

I was at the helm when *Preussen* ran aground

Rolf Warming

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Preussen, built in Germany in 1902, was the largest sailing ship of her time and, until the launch of the *Royal Clipper* in 2000, was the only five-masted, full-rigged ship ever built. Known as the 'Queen of the Queens of the Seas' to seamen, she was one of the last great sailing ships. She sailed around the world shipping cargo from Europe to South America and back, setting several speed records in the process. She was severely damaged in the English Channel on an outward journey in 1910, when she collided with a steamer. Despite the relentless efforts of the crew to keep her afloat, she was eventually abandoned after having ran aground beneath the cliffs at Dover. Christian Friedrich Warming, a young and ambitious Dane, was employed as Able Seaman aboard and acted as helmsman when she ran aground (Fig. 1).

C.F. Warming (1890-1988) was born into a traditional seafaring family who had earned their living in maritime affairs for generations.¹ Christian Friedrich's grandfather was a fisherman whose work often led him to whaling off the coast of Greenland. His father, Christian Peder, was a skipper and an accomplished shipwright who, along with other members of the family, built several galeases, yawls and sloops, some of which were employed in the family's small shipping business. Christian Friedrich and his two brothers assisted in the building of some of these boats, dragging heavy oak timbers across the icy fjord during the winter by sheer manpower. Christian Friedrich was the youngest of the three sons and, naturally, followed in the footsteps of his father and brothers. They were all committed to a life at sea from a very early age, starting their seafaring careers as young teenagers. Like his brothers, Christian Friedrich first sailed with his father as skipper on smaller boats which were primarily involved in the brick shipping industry. Driven by his ambitions and the spirit of adventure, he soon left the small shipping industry to join the larger ships that sailed from Hamburg. In doing so, he

¹ C.F. Warming was my great grandfather.

embarked on a long and successful career at sea, sailing as seaman, helmsman and eventually ship's master. There are many family tales stemming from his long life at sea, ranging from dealing with crew mutiny to throwing a Nazi-German Consul overboard in the harbor of Santos in April 1940.² Among these many experiences, which offer insight into both the mundane and dramatic aspects of seafaring life in the early 1900s, there is a collection of memoirs that have been particularly cherished in the family, stemming from his time aboard the *Preussen*.

These newly translated memoirs presented here offer a detailed first-hand account of the demise of the *Preussen*, which demonstrate the crew's admiration for the ship and their dedication to save her.³ A version originally appeared in the short-lived Danish journal *Søens Verden* (Warming 1961). This story provides a voice for the many traditional seafaring families who were caught up in a rapidly changing world and witnessed the disappearance of the last great sailing ships in the beginning of the 1900s. C.F. Warming, like many others, had to find employment aboard the oceangoing steamers if he was to make a living at sea. His account of the *Preussen*, the last great sailing ship on which he was employed, reflects his sentiments on these technological developments. The wreck of the *Preussen* still lies beneath the chalk cliffs of Dover where she was stranded, although there is little left of her now.

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² Reported in *The Times*, 27 April 1940, with the headline 'Danish "Ducking" for German Consul'

³ Translated by Rolf Christian Warming & Barry Bradley-Young.



Figure 1. Ship's Master C.F. Warming on the bridge of *Egyptian Reefer*, returning to Copenhagen at the end of the Second World War after 6 years overseas. Copenhagen, 12 December 1945. (Author's collection)

I was born and raised in a seafaring family on the Flensburg Fjord. As a youngster, I had already decided that I wanted to go to sea, so that I could enter navigation school and become a chief officer. My older brothers and cousins had first sailed for a year or two in smaller boats, then with a Marstal or Svendborg schooner, and then continued in the great sailing ships from Hamburg. It was this lifestyle I hankered after. I started by making three short summer voyages with my father in

the small shipping industry. In winter these vessels were laid up for some months. Then came a trip on the barquentine *Hansigne* of Marstal from Hamburg to Maracaibo and back where I sailed as an Ordinary Seaman.

Next I sailed aboard the bark *Tellus* as Able Seaman, outward bound from Hamburg with a cargo for three ports in Chile, returning with saltpetre to Falmouth where we were to receive our orders. We unloaded in Dunkirk but after discharging the cargo we went back to Hamburg where I went in search of a more modern ship. The *Tellus* was somewhat old-fashioned in design and for me it was all about getting as good an education as possible. For young would-be mates of the day, an apprenticeship aboard one of the Hamburg sailing ships was highly coveted.

My next ship was the four-masted barque *Pamir* of Hamburg, a fully modern sailing ship, just four years old, which belonged to the firm of Laeisz. She was tied up at Antwerp but due to the bad times in shipping it was made a precondition that the crew members should themselves pay for the outward passage from Hamburg, otherwise new hands would be sought for in Antwerp. The ship was to take cargo from Antwerp to Valparaiso and Iquique, and then return to Hamburg with Chilean saltpetre.

By that time, I had spent the necessary sea time aboard a sailing ship, but still lacked about seven months service as an Able Seaman to get into navigation school. I tried a short trip on the steamer *Baghdad* to the Mediterranean but that did not appeal to me, so I signed off on my return to Hamburg. The barquentine *Carla* of Marstal, which was loading for Rio Grande, needed an Able Seaman. It seemed suitable to me but when I had been aboard for a day I was told that it was going to be away for three years, sailing between Australia and New Zealand. This did not fit in with my plans, so I signed off and got my papers. On the way ashore, I met one of my old shipmates from the *Pamir*. He said that he was aboard the *Preussen* and that they probably still needed Able Seamen. We hurried along to the Agent's office. I asked if by any chance they needed seamen aboard the *Preussen* and was told they were looking for an Able Seaman who had already served aboard any of the Laeisz sailing ships. Since my papers showed that I met the requirements, I was told to meet at the medical examination at nine o'clock the following morning. As agreed, I met up for the examination and was subsequently signed on the same morning, 10 October 1910.



Figure 2. The world's only five-masted, full rigged ship. (Courtesy of the German Maritime Museum)

On that same afternoon, I went aboard the *Preussen* which was tied to the mooring piles in the sailing ship dock with sails flapping and just about everything ready to go. It was like a dream come true. The *Preussen* with her five fully rigged masts was a magnificent sight to behold. She wore upper and lower topsails and topgallants. Since she was the only fully rigged ship with five masts in the world, one of the masts had a special name in honor of the owners. From the bow aft, the masts came to be called the fore-mast, main-mast, middle-mast, Laiesz-mast, and the mizzen-mast. Everything was so conveniently placed and as mechanical as possible, all for the express purpose of working the ship. All halyards from the square sails were led down to hand-winches which could haul in and pay out. The

braces for the lower yards were led down to brace winches and any slack could be taken up by crab winches under the pinrails. The sheets and tacks of the lower sails could be pulled taut by deck capstans, fitted at a suitable distance outboard. In the boiler-house behind the foremast there were two donkey boilers to supply steam to the anchor capstan and windlass, and deck winches.

The living quarters for the ship's company, both officers and crew, were situated in the superstructure amidships, which also housed the navigating bridge. At the centre of the superstructure was a very spacious chart room with access to the officers' quarters. In front of the deckhouse was the steering station with the ship's double wheel for manual steering. The binnacle was situated just ahead of the wheel and a little abaft the middle-mast with its belaying points and traditional pin rail around its base. Ahead of the main-mast was its brace winch, and a skylight over the galley; then came a passage with free access from one side of the ship to the other.

The aft half of the superstructure contained the accommodation for the ship's officers. On the starboard side was the captain's private quarters with a large saloon amidships after which there came a continuous fore-and-aft passage. In addition, on the port hand side were the officers' cabins with that of the Chief Officer positioned abaft. In the forward half of the superstructure on the port side were cabins for the boatswains, ship's artificers and the cook. Amidships was the galley and on the starboard side there were two large cabins for the rest of the crew. There were also some cabins in the poop aft, one of which was the ship's hospital.

The whole crew normally consisted of 48 men, divided as follows: captain, 3 mates, 2 boatswains, 1 carpenter, 1 blacksmith, 1 cook, 1 cabin steward, 18 Able Seamen, 12 Ordinary Seamen, and 8 boys. There were also two passengers making the trip - a marine artist and a navigation instructor. The crew was divided into two watches which were sub-divided into 4 men per mast. If there was neither mate nor boatswain to take charge of a mast, an Able Seaman was appointed 'Senior Man'. I was the 'Senior Man' for the middle-mast. My crew consisted of a young Able Seaman, an ordinary seaman and a boy. I was proud to be appointed; it was an acknowledgement of me being a fully-fledged leading hand. The entire time spent at sea under sail was an extension of Navigation School. By that time, nearly all the large sailing ships were training ships carrying cargