

Thomas Ankers, died on board HMS Thetis, June 1939

HMS Thetis was a tragic and long-running saga in the summer of 1939. She was undergoing acceptance trials off the coast of Anglesey when she failed to surface from a dive on 1 June 1939. Full accounts can be found on the internet.¹ For several days it looked as though the lives would be saved. After salvage, Thetis became HMS Thunderbolt before being sunk by an Italian vessel on 14 March 1943.

Although Thetis was built in Birkenhead by Cammell Laird, there was some local involvement:

North Western Daily Mail Friday 2 June 1939

DESTROYER LOCATES SUBMARINE ALL ON BOARD THETIS REPORTED ALIVE FOUR ESCAPE BY DAVIS APPARATUS EQUIPMENT BEING RUSHED TO THE SCENE

The submarine Thetis, with her 79² occupants, is safe, and two of her officers are already on board the Brazen, which located her. Official announcement of the news came at 8.45 a.m., 19 hours after the submarine dived yesterday. The vessel was found at a point 14 miles north-west of Great Orme's Head, North Wales. Eighteen feet of her stern was visible above water.

Capt. H. P. K. Oram and Lieut. H. G. Woods, it was learned, escaped from the submarine and were taken on board the Brazen. Salvage operations are now being directed by Capt. Oram.

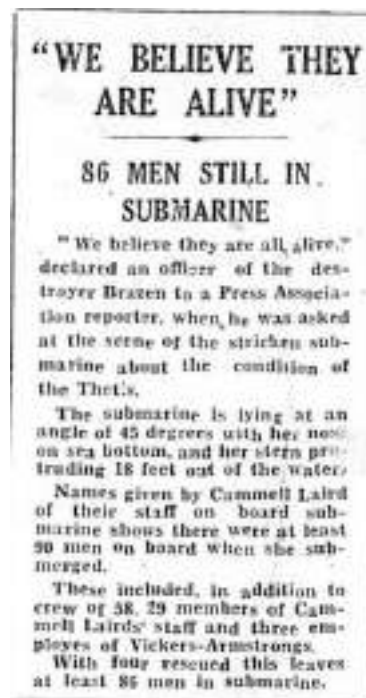
It is officially stated by the Admiralty that the bow of the Thetis is in 130 feet of water and her stern is on the surface. In addition to Capt. Oram, Lieut. Woods, Leading Stoker Arnold and Mr. F. Shaw, of Cammell Lairds, have also escaped, the official statement adds, by Davis escape apparatus³.

In addition to directing salvage operations, Capt. Oram will make a full report on the state of the submarine.

The commanding officer and all the remainder of the crew were alive at 10 o'clock, and salvage equipment is being rushed to the scene.

The Thetis, £350,000 new submarine, built by Messrs. Cammell (*sic*) Laird, Ltd., left Birkenhead for acceptance trials on Thursday. She dived at 1.40 p.m., and should have emerged three hours later.

It is from Cammell Laird's offices that the dramatic news of the submarine's location and the safety of all on board was first issued.



Two articles from the same edition highlight the fact that Lieut. Commander Bolus was married to a daughter of the local Coroner, Mr. F.W. Poole, and that they really did not know how many men

were on board. Mrs. Bolus was highly praised for her role in calming worried family members.

Elsewhere in the same edition there was more personal interest in those involved locally:

¹ E.g. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Thetis_\(N25\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Thetis_(N25)) ; http://www.cyber-heritage.co.uk/thetis_close_enough_to_touch.htm

² A figure later increased.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Davis_Submerged_Escape_Apparatus

THREE LOCAL MEN ON SUBMERGED VESSEL

While the greatest anxiety was felt by everybody as to the fate of the British submarine Thetis, and all on board, when she failed to reappear after her submersion trials in Liverpool Bay, there were several families in Barrow and district to whom the period of waiting must have been very trying indeed, as they had relatives on board.

Commander Bolus, the commander of the ship, is the son-in-law of Mr. and Mrs. F.W. Poole, of Bankfield House, Urswick.

He married Sybil, their second daughter nine years ago. That lady has herself been in the news for her gallantry during the period when the fate of the submarine was in doubt. She did all she could to comfort other women who had their menfolk on board, while all the time she must herself have been feeling the awful strain, knowing that her husband was one of those imprisoned on the time being in the submerged vessel.

Commander Bolus spent last weekend with his wife and child at Bankfield House, Urswick. He was one of the officers on the Osiris, built at Barrow, and for two years was in command of a submarine flotilla at Malta.

Three employes (*sic*) of Vickers-Armstrongs were also on board. They were:-

James Young, foreman fitter, residing at 8, Falmouth-street.

Thos. Ankers, foreman in the Submarine Dept., of 19, Derby-street, and

Horace T. Cragg, submarine draughtsman, who resides at Broadgate, Victoria-road, Ulverston.

All are married.

When our representative called upon Mrs. Cragg this morning she was anxiously awaiting news. She had a letter from her husband this morning, posted before he set out on the trials. In this he said they were expecting a very successful trip, and that he would be home on Friday.

Mr. Young has been working at Birkenhead for some time, but Mr. Ankers went there only on Tuesday to go on the trials.

Mrs. Young told the "Mail" that she heard the news on the wireless last evening and had spent a terrible night waiting for news of her husband. She had intimation early today that the ship had been located, and during the morning a telegram arrived from her husband's landlady in Birkenhead bringing the same good news.

Mrs. Ankers too, was relieved to hear that the Thetis had been located and that some of the men had been able to leave her. She had had no news of her husband this morning, and was also anxious to know if Mr. Cragg, the Ulverston man, was aboard.



Mr. Thomas Ankers, one of the Barrow men aboard the Thetis, a married man with no family, whose home is at 15 Derby-street. The other Barrow man, Mr. James Young, of 8, Falmouth-street, Walney, has two children, a boy and a girl, both under ten years of age.

By the following day, hope of recovery had been lost. The headline in the NWDM read:

FATE OF THOSE ON BOARD THE THETIS MEN BELIEVED TO HAVE DIED FROM CHLORINE GAS "NO HOPE OF SAVING FURTHER LIVES" CAMMELL LAIRD'S STATEMENT

It was officially announced by Cammell Lairds this afternoon that they had given up hope of saving further lives.

It was added that there was no truth in the rumour that they were even considering blowing up the vessel. They would still attempt to save the ship.

The statement added that the Company considered that the men on board died from chlorine gas, of which the ship carried a large quantity and which it is thought escaped owing to the tilting of the vessel.

Two hours after had been almost abandoned for the men remaining trapped in the submarine Thetis at the bottom of Liverpool Bay early to-day a dramatic message, which indicated signs of life, was issued by the Admiralty.

Divers working feverishly on the hull, which was feared to be already the sepulchre of over 90 men, heard faint tappings from the interior.

Then, at dawn, some hours after it had been estimated that the submarine's air supply must have been exhausted, a new bid began to raise the stern.

This brought fresh hope to the crowd of agonised women-folk waiting at Birkenhead, who at midnight, heard with dismay a Cammell Laird's official announcement in broken tones "I am sorry but there is little hope for the men remaining in the submarine."

But official quarters were not optimistic about averting what would be the worst submarine calamity in history.

Only four men have escaped, using the Davis rescue apparatus, and two others are believed to have died in making the attempt.

The account goes on for 3 full columns of what was then a broadsheet paper.



The NWDM of the 5 June announced a "Full Public Enquiry", and the setting-up of a fund for dependants.

On Tuesday 6 June it announced that money was "pouring in" to the relief fund; that Vickers-Armstrong's had assured the fund organisers that their employees would be provided-for, and that a National Day of Mourning had been declared for the following day. A service would take place at St. John's, Barrow Island, on the Wednesday afternoon.

On 7 June the NWDM carried reports of the services at sea, and in Birkenhead and elsewhere.

The 8 June saw the appointment of Mr. Justice Bicknell to head the Inquiry, and an article speculating that the submarine might never be raised. Heavy cable was required to lift her, and the weather was deteriorating. There is an account of the service in St. John's, Barrow Island, attended by representatives from Vickers-Armstrong's, the Admiralty, Royal Navy ships, Vickers' employees and trade union representatives, the local M.P. Sir Jonah Walker Smith, and others. There are pictures of wreath-laying at the Cenotaph.

IN
LOVING MEMORY
OF
THOMAS ANKERS
WHO LOST HIS LIFE IN
H.M. SUBMARINE 'THETIS'
JUNE 3RD 1939, AGED 56 YEARS

I found further mentions on the 9, 17 and on 27 June it was announced that salvage work was due to start the following day. On the 28 June an article suggesting that the Inquiry, due to start on Monday 3 July, may last over a fortnight. Salvage operations had been delayed due to bad weather.

The Inquiry opened on 3 July 1939, only four weeks after the disaster, and full accounts of the evidence were published each day in the NWDM, (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14 July). The task of raising the Thetis was also reported at length in July & August. On the 7 Sept. it was reported that the hatch had been removed and another body recovered. On 12 September it was reported that sixteen bodies had so far been recovered, among them Thomas Ankers. On Friday 15 September, an account of his funeral read as follows:

BARROW VICTIM OF THETIS DISASTER FUNERAL AT RAMPSIDE

The funeral took place at Rampside on Wednesday of Mr. Thomas Ankers, of 19, Derby-street, Barrow, one of the 99 men who perished when the submarine Thetis sank in Liverpool Bay on 1 June. Mr. Ankers' body was one of those recovered by divers who entered the vessel where it is now beached in Moelfre Bay.

The service was conducted by the vicar of Rampside, the Rev. H. Robinson, and the family mourners were Mrs. Ankers, widow; Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, Mr. and Mrs. J. Wade, Mr. F. Pointon, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law; Mr. F. Sinclair, and Mr. a. Jones, nephews. Friends present were Mr. and Mrs. E. Wade (Farsley), Mr. Exton (Bradford), Mrs. Coles, Mrs. Cornthwaite.

Representatives from the Shipyard, where Mr. Ankers was employed as a foreman fitter, were Mr. J. Callander, general manager; Mr. W. Johnson, works manager; Mr. W.R. Marsh, assistant manager, Comdr. A.S. Cumming; Comdr. T. Parkinson; Mr. J.C. Pank, assistant submarine dock manager; Lieut. Cotman, R.N., assistant Admiralty engineer overseer.

The bearers were Messrs. Gittins, Agnew, Elliott, Holton, Dixon and Norman, foremen and chargehands from the submarine dock.

Messrs. William Ormandy and Sons, Church-street, were the undertakers.

In the 1911 Census, Thomas (28 yrs) was a Marine Engineer employed at the shipyard, and living with his wife Martha Hannah Ankers (28) and son Hubert (2) at 24, Kent St, Barrow. Both parents were born in Crewe. *Hubert died in 1921, and Martha in 1943. (Cumbria BMD website)*

In the 1901 Census Thomas (18) was living with his parents and elder brother James at 60 Ludford St, Crewe, and working as a locomotive engine fitter.