HMS Cobra
17th September 1901
Read as the Torpedo Boat Destroyer inexplicably breaks in two. Only 12 survived from 75 men onboard.

The Ship, Design and Build
HMS COBRA was one of only two specially designed, new turbine powered Torpedo boat destroyers, built by Messrs Armstrong, Whitworth & Co. at the Elswick Works, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and launched as a 'stock-ship' in June 1899. (Stock ships were vessels laid down as speculations and when completed, they were offered for sale to the Royal Navy or similar customers.) She was 354-tons and had dimensions measuring: 64m by length, a 6.4m-beam and a 2.13m-draught. The vessel had four funnels, quadruple shafts, each carrying three (another report says two) bronze screw propellers, powered by 10,000ihp steam turbine engines, built by Messrs C. A. Parsons Turbine Co. that made her capable of a maximum speed of 36 knots. This unusual and short-lived arrangement with the propellers was an attempt to reduce the cavitations effect produced by a single screw when the shaft was rotating at the high revs-per-minute, produced by the two new powerful turbine engines. She had an armament consisting of one gun that fired 5.44-kilo (12-pound) shells, five-guns that fired 2.72-kilo (6-pound) shells and two torpedo tubes. She had her first sea-trial on 15th July 1899 and twelve sea-trials altogether. The twelfth trial was the one carried out by the Admiralty and she reached a speed of 34.8 knots, as the mean average of six runs. COBRA, or No-674 as she was then, was damaged in a collision soon after completion and it was not until she had been repaired, that the vessel was put up for offers. On 12th December 1899, the Admiralty was informed that two destroyers, No-673 and No-674 were available for purchase. The Admiralty's main interest in the ship was her new turbine engines, as she was to be used as a second test bed for the turbine, the first being the VIPER. The two destroyers were not the modern type, as we know them; they were more Torpedo-boat-destroyers, light, fast and designed for that particular purpose. (Unfortunately VIPER, under the command of Lieutenant Speke, struck the Reconquet Reef, in the Channel Islands and ripped her bottom out at 5.25 p.m. on 3rd August 1901. On that afternoon, she had been dispatched from Portsmouth to take part in the 1901 Manoeuvres, her job being, to search for 'enemy' Torpedo boats off the Channel Islands. When the weather took a turn for the worse, her speed was reduced from 22 to 16 knots. A dense fog caused more problems, but VIPER had sighted one of the 'enemy' boats, namely Torpedo boat No-81 and increased her speed, back up to
22 knots, to avoid the other boat. It was then that she went aground, followed by Torpedo boat No-81 and both vessels were a total loss. There had been no loss of life, but Lt. Speke was reprimanded. The two wrecks were later sold for scrap after they broke up on the Reconquet Reef, part of the Casquets (rocks) at Alderney, soon after.

COBRA was ready for trial by June 1901 and turned in a mean speed of 34.7 knots with a maximum of 35.6 knots. However, her boilers had an insatiable appetite for coal and they needed an enormous increase in engine room staff to keep them supplied. Despite this type of vessel’s phenomenal speed, the First Sea Lord was disgruntled at the prospect of having a whole fleet composed of similar vessels, mainly because of the increase in the number of stokers required. It would have meant that she would have had to have as many as eighty-crew on board, just to keep her fires burning.

Having been fitted out at the shipyard in Elswick, Newcastle and following acceptance into naval service by the Admiralty, Lieutenant Bosworth Smith RN was chosen to command her. He left for Newcastle-upon-Tyne to commission the ship, accompanied by a Portsmouth crew of fifty-three. An early start had been planned for 16th September 1901, but this was not possible, because all of the navigational equipment had not arrived in time and her compasses had not been swung. Lt. Smith’s orders were, to steam her down to Portsmouth, passing no closer than 5-miles off Flamborough Head, then to pass between the Outer Dowsing and Dudgeon Shoals, but outside the Gabbard and Galloper Shoals. Lt. Smith RN was also instructed to sail at dawn and anchor for the night, either off Harwich or Great Yarmouth.

**The Event of the Sinking**

COBRA cleared the mouth of the Tyne at 11 a.m. on 17th October, with fifty-four officers and men and twenty-five contractors from the Parsons Turbine Company, who were under Mr R. Bernard, the works manager. However she spent a considerable time manoeuvring off the Tyne adjusting the compasses and then steamed on south with a heavy sea on her starboard quarter. Later, it was found that great difficulty was experienced in manning the stokeholds as she rolled heavily. Lt. Smith was forced to reduce her speed from 17 knots to 10 knots, but the vessel was still thrown about violently as she steamed on throughout the night in terrible conditions. Around dawn, the weather improved, allowing her speed to be increased again. It was at 7 a.m. on 17th September that, without any real warning, HMS COBRA was enveloped in steam then just buckled up and broke in two, within sight of the Outer Dowsing Lightship.
A List of Royal Navy Officers & Men onboard HMS COBRA

Smith, A. W. B., Lieutenant RN
Wood, Thomas J., Boatswain
Cole, F., Boatswain
Percey J. G. O. Chief Engineer (saved)
Adams, Richard, stoker, O.N. 287773
Ashbey, Chas, stoker, O.N. 290564 (saved)
Auld, Thomas Morrow, stoker, O.N. 288307
Barnes, Francis K., P.O. 1st Class O.N. 128025 (saved)
Barrett, Edward Ludlow, stoker, O.N. 276860
Borrett, Ed., stoker, O.N. 286217
Bridge, Henry J., stoker, O.N. 295??5
Burnett, John, stoker, O.N. 288179
Cannon, Michael, stoker, O.N. 287712
Chivers, F. A., domestic 2nd class, O.N. 359141 (saved)
Coates, Charles E., stoker, O.N. 287706
Collins, John, stoker, O.N. 285171 (saved)
Comley, Isaac Allen, stoker, O.N. 294995
Currie, Alex, stoker, O.N. 267867
Davidson, Alexander, stoker, O.N. 286517
Edwards, George J., ship's steward, O.N. 158889
Edwards, Henry, domestic 3rd class, O.N. 100286
Farmer, Walter Edmund, stoker, O.N. 294997
Ford, William O., stoker, O.N. 287648
Gates, Frederick W., stoker, O.N. 167194
Griffiths, William, domestic 1st class, O.N. 123839
Hardy, Charles, leading stoker 3rd class, O.N. 142959
Redfern, William, stoker, O.N. 281854
Harfield, Joseph, stoker, O.N. 286016
Hayter, William A. stoker, O.N. 285465
Head, John, leading stoker 2nd class, O.N. 164211
Hoare, Edwin J., Leading signalman, O.N. 120667
Hughes, Thomas J., stoker, O.N. 282976
Hutchinson, Henry L., A.B., O.N. 131554 (saved)
Johnson, Alexander, Leading signalman O.N. ??????
Keirnan, Thomas, stoker, O.N. 278800
Kendall, William T., stoker, O.N. 294998
King, Charles, stoker, O.N. 115412
Lavender, Ernest, stoker, O.N. 356123
McGinn, Janes, stoker, O.N. 164077
Montague, Fredk P., A.B., O.N. 163360
Norton, Frederick, stoker 1st class, O.N. 132576
Osgood, Henry J., ship's cook, O.N. 136510 (saved)
Privett, Ernest, carpenter's mate, O.N. 151469 (saved)
Rose, William Edward, sick-berth steward, O.N. 138783
Sellings, Henry C., A.B., O.N. 187890
Seymour, John, stoker < O.N. 288498
Shayler, Benjamin, A.B., O.N. 168397 (saved)
Tuffrey, Leonard A.B., O.N. 172594
Turvey, Walter A.B., O.N.177308
Waldron, George, A.B., O.N. 140654
Warrener, F. H., PO 1st Class O.N. 119950 (saved)
Wassel, Thomas, stoker, O.N. 295002
Webb, Walter John, chief engine-room artificer 2nd class, O.N. 128927
Woolford, George, leading stoker 1st class, O.N. 142477
Messrs. Parsons Turbine Co. staff
Mr Robert Bernard (work’s manager), 10, Stanwick St., Tynemouth.
Edward Lee (foreman-fitter), 21, Morley St., Heaton, Newcastle.
Ralph Richardson (foreman-fitter), 40, Brighton Rd., Gateshead.
John Abel (fitter), 44, Denmark St., Heaton, Newcastle.
J. W. Webb (fitter), 9, Fifth Avenue, Heaton.
T. Boyd, 4, Blindburn St., Heaton.
Walter Bates (fitter), 20, Alice St., South Shields (saved).
J. Blacklock (fitter), 20, Second St., Bensham, Gateshead (saved).
W. T. Orton (fitter), Newcastle.
J. Hamilton, 22, Napier St., Jarrow-on-Tyne.
T. Bailbey, 56, Woodbine Avenue, Wallsend-on-Tyne.
Robert Mackenzie (seaman), 56, Westminster St., Gateshead.
J. Puncheon (apprentice-fitter), 32, Catherine St., Jarrow-on-Tyne.
George Spillett (fireman), 100, Laurel St., Wallsend-on-Tyne.
W. Ewert, 6, Artisan Terrace, Wallsend.
A Mr Dinning, an engineer from South Shields who went with the vessel for the run.
G. MacGregor (apprentice-fitter), 69, Molynoux St., Heaton.
B. Patterson (fitter), 13, School St., Bensham.
Mr Crichton (fitter) address unknown.
J. Patrick (Attendant with the electrical dynamos) Richmond St., Gateshead.
Tom Wilcox (Attendant with the electrical dynamos) Armstrong St., Bensham.
Fred Keeping, South Shields, sailed with COBRA on the Tuesday trials. Some of the latter men were involved with Messrs. Higginbottom & Co. of Newcastle who were the caterers for the voyage.

Survivors, Witnesses and Reports
Samuel Hambling, the Mate in charge of the Outer Dowsing Lightship said later that the destroyer’s approach was reported to him at 7 a.m. on 18th September and he saw the COBRA going ‘north’, but noticed how she was ‘plunging heavily’. (Mr Hambling said the vessel was going north, but by all accounts she must have been going south). Fifteen minutes later he saw steam blowing off from her third funnel and immediately after that she was enveloped in a mass of gushing-steam issuing from all parts. Mr Hambling said the destroyer’s bearing was at this time west by south from the Lightship and a distance of about 2-miles. The weather was cloudy, with the wind blowing from the north, northwest. At 7.20 a.m., he saw her settle down amidships, as if she had ‘burst’ herself and then watched her stern end sink, with about 30-feet (9.14m) of stem/bow out of the water, which then drifted south. Hambling said there was nothing he could do to render assistance, but hoisted distress signals (flags) and compass bearings, then fired four guns to a steamer passing westward, but it took no notice and sailed on. The flags were kept flying, but at 8 a.m., at a distance of 3-4-miles and bearing south by west, COBRA became stationary. Hambling said, “She was a danger to other vessels in that position and at 5 p.m. I saw a steamer go to the wreck, which was by that time 6-miles distant”. When Mr Hambling first saw the warship, he said she was some 6-miles distant and in the proper track for vessels passing up and down the coast, but when the steam was seen issuing from her, she altered course. At this point, the wind was blowing north, northwest force-6, with the flooding tide running south, southeast.
At 6.45 p.m., a steam trawler passed to the westward and the lightship crew hoisted the signal, but she did not respond. Hambling said “when the accident happened, HMS COBRA was about 4-5-miles from the light-vessel. Just then, the vessel ported her helm, which brought her round to southeast. When she settled down amidships, both ends rose up, as if attached to a hinge and they both collapsed immediately. The stern-end began to sink and as that part went down, the fore section gradually rose up. After the stern had gone down, the fore part slipped under, but with about
30-feet (9.14m) of the bows out of the water. Two of the funnels, No-2 and No-3 approached each other until they almost touched and it was at that point that the two parts of the vessel collapsed. The two funnels crunched together as the bow and stern halves both came together”.

In a report made by the COBRA’s Chief Engineer later, he said, “I remembered feeling a sharp impact, followed by the complete fracture of the hull, only two or three minutes later”. In actual fact, her back had broken across between the two after boilers and her stern section sank almost immediately. The destroyer carried a 4.27m (14-feet) dinghy, a naval-whaler (a type of boat) and three collapsible Berthon-boats. However, too many men clambered over the gunwale of the whaler and it capsized. Unfortunately, no one could assemble the Berthon collapsible boats and only the rowing-dinghy managed to get clear, with eight men onboard. They were able to haul four more men out of the sea, over the stern of the boat, but conditions were so cramped, it made it impossible to row. The little boat, full of men and up to the gunwales in freezing water, floated around in the very rough sea for eleven hours, before the steamship HARLINGTON, rescued them. Around the wreck, there were piteous cries for help when the already fully laden dinghy drew away from the scene. Bodies of the dead and dying floated everywhere and the lifebelts they wore were useless in the gale-force wind, heavy sea and freezing conditions.

Nothing more was heard from the COBRA after she left the Tyne until the disaster struck and a brief message was received at Elswick to the effect that the P & O steamer HARLINGTON had picked up twelve of the crew in a dinghy and taken them to Middlesbrough. Then a further message was received about noon, informing them that one of Mr Eustace Smith’s trawlers had recovered six of the bodies and taken them to Grimsby. The first news received by Portsmouth, was a telegram sent at 9.40 a.m. by Mr Percey, Chief Engineer of the ship to the offices of the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Superintendent and others, connected to the warship. Officers at Portsmouth, acquainted with the North Sea speculated whether that the COBRA had struck a rock or was lifted by the heavy seas onto a sandbank, but either way the result would have been the same and that she would have been a total wreck within minutes. On hearing the news, the Admiralty immediately dispatched the cruiser ST. GEORGE and torpedo-boat-destroyers JASEUR, ANGLER and MALLARD to the scene. HMS ANGLER and MALLARD left Sheerness at 2 p.m. on Thursday and arrived at the scene of the disaster that evening, having made rapid passage from the Medway. However, ST. GEORGE, ANGLER and MALLARD returned to Sheerness and JASEUR to Portsmouth on the Saturday, having been unsuccessful in finding any of the missing men.

King Edward sent a telegram to the Admiralty, acknowledging receipt of the terribly sad news at the loss of the COBRA and directing, that his Majesty’s deepest and most heartfelt sympathy be expressed to the relatives of those lost.

Survivor’s reports:
A survivor, who was brought ashore at Middlesbrough from the HARLINGTON said, “We struck at half-past seven on Wednesday morning. The sea was high and there was a nasty cross-sea. The COBRA began to roll very heavily in the middle watch about 4 o’clock. It was about sunrise. I went up on deck to see what was the matter. The vessel continued to roll and then suddenly struck the shoal and the waves in a moment broke over her. Alarmed by the force of the shock, every man came on deck. Some of the men were in their berths at the time and had no time to dress themselves. The seas began to roll over the forecastle and a few moments later, the COBRA broke in two, fore and aft. Someone gave the order to clear the boats away, but I do not know whom, but I had already commenced to do this. There was a whaler and a dinghy on board and three collapsible boats. Some difficulty was experienced with the latter and I do not know if they were got out or not. The whaler and the dinghy were got out, but I think the latter was swamped. She did not take the water right. I myself cut the dinghy free and as the after part of the vessel was rising, I could see there was no hope of remaining on her and launched the
dinghy. Directly she was in the water, several men boarded her from the ship. Most of the remainder of the crew jumped into the sea from fear of being taken down in the vortex, as no one knew the depth of water around. Besides every moment an explosion from the boilers was feared. Several fortunate fellows however, stayed on board till the end. Everything seemed to happen so quickly that I cannot tell how long we were before we got clear of the ship and wreckage, but I think it would be about five-minutes. As we moved away from the COBRA we picked up a number of men who were in the water until we had none on board. Chief Engineer Percey was the last of the nine. Three other men hung onto the side of the dinghy for three hours before we dare bring them in, owing to the rough sea and the danger of swamping the boat, which was built to hold eight. I had, however thrown all the tackle overboard that was not absolutely necessary and we had remaining two sculls and two oars. As we rowed away from the vessel we kept passing the bodies of drowned men and I feared that all of the crew and contractor's men, except those in the dinghy perished. Lifebelts were no use. We rowed on all day, but we were unable to make much headway for fear of being swamped. We endeavoured to get in the track of steamers and I tried to attract attention by waving a stoker's towel at the end of a boat hook. Several steamers passed by without even noticing us. At length, after a weary and trying ten hours in an open boat, we were rescued by the P & O steamer HARLINGTON.”

Crewman stoker John Collins, O.N. 285171, stated: “I was on duty in the stokehold when the vessel struck. The water began to pour in almost immediately and coming into contact with the boilers, caused clouds of steam to rise. Rushing up on deck in my trousers and singlet, accompanied by other men who were below, a thrilling spectacle met my gaze. Waves were breaking over the doomed ship, and men with cries and shouts were making in a body for the ship’s whaler. Hastily snatching a lifebelt, I went in the same direction and found a place in the boat. Others tumbled in one on the other without regard to the appealing cries of those already in the boat warning them that the boat would be overturned. I estimated that 40-50 men had rushed into the boat, with the result that it overturned and we were thrown into the raging sea. I found that my leg had been injured in the overturning, but I struck out for the dinghy and clung to the stern with two others. The occupants dared not take me on board until calmer water had been reached and it was fully an hour afterwards that I was dragged in, thoroughly exhausted and unable to hold on any longer. I was the last man to be taken into the dinghy. Meanwhile the unfortunate men who had been thrown into the sea from the whaler struggled hard for dear life, but with many of them, the struggle was in vain. Numbers of them were already floating on the water, dead, notwithstanding the lifebelts they wore, for those waves rendered the lifebelts useless. One man who belonged to Messrs Parson’s Works, was heard to cry out just as the waves closed over him,” Oh my God, my wife and children”. Other of the whaler’s victims were sucked in under the vessel and speedily drowned”.

The Days following the Sinking
Fishing boats were recovering bodies of the dead for weeks after the accident. On one occasion, on 15th October, the body of a sailor wearing a singlet, but with no number attached was sighted about 10-miles from the Hasborough Lightship, by the captain of the Sunderland registered steamer EIDER, which was bound for Ramsgate with a cargo of coal. Members of the crew put off in the ship’s boat and found the body, which was in a very decomposed condition. The body, which was undoubtedly one of the crew of HMS COBRA, was committed to the sea again. (This was a course of action that would not be allowed to happen today).

The sunken bow section of the ill-fated destroyer was eventually located by the Neptune Salvage Company’s vessel HERAKLES and a Swedish diver working from her made a number of dives on the bow/fore part and examined it. He reported that “she lay in 15-fathoms (27.43m), with her bottom up and none of her hull-plates
stove-in. She was broke in half close to one of the boilers with jagged ends of metal, however the stern section was not found within 60-feet of the wreck”. However, he did find an indentation in the keel-plate of about an inch (2.54cm) deep and extending for about a foot (30.48cm) in the immediate neighbourhood of the jagged rent, which divided the halves”. The stern has never been found to-date, either.

The merchant steamship OAKWELL later reported that she had steamed over some floating timbers about 6-miles northeast from the Dudgeon Light-vessel and said it could have possibly been from a wreck. Striking a submerged wreck or a shoal were other reasons, which could have caused the warship to sink, according to some official people at the time.

Out of all those men on board, just twelve survived and, having sent many of their best skilled men on the trip, it was a crippling blow to Parsons Turbine Co. There was a public outcry on Tyneside following the loss, which forced a Court of Inquiry. Tests made by Wolf, also concluded that the vessel was structurally unsound when she put to sea. Although Parsons turbine engines were in no way to blame, it was ironic that two similar vessels driven by the new-fangled turbine engines were lost within a few weeks of each other.

By 15th November 1901, £4,992-16s- 4d had been raised for the Cobra Disaster Tyneside Fund and this was before the receipts from the concert on 20th November. There was also a collection at the football match between Middlesbrough and Newcastle United on 23rd October that raised £79- 3s-6 d, as well as a variety of collections and from events across Tyneside.

The Court Martial Hearing

The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Bosworth Smith RN (deceased) was held on board the VICTORY at Portsmouth, under the Presidency of Rear Admiral Pelham Aldrich in mid October 1901. The Court found that she did not touch ground or meet with any obstruction and that her loss was not due to any error of navigation, thus vindicating Lt. Smith, who went down with the ship. The Court conveyed a message to his relatives and friends ‘the highest consolation that it is in human power to give’. The court also found that the loss of the COBRA was due to structural weaknesses and that she was weaker than other destroyers. No blame was attached to the Chief Engineer Mr Percey or to any of the other survivors.

Three experts, who were called to give evidence at the Hearing, were: a Government servant, an independent person from a private company and a designer and builder of ships. They were in fact the helmsman, the diver and Mr P. Watts, Esq. The designer, Mr Watts stated that “the vessel did not collapse from wave motion alone, that she was relatively stronger at the section where she parted than at a similar section nearer the middle point of the ship. Also that the section of the plating was weaker, or had less expansive strength on each side of the fracture at the frames than at the actual section of the parted hull, showing that neither hogging nor sagging could account for the disaster”. Secondly, the evidence of the helmsman at the time shows that he received orders “to put the helm hard-a-starboard, after which he was steering east with the wind northwest”, or thereabouts, in nautical terms, “on the quarter”. He then received orders “to again put helm hard-a-starboard” with both engines going ahead at what was considered a very high rate of knots. The result of this would be to bring the full force of the wind on the beam or broadside, and ultimately on the bow, “but the vessel only came up northeast. Consequently the wind was on the beam in full force with rough seas”. He then received orders to “stop port engine and go ahead starboard”, but still the vessel refused to come round and fell back to east. Both engines were then ordered “slow speed ahead”; soon afterwards the COBRA seemed to be on a pivot and the captain ordered the boats out. Mr Watts stated that: “now if we consider what the effect of such an evolution would have on this lightly built ship of great length, relative to her amidships section, we may be unable to draw a reasonable inference.
as to the excessive and abnormal strains brought upon this lightly built structure at a very crucial moment of the disaster”. He went on to say that “to put a helm hard over under favourable circumstances when a vessel is at a moderate speed, brings considerable strain on the ship at both ends and in this case, the ship was heading east, with strong wind northwest, with heavy seas running. An attempt was made to alter course suddenly, so by putting the helm hard starboard, the effect of which was to bring the wind full on the beam and, consequently, with the rough sea, it offered an almost rigid obstacle. These actions resulted in excessive and abnormal stresses on the structure in the lateral direction”.

The Wreck up until Today
After all these years, the circumstances of her loss are still debated even today. In a reassessment of the loss of HMS COBRA in 1985, the transactions of Royal Institution of Naval Architects showed that the most likely cause was structural weakness of the deck under compression (in other words buckling), leading to break-up in waves. Authors in the report included world experts in ship-structures, like Prof. D. Faulkner and (the late) Dr. C. S. Smith.

Foot-note
It may be helpful to take notes from this information for anyone wishing to search for the stern section, or even the bows, which are not guaranteed to be where they are said to be.

The Outer Dowsing Light-vessel at the time was moored at co-ordinates: N53 27 00 E01 05 06 and it was 1½-hours before high-water when the depth of water would have been about 24.38m (80-feet). Now there is no Outer Dowsing Light-vessel, but the head of the shoal some 6-7-miles to the north, is marked by the North Outer Dowsing Light buoy and approach to the channel by the Dowsing Light-vessel on the west side of the channel, not the east side.

The Swedish diver examined the bow/fore section of the wreck in 1901 and reported that it was in 15-fathoms (27-28-metres). The wreck suggested for the bows is in 38m, a considerable difference in depths!!! Samuel Hambling, Mate from the Lightship said the COBRA was about 2-miles west by south from the Lightship when he saw steam coming from her. Then the bow/fore section drifted 3-4-miles and even 6-miles distance when he saw a steamer going to it. There was a north, northwest force-6 wind blowing and the tide was flooding, running south, southeast, so the wreck would have been blown and drifted, more or less in the same direction at quite a speed, before coming to rest. Another important point to remember is that the vessel was 64m by length and broke in two halves about amidships and between No-2 and No-3 funnels, so both halves would have been about the same size, 32-metres each. Until someone has dived on the two wrecks, we will be all just presuming?