

CHARLES ALGERNON FRYATT

2 December 1872 – 27 July 1916



He was a British mariner who was executed by the Germans for attempting to ram a U-Boat in 1915. When his ship, the SS Brussels, was captured off the Netherlands in 1916, he was court-martialled and sentenced to death although he was a civilian non-combatant. International outrage followed his execution near Bruges in Belgium. In 1919, his body was reburied with full honours in the United Kingdom.

Early life

Fryatt was born on 2nd December 1872 in Southampton, the son of Charles and Mary Fryatt. He attended Freemantle School in the late 1870s. In 1881, Fryatt's family lived at 22 Trinity Terrace, St. Mary's Southampton but later moved to Harwich in Essex where he attended the Corporation School.

He and his wife, Ethel, had seven children: six girls and one boy. The children were Olive, Victoria, Doris, Vera, Mabel, Charles and Dorothy. The younger

Charles later followed his father into the merchant navy, training at HMS Worcester.

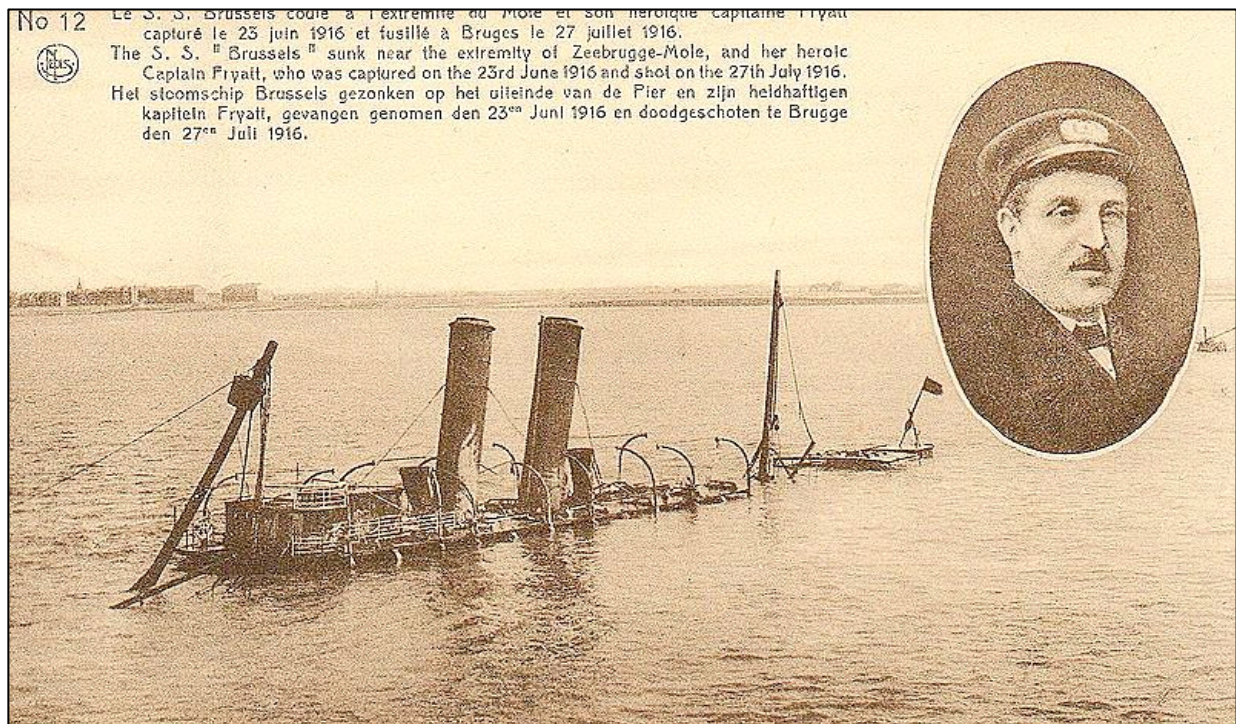
On leaving school, Fryatt entered the Mercantile Marine, serving on SS *County Antrim*, SS *Ellenbank*, SS *Marmion* and SS *Harrogate*.

In 1892, Fryatt joined the Great Eastern Railway as a seaman on SS Ipswich. Fryatt's father had been the First Officer on SS Cambridge. He rose through the ranks, serving on various ships. His first command was SS Colchester. In 1913, he was appointed master of SS Newmarket.

U-boat attack

On 3 March 1915, Fryatt's command, SS Wrexham, a Great Central Railway ship, was attacked by a German U-Boat. The ship was chased for 40 nautical miles (74 km). With deckhands assisting the stokers, the vessel made 16 knots (30 km/h) when it would normally have been pushed to make 14 knots (26 km/h). *Wrexham* arrived at Rotterdam with burnt funnels.

The Great Eastern Railway presented Fryatt with a gold watch for this feat. The watch was inscribed *Presented to Captain C. A. Fryatt by the Chairman and Directors of the G.E Railway Company as a mark of their appreciation of his courage and skilful seamanship on March 2nd, 1915*. Later that month he was in charge of *Colchester* when it was unsuccessfully attacked by a U-boat.



On 28 March 1915, as captain of the SS Brussels, he was ordered to stop by U-33 when his ship was near the Maas lightvessel. Seeing the U-boat had surfaced in order to torpedo his ship, Fryatt ordered full steam ahead and proceeded to try to ram U-33, which was forced to crash dive.

This action was following orders issued by Winston Churchill to captains of merchant ships. These orders included treating the crews of U-boats as felons and not as prisoners of war.

White Flags were to be ignored. Churchill's order also stated that survivors from U-boats might be shot if this was more convenient than taking them prisoner. If a captain were to surrender his ship he would be prosecuted by the British. The Germans became aware of these orders when they found a copy of them upon capturing the SS Ben Cruachan in October 1915.

For this second action, Fryatt was awarded a gold watch by the Admiralty. The watch was inscribed *Presented by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to Chas. Algernon Fryatt Master of the S.S. 'Brussels' in recognition of the example set by that vessel when attacked by a German submarine on March 28th, 1915.* Fryatt was presented with a certificate on vellum by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. He was also praised in the House of Commons.

Capture

On 25 June 1916, *Brussels* left Hoeh van Holland bound for Harwich. Lights were shown from the beach and a flare was fired. A passenger is reported to have remained on deck and signalled to shore. Five German destroyers surrounded *Brussels*. The passengers were told to prepare to take to the lifeboats and orders were given for official papers to be destroyed, which was done successfully. *Brussels* was taken by the Germans, and the radio was destroyed. She was escorted into Zeebrugge and then to Bruges.

Court Martial

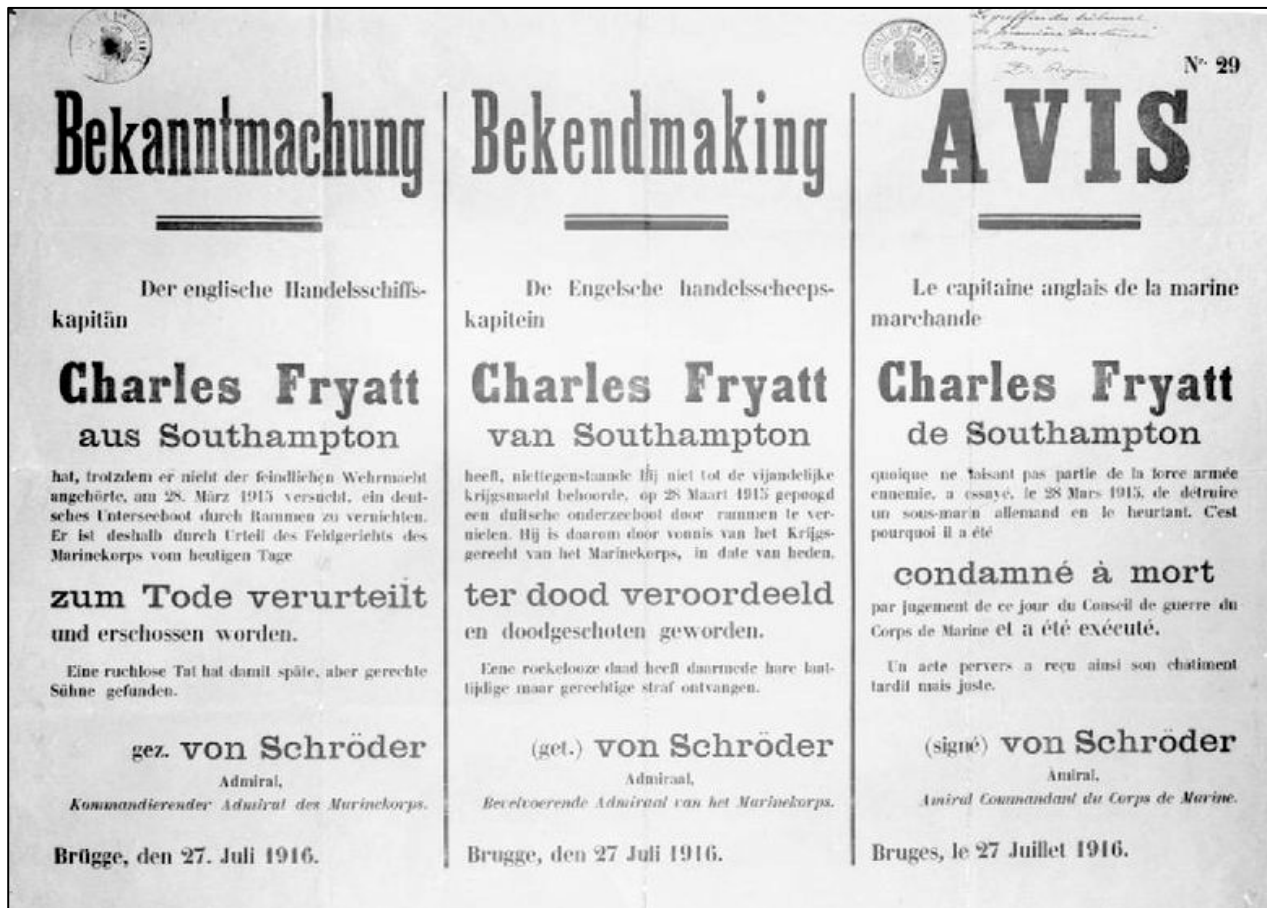
Fryatt and his crew were sent to the civilian internment camp at Ruhleben, near Berlin. On 16 July 1916, it was reported in the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* that Fryatt had been charged with sinking a German submarine. The Germans knew that *U-33* had not been sunk.

At the time of the trial, she was on active service as part of the Constantinople Flotilla. The basis for the charge was the inscriptions on his watches.

Fryatt was tried at a Court Martial on 27th July 1916. The Court Martial was held at Bruges Town Hall. He was found guilty of being a franc-tireur and sentenced to death.

Notice of execution in German, Dutch and French

The sentence was confirmed by the Kaiser. At 19:00, Fryatt was executed by firing squad and was buried in a small cemetery just outside Bruges that the Germans used for burying Belgian "traitors". The grave was later visited by diplomat Sir Walter Townley (British Ambassador to the Netherlands from 1917 to 1919 and his wife.



An execution notice was published in Dutch, French and German announcing the death of Fryatt. It was signed by Admiral Ludwig von Schroder.

A translation of the execution notice reads as follows:

NOTICE. The English captain of a merchant ship, Charles Fryatt, of Southampton, though he did not belong to the armed forces of the enemy, attempted on March 28th, 1915, to destroy a German submarine by running it down. For this he has been condemned to death by judgment this day of the Field Court Martial of the Naval Corps and has been executed. A ruthless deed has thus been avenged, belatedly but just.

Signed: **VON SCHRÖDER**,
Admiral Commandant of the Naval Corps. Bruges, July 27th, 1916.

German post-war confirmation of Court Martial

On 2 April 1919, a German International Law Commission named the "Schücking Commission", after its chairman Walther Schucking, reconfirmed Fryatt's sentence:

"The execution by shooting of Captain Charles Fryatt, which was given by the Court Martial Bruges, due to the sentence of the court martial proceedings on 27 July

1916, contains no violation of international law, The Commission apologizes most vividly for the hurry in which the judgement was enforced."

The Commission's ruling was not unanimous. Two members of the legal review panel, Eduard Bernstein and Oskar Cohn, dissented because in their opinion Fryatt's sentence had been a severe infringement of international law.

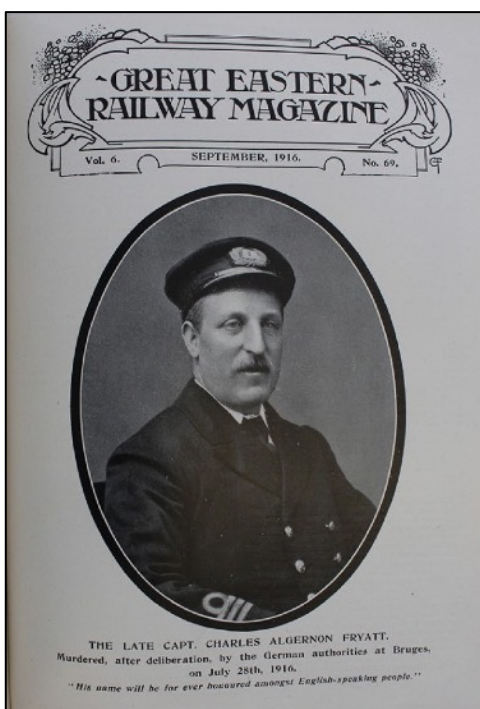
Reaction

On 31 July 1916, British Prime Minister H. H. Asquith issued a statement in the House of Commons.

