



The Wreck of the HMS Birkenhead: The History of the British Royal Navy's Most Notorious 19th Century Shipwreck

Charles River Editors

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- *Includes pictures of the wreck
- *Includes accounts of the wreck written by survivors
- *Includes a bibliography for further reading
- *Includes a table of contents

“In memory of Lieut.-Colonel Alexander Seton, Ensign Alex. C. Russell, and forty-eight N.C.O.s and men of the 74th Highlanders who were drowned at the wreck of H.M.S. 'Birkenhead' on the 26th February 1852, off Point Danger, Cape of Good Hope, after all the women and children on board had been safely landed in the ship's boats.” – The inscription on a memorial in St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, Scotland

“To take your chance in the thick of a rush, with firing all about,
Is nothing so bad when you've cover to 'and, an' leave an' likin' to shout;
But to stand an' be still to the Birken'ead drill is a damn tough bullet to chew,
An' they done it, the Jollies -- 'Er Majesty's Jollies -- soldier an' sailor too!
Their work was done when it 'adn't begun; they was younger nor me an' you;
Their choice it was plain between drownin' in 'eaps an' bein' mopped by the screw,
So they stood an' was still to the Birken'ead drill, soldier an' sailor too” – Rudyard Kipling, “Soldier an' Sailor Too”

In an emergency, it is a common practice to attempt to evacuate women and children first, not simply because they're the most vulnerable but because it's an established code of honor that has been passed down from generations. This is especially the case in situations where there aren't enough resources to rescue everyone, and this concept has been made famous by disasters such as the sinking of the Titanic, which didn't have enough lifeboats on board for everyone.

Although the “women and children first” rule might seem like common nature and a practice that has been observed for centuries, it was actually popularized by the 1852 shipwreck of the Royal Navy troopship HMS Birkenhead, one of Britain's worst maritime disasters. Originally designed as a frigate, the Birkenhead had only been in service for a handful of years and was being used to transport soldiers in South Africa when it struck an uncharted rock in the early morning hours of February 26 and wrecked a few miles from shore.

At the time, it was not a standard practice to carry enough lifeboats for everyone on board (a regulation that would not come until after the sinking of the Titanic), and the Birkenhead would go down within just 20 minutes of hitting the rock. While the men on board took orders and attempted to pump out the water, it was clear that passengers would have to get in lifeboats quickly. As they did so, one person on board the doomed ship remembered, "Almost everybody kept silent, indeed nothing was heard, but the kicking of the horses and the orders of Salmond, all given in a clear firm voice."

Worried that subsequent attempts to get into lifeboats would inadvertently capsize them and cause an even greater calamity, the men who stayed on board while the women and children were evacuated instead went

down with the ship and then tried to swim to shore, a daunting prospect that only a few were able to survive. Of the nearly 650 people on the ship, less than 200 survived, with the rest drowning, dying of exposure to the elements, or being devoured by sharks.

Despite the disaster, it was commemorated by the British due to the chivalry of the men on board, which not only set a precedent but was cited as a martial ideal for other Royal Navy sailors to emulate. The Wreck of the HMS Birkenhead chronicles the notorious shipwreck and its legacy. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the shipwreck of the Birkenhead like never before, in no time at all.

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