

Drowning First World War veteran saved from sinking by his chirpy canary

THE INCREDIBLE survival story of how a First World War seaman was saved from drowning by his pet CANARY has resurfaced a century after the start of the conflict.

By Rebecca Perring



Chirpy canary saved his owner, First World War veteran, Walter Thorp from sunken ship [BNPS]

Walter Thorp was the last man to abandon the sinking SS City of Corinth merchant ship after it was torpedoed by a German U-boat 12 miles off Cornwall in May 1917.

Just as the radio operator was about to dive overboard he remembered his pet canary, which he had recently bought on a stop in Singapore, was still in his cabin.

The 20-year-old sailor rushed back to rescue his beloved bird and after wading through chest high water he managed to haul its large bamboo cage out onto the deck.

But by the time he jumped into the water, all the ship's lifeboats with the surviving crew were gone and he was left clinging to the wooden bird cage, which luckily floated.

Mr Thorp soon became exhausted and was in danger of drowning but each time he started to doze off his chirpy canary would sing loudly and wake him up.

Amazingly the canary, which he had named Triller because of its distinctive song, kept Mr Thorp awake for the next eight hours until they were both plucked from the English Channel by a passing British freighter and taken to Dagenham.

Now 100 years later, the amazing never-told-before tale has been unravelled in a new BBC book by Paul Atterbury, an expert on the Antiques Roadshow. World War One in 100 Family Treasures, highlights stories that came to light in the making of the Antiques Roadshow's WWI centenary programmes but never made it to air.

I'm incredibly proud of my father, he was my hero and I felt his story deserved telling said David Thorp.

Mr Thorp's son David, responded to an appeal from the programme for untold stories from the First World War.

The 80-year-old who grew up in Denbigh, north Wales, but now lives in Spain, said it was a "sheer quirk of fate" that saved his father.

He said: "Dad didn't talk much about the war - he was a very private person and I had to really press him to get this story out of him.

"Dad was the wireless officer, the radio man, and his job was to stay there broadcasting signals until the ship sunk. That's what he did, but everyone else in the meantime leapt off the ship and into lifeboats.

"It was only thanks to a sheer quirk of fate that he survived the sinking. It's an amazing story but I really had to drag it out of him."

As it was the second time out of three that Mr Thorp's ship was torpedoed, in anticipation he had attached a long cord to the cage.

"He picked up the cage and jumped into the water. The cage was made from bamboo so it floated and he was able to swim away from the ship pulling the cage behind him.

"The water was calm but everyone else had disappeared. The U-boat was still out there so they scarpered and left him there.

"Dad told me he got very tired very quickly and he started falling asleep, but every time his head would drop his canary would start chirping loudly, waking him back up again," Mr Thorp continued.

After the ordeal Mr Thorp took Triller back to his parents' house in Chelsea, west London, where it lived for the next 13 years. Triller remained silent apart from when his owner returned home from being at sea when it would burst into song.

Mr Thorp added: "He went back to sea and the bird never sang a note until it heard him walking back down the street to the house when it would start singing.

"I'm incredibly proud of my father, he was my hero, and I felt his story deserved telling."

Following the First World War Mr Thorp met and married his wife Margaret and had two children, David and Joan. He took up civil engineering and during the Second World War he was captain of the 9th battalion, Denbighshire Home Guard.

He was appointed county surveyor for Denbigh in 1949. Mr Thorp died in 1961 shortly after his retirement.

The 6,000 ton SS City of Corinth was en route from Singapore to London when it was torpedoed without warning by UB-31 and sunk 12 miles off the Lizard. There were no casualties.