"I deeply regret to say that it appears to be true that Captain Fryatt has been murdered by the Germans. His Majesty's Government has heard with the utmost indignation of this atrocious crime against the laws of nations and the usages of war.

Coming as it does contemporaneously with the lawless cruelty towards the population of Lille and other occupied districts of France, it shews that the German High Command, under the stress of military defeat, have renewed their policy of terrorism. It is impossible of course to conjecture to what atrocities they may proceed.

His Majesty's Government desire to repeat emphatically their resolve that such crimes shall not, if they can help it, go unpunished. When the time arrives, they are determined to bring to justice the criminals, whoever they may be and whatever position they may occupy. In such cases as these the authors of the system under which such crimes are committed may well be the guiltiest of all. The question of what immediate action can be taken is engaging the earnest attention of the Government and I hope very soon to announce to the House of Commons what we can do."



Lord Claud Hamilton MP, Chairman of the Great Eastern Railway, denounced the execution as "sheer, brutal murder". The Mayor of Harwich opened a fund to erect a permanent memorial to Fryatt. A similar fund was opened in the Netherlands.

In the United States, The New York Times denounced the execution as "a deliberate murder". The New York Herald called it "The crowning German atrocity". In the Netherlands, the Nieuwe Rotterdam Courant described the execution as "arbitrary and unjust", while the *Handelsblad Holland* called it "A cowardly murder inspired by hatred and revenge".

"I Switzerland", the *Journal de Genève* said, "It is monstrous to maintain that armed forces have a right to murder civilians but that civilians are guilty of a crime in defending themselves".

The Dutch branch of the League of Neutral States presented the Great Eastern Railway a memorial tablet which was erected at Liverpool Street Station. The memorial was unveiled on 27 July 1917, exactly a year after Fryatt's execution. The scrap value of *Brussels* was donated towards the cost.

The Great Eastern Railway awarded Fryatt's widow a pension of £250 per annum. The Government granted her an extra £100 per annum pension on top of her entitlement. Fryatt's insurers, the Provident Clerk's Association, paid the £300 that Mrs Fryatt was entitled to immediately, dispensing with the usual formalities.

The Royal Merchant Seaman's Orphanage offered to educate two of Fryatt's seven children. The King expressed his indignation and abhorrence at the execution of Fryatt in a letter to Mrs Fryatt.

In the letter, he also wrote "The action of Captain Fryatt in defending his ship against the attack of an enemy submarine was a noble instance of the resource and self-reliance so characteristic of his profession."

The incident inspired an Australian film, *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*. (1917).

Shells avenging Fryatt's death

15-inch shells of the No. 10 Battery, Royal Marine Artillery with a written message reading: "To Captain Fryatt Murderers".
Becourt, 3rd August 1916.



Funeral and reburial

In 1919, Fryatt's body was exhumed and returned to the United Kingdom for burial. His coffin was landed at Dover and transported in Southeastern and Chatham Railway PMV No. 132 to

London.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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On 8th July 1919, his funeral was held at St. Pauls Cathedral. Hundreds of merchant seamen and widows of merchant seamen and fishermen attended. Representing the Government were many members of the Admiralty, the Board of trade, the Cabinet and the War Office.

The funeral of Captain Charles Fryatt through London, showing the flag covered

coffin on a gun carriage drawn by British bluejackets through crowded streets arriving at St Paul's Cathedral, where the memorial service was held. The bluejackets lining the street are resting on arms reversed.

THE PALL-BEARERS.

An escort was provided by his Majesty's ship *Pembroke* with gun carriage, and the pallbearers were four of Capt. Fryatt's colleagues in the Great Eastern steamboat passenger service, namely, Captain T. E. Barran, Captain F. Lawrence, Captain T. W. Stiff, and Captain H. Goodey. With them were associated three other friends and colleagues, Captain Williams, Harbour Master at Lowestoft; Captain H. Taylor, of the Mercantile Marine; and Captain Ortwell, chief mate of the steamship *Brussels*.

The band of the Great Eastern Railway, augmented by drummers from the Royal Marines, played the Dead March, Eternal Father Strong to Save and Abide with Me were sung, and a blessing given by the Bishop of London. The route of the coffin to Liverpool Street Station was lined with people.

Fryatt was buried at All Saints' Church, Upper Dovercourt. His coffin was carried from the station to the church on a gun carriage. His widow was presented with the insignia of the Belgian Order of Leopold that had been posthumously awarded to Fryatt.

Fryatt was also posthumously awarded the Belgian Maritime War Cross.



Basildon Borough Heritage Society - December 2024