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Major Edwin Hunt MVO Emeritus Bargemaster to Her Majesty The Queen WARE THE TOTAL TH

Letter to The Editor of The Times

11th November 1999

Sir,

A recent programme on television dealt with the loss of the submarine "Truculent" on a January night fifty years ago in the Thames estuary, when ten men survived from a crew of seventy-four. Three of the survivors told their story.

For forty years I taught apprentice watermen and lightermen at City College and made a practice of stressing lessons to be learned from the affair. Truculent was bound upstream on the surface when a "strange" group of lights appeared ahead. The Seamanship Manual was brought to the conning tower and course was altered to port; for it was believed that the lights were those of a stationary ship. When the Officer of the Watch looked up from the manual the ship was almost upon them, and Truculent was struck by the ice-breaker stem of the Swedish spirit-tanker "Divina", and sent to the bottom in 60 feet of water.

With good emergency drill most of the crew survived the collision A marker buoy was released so that rescue boats could home-in, but conditions below did not allow a wait until dawn when rescue could be assured. As soon as internal pressure was right they began to leave, two-by-two, some without clothing. Sadly, no rescue boats were waiting, and all died of hyperthermia except for ten who were picked-up by a Dutch freighter and Divina.

The hyperthermia lesson was learned five years after a war which had seen far more sailors die of exposure to cold than from any other cause. After Truculent survival suits became part of submarine escape equipment.

For my students there were two very important lessons; the first being that they should know the lights to be carried by a variety of vessels. Divina carried the normal lights of a ship under-way, plus an all-round red light for a ship carrying spirit and, as something to be seen every night, should have been easily recognised. The most important lesson for my students was that they should at all times concentrate on navigating their vessel. Should they need to consult a book or should Head-Office ring up on walkie-talkie, they should hand over the wheel to someone else so that both may concentrate on what they are doing.

Sadly today, I see motorists driving in heavy traffic, at speed, with one hand on the wheel and the other on a mobile phone while they concentrate on what is being said miles away.

Yours etc.

Edwin Lent