutes after the last of the colliers grounded, Campbell received the first intimation of the calamitous events taking place astern of him - a signal from the armed trawler HMT Agate saying “she was ashore”.

From the evidence available, it appears that Agate’s captain, Lieut Leslie Cline, had made frantic efforts to avert the disaster. Realising too late they were off course, he ordered his helm ‘hard over’ in a desperate attempt to warn the wayward ships. But he was too late. Moments after the first ship grounded, Agate struck sand too. “She touched three times,” recalled Leading Seaman J T Perkin, “twice lightly and the third time she bumped heavily and stuck.”

The driving wind and sea pushed her further onto the bank. “We swung round until we got the wind on the port beam and had the sea breaking over us,” said Perkin.

■ Above L-R, ill-fated escort: HM Trawler Agate. Out of a crew of 27, 19 men were lost including all of the ship’s officers.

■ Convoy hero: Able Seaman Stanley Adams was a volunteer member of Vimiera’s whaler crew. (Courtesy Paul Adams).

■ Midshipman Tony Ditcham: he considered conditions were ‘so extreme and appalling that none of us present would have thought it possible to save anyone at all’.

■ Leading role: Lieut Cdr Angus Mackenzie RNR did not think anybody could ‘live’ in the sea let alone save anybody.

■ Scene of disaster: a sketch plan showing the positions of the wrecked colliers on the Haisborough Sands taken from the Admiralty Board of Enquiry report.

■ Left, On the East Coast run: HMS Vimiera battling through rough seas during her regular convoy escort duties from Scotland to Sheerness. (Courtesy Paul Adams).

Agate’s plight was mirrored aboard the Cardiff-registered Afon Towy. At 684 tons, she was the smallest of the grounded colliers and the most vulnerable to the smashing waves. Her crew of 13 took what shelter they could, but it was not enough.

At about 5.45am a big sea struck with such violence she rolled right over to port and capsized, hurling the starboard lifeboat out of its chocks. The crew were left struggling in the water, around nine of them clinging to the lifeboat.

In the hours that followed 15 men were saved by the trawler Basset, including Perkin, whose survival was near miraculous.

With help almost at hand, the trawler suddenly took “a terrible list”. Somebody cried “It’s going to capsize” almost as two men were swept away. Perkin just had time to free a Carley Float and jumped for it.

Four others followed, but it appeared as their efforts were all in vain. “A big sea took us back on top of the ‘fiddle’ [the steel framework around a hatchway] and then took us out again,” said Perkin, “and the next time she got on top of the ‘davit head’ and capsized and we were all in the water... “When the others saw it capsize they were petrified. Then we swam for the Carley Float and the next sea took us round the bow and we were only two or three yards away when the Agate turned right over to port.”

About an hour later, the five men were picked up by Basset. They were among only eight survivors from the gallant little trawler.

It was now a race against time to save as many men as possible from the stranded colliers at the mercy of the cruellest of seas.

Morning on the wind-blasted Haisborough Sands presented a miserable spectacle. Five of the seven grounded ships were, in the words of one of the escort commanders, “awash to the level of the boat deck” with “terrific seas” breaking over them.

To Lieut Kirkwood of the Puffin, “the scene of these ships stranded on the sands was the most grim sight I have ever seen”.

Puffin was not alone. The destroyer HMS Vimiera, together with the trawler Basset, had been diverted from shepherding stragglers to help the Agate.

But having arrived too late, they turned their attention to the wrecked colliers.

Moving in as close to the sandbank as he dared, Lieut Cdr Angus Mackenzie in Vimiera signalled for shore-based lifeboats to be launched while trying to direct floats towards the nearest ship.

Mackenzie was in a quandary. Through the spray, he could make out the wreck of the Taara. There were men visible in the water around her and others clinging to her masts. But the only way of reaching them was by a cutter and that meant pulling over the sands in seas that seemed “almost impossible”.

Realising that the lifeboats could not possibly reach them in time to save them, he decided to seek volunteers for what he regarded as a ‘forlorn hope’.

All the officers, including the ship’s doctor, offered to go and Mackenzie selected Sub-Lieutenant David O’Sullivan to take charge of a whaler with a crew of five consisting of Petty Officer James Errington, Acting Petty Officer Edmund Archer, Able Seamen Stanley Adams, Victor Benningfield DSM and Robert Briggs.

“Personally,” Mackenzie admitted, “I did not think that they would be able to live in that sea let alone save anybody.”

In fact, they exceeded all expectations, confounding their captain’s gloomy forecast by hauling themselves three times across a sea so bad that witnesses considered “boat work suicidal”.

Towed each time to windward by a boat-hook from Vimiera, they succeeded by dint of their heroic and Herculean feat in rescuing 20 men clinging to a line trailing from the stern of the collier.

In the course of what Mackenzie called their “exceptional” achievement spanning more than three exhausting hours more men from another of the grounded colliers were picked up by Vimiera as they floated past.

But for all their gallantry there were still over a hundred men marooned on the wave-buffed wrecks. Their fate now depended on the skill and speed of the lifeboatmen hurrying to the rescue - and to one man in particular.

■ Next week: Blog to the rescue.

