

The S.S. Cranford and the Fortune of War

By Robert Fridlington



[The following article is a slightly expanded version of a story that appeared in the September 1999 issue of "The Mill Wheel." It was originally planned to present the story in its present form as a memorial article on the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the vessel. However, other factors intervened and made that impossible. This story is that memorial and commemorates the eleven men who lost their lives when the ship was sunk.]

September 1, 1919, 4:00p.m. The last great timber had been sawn through. For an anxious moment, the ship just stood there, not moving. Then, as the huge crowd cheered, the ship slid slowly down the ways into the Cape Fear River. The *S.S. Cranford* had been launched.

The *S.S. Cranford*? Why was a large, ocean-going freighter given the name of a small land-locked, New Jersey town of less than 6,000 people? That remains something of a mystery, although at the time, one of the reasons given was Cranford's impressive showing in the several Liberty Bond Drives during World War I. These bond drives not only helped pay the huge costs of the conflict, but they also served to whip up enthusiasm for the war effort. Cranford was understandably proud of its record, and local papers printed long lists of bond subscribers that often contained 800 to 1,000 names.

The town's best effort was established in the Fourth Liberty Bond Drive of December 1918, just after the Armistice. In that drive, Cranford citizens had responded with subscriptions totaling \$825,000, more than three times the town's \$268,000 quota and one of the state's records for oversubscription. At least one later account stated that the ship received its name in recognition of that record, but actually the name was approved before the Fourth Liberty Bond Drive even began.

Whatever the reason, the key figure in the adoption of the name was Lorenzo C. Dilks, a former resident of Cranford, where he had served on the Township Committee. In the middle of 1918, Dilks had been named president and General Manager of the Carolina Shipbuilding Corporation, which was constructing a large new shipyard on the Cape Fear River in Wilmington, N.C. He resigned from Cranford's Township Committee in June 1918, to take over his new duties and when he moved south, he took two other Cranford men with him. One was Samuel H. Tool, another Township Committeeman, who would have charge of real estate matters and housing for the shipyard workers, and the other was Samuel D. Pettite, who would become general purchasing agent for the company.

It was through Dilks' efforts that the name *Cranford* was approved by the U.S. Shipping Board for the first ship to be launched in the new Carolina shipyard. It was a big event, drawing a crowd of about 15,000 people. Mrs. Lorenzo Dilks was "sponsor" for the ship and broke "a bottle of good old-time champagne" on her bow. A delegation from Cranford including Township Committeeman Hall B. Sims, Kenyon Messick, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Moser, and *Cranford Citizen* editor James E. Warner and his wife, all of whom were honored guests on the sponsor's stand. On behalf of the citizens of Cranford, Hall Sims presented an inscribed ship's bell for the new vessel.

James Warner and Kenyon Messick explored the unfinished ship "climbing some 40 feet of ladder and taking a trip over the decks of the vessel." Warner splashed the story of the launching on page one of the *Citizen* and included a photo of the ship taken a few days earlier. In what was perhaps a fit of journalistic pique, Hugh Hearon and George M. Hendricks, proprietors of the *Cranford Chronicle*, who presumably were not invited to the festivities, gave the launching story only two brief paragraphs on page 4.

The *Cranford* was constructed under an emergency program the United States Shipping Board to increase the capacity of the country's merchant navy. Although launched in 1919, it was not completed until 1920, two years after the war was over. The ship was 410 feet long and 55 feet wide. By comparison, the World War II Liberty ships, introduced in 1941, were 441.5 feet long and the faster, stronger Victory Ships that replaced them in 1943 were 455 feet long. The *Cranford* had a cargo capacity of approximately 8,500 tons.

For two decades, the *Cranford* sailed for the Lykes Lines. The ship kept busy but there was none of the excitement or drama of World War I days. Instead, it was the work-a-day world of peacetime cargo hauling. But the *Cranford's* role would change dramatically in December 1941, when the United States was plunged into World War II.

The *Cranford* could finally fulfill the reason for which she was built: carrying cargo during wartime. The ship's entry into the war was much less celebrated, much less dramatic than its birth some 22 years earlier. There were no crowds, no speeches, and no representatives from New Jersey. Just the routine of transporting cargo. This was her mission.

After Germany declared war on the United States in December 1941, the most formidable enemy the *Cranford* had to face was the U-Boat, whose attacks on American shipping lanes were devastating. The best protection for a merchant ship was to travel in a convoy guarded by anti-submarine vessels of the U.S. navy, but many cargo carriers had to sail routes for which no escort could be spared and thus had to sail alone. In early 1942, the Navy began to provide merchantmen with one or more guns and an armed guard of Navy enlisted men. The *Cranford* received a gun crew of eight of these armed guards.

Cranford's wartime career would be brief. In July 1942, the ship left Cape Town, South Africa, bound for Trinidad in the British West Indies. James Henry Donaldson was the ship's Master. It carried a cargo of 6,600 tons of chromium ore and 1,600 tons of cotton. On July 30th, about 250 miles southeast of Barbados, off the northern coast of South America, the *Cranford* was struck by a single torpedo fired by a German submarine, the U-155, commanded by Adolph Cornelius Piening. The ship sank within three minutes, taking with her nine of the 36 merchant seaman aboard and two of the eight-member naval gun crew.

The events that followed may strike the present reader as improbable but such actions were not uncommon in the early days of World War II. The U-boat surfaced and its commander questioned the survivors about the cargo and their planned destination. He also told the survivors in English that their distress was "the fortune of war."

Two injured crewmen from the *Cranford* were taken aboard the submarine and given medical attention before being returned to their shipmates. The Germans gave the Americans water and supplies and gave directions for heading for shore. The U-boat commander also gave the *Cranford's* crew a rope so that they could tie their only life boat to two life rafts containing survivors. The following morning, after only a few hours adrift, the *Cranford* survivors were rescued by a Spanish tanker, S.S. Castillo Alemenura and landed at Curacao.

But the S.S. *Cranford* was gone. A victim, as the German captain said, of “the fortune of war.”

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