

1931: The Invergordon mutiny



A short account of a strike by a thousand sailors of the Royal Navy that occurred in Northern Scotland in 1931 against proposed wage cuts.

The government attempted to suppress all memory of the strike, and although the strikers won partial concessions, the cuts were still imposed and many sailors were punished for taking part.

Britain of 1931 was in the first throws of the Great Depression. Economic stagnation had led to mass unemployment with the number of people out of work having more than doubled to 2.5 million during the previous year alone, homelessness was rife, and those who still had work were faced with enormous pay cuts. The heavy burden of retaining the prestige of British capitalism was placed upon the back of the working class, and millions of people were facing head-on the blunt misery the Depression was to throw upon them for years to come.

The government, wishing to create savings in public spending, put forward a series of pay cuts to be enforced in the public sector, including cuts to the Armed Forces. On the advice of a government committee appointed to identify areas in which public spending could be cut, new pay rates were put forward for the Royal Navy. Officers, NCOs and those who had joined after 1925 were to receive a cut of 10% and ratings below the rank of petty officer who had joined before 1925 would have their pay reduced to a new rate, in most cases this amounted to a 25% cut in pay. Recruitment to the navy was particularly high in large industrial centres which were experiencing massive unemployment, and, faced with the hardships of the time, these cuts essentially condemned many sailors and their families to poverty.

Rumours of the pay cuts had been circulating around sailors of the Atlantic Fleet by early September, while the fleet was on maneuvers in the North Sea. These rumours were soon confirmed when the group of ten warships docked on the 11th on the Cromarty Firth in northern Scotland. Taking leave in the nearby town of Invergordon, the sailors became fully aware of the extent of the cuts from newspaper reports, and later from confirmation from the Admiralty. Recognising the disastrous effects that these cuts would have upon themselves and their families, especially for those facing a 25% loss of pay, the sailors became convinced that positive action was needed.

Agitation amongst the crews began almost immediately and on the evening of the 12th a group of sailors held a meeting on a football field in Invergordon and voted in favour of a strike. Singing the Red Flag, the men left to spread the news among the others and to make preparations for the action. Several meetings were held in a canteen in Invergordon on the 13th with hundreds of sailors in attendance, many climbing on tables to make impromptu speeches in favour of the strike. Upon hearing of the meetings, fleet commanders dispatched patrols of marines to break up the meetings and shut the canteen down early, which they did, although more speeches were made on the pier and on the decks of ships as sailors returned,

many ignoring orders to disperse. Four more warships docked on the 14th and meetings were conducted throughout the day, with crews from the newly arrived ships taking part. Marines were dispatched again in the evening after reports of "disorderliness" on shore reached Rear Admiral Wilfrid Tomkinson, temporary commander of the fleet at the time.

The strike was to take place on the 15th, a day designated for practice maneuvers. When ordered to put to sea that morning the commanding officers of four of the ships were met with flat refusal from their crews. The crews of HMS Hood, the fleet's flagship, and HMS Nelson carried out harbour duties but refused to put to sea, and the crews of HMS Valiant and HMS Rodney carried out essential duties only and simply ignored other orders. Sailors gathered on their ship's decks, cheering and using semaphore signals to indicate to each other that the strike was in effect. Only four ships had put to sea, and three had to return to dock after several hours for lack of crew members who were willing to obey orders. Sailors conducted further meetings on decks with regular intervals of singing, a piano being dragged on deck from an officer's quarters on one ship as an accompaniment. The strikers were joined by many Royal Marines, essentially the police force of the Navy who were usually expected to break up disturbances such as this, and some Petty Officers. Over a thousand men had taken part in the strike, and it was successful in forcing the fleet commanders to abandon plans for the maneuvers. Tomkinson telegraphed the Admiralty in the afternoon explaining the situation and insisted that any restoration of order would be impossible without immediate concessions to the strikers.

An Admiral Colvin was dispatched by Tomkinson on the morning of the 15th, with the job of taking the sailor's grievances to the Admiralty. Not expecting a reply for several days and wishing to halt the spread of the mutiny, Tomkinson ordered concessions to the strikers. These included extending marriage allowances to sailors under the age of 25, and that those on lower rates of pay could remain on the old rate, effectively cancelling the 25% pay cut in favour of a universal 10% cut. These allowances were accepted by the government and the Admiralty, and although not completely cancelling out the pay cuts, were largely accepted by the strikers. They had won a small victory. Ships were ordered to put to sea and return to their home ports on the evening of the 15th, which they did more or less without incident.

A highly embarrassing incident for the Admiralty and the government, and fearing repeats of the mutiny from other sections of the armed forces, attempts were made to suppress any record or public knowledge of the strike at Invergordon. The government refused to hold an inquiry, public court martials for strikers were forbidden and the Atlantic Fleet was renamed the Home Fleet. Strikers were punished out of the public eye however, many were jailed, and many more punished in barracks and then dispersed throughout the Navy. The backlash of the strike was not just confined to the forces. The offices of the Daily Worker, the Communist Party newspaper which had lent its full support to the strikers, and indeed one of the few newspapers to report on the strike, were raided. Its printer, business manager and a member of its editorial board were arrested under the Incitement to Mutiny Act. News of the strike did, however, reach some sections of the population, and it preceeded and most probably acted as an inspiration to a massive demonstration in London against public sector cuts, as well as marches and riots of 50,000 and 30,000 members of the Unemployed Workers Movement in Glasgow and Manchester respectively.

While not completely halting the tide of pay cuts that was to affect the Navy, the daring and well organised actions of the strikers, not to mention the massive show of solidarity and comradeship shown between them, certainly lessened the impact of the cuts and should be remembered as a proud chapter in the long history of mutiny and rebellion in the Royal Navy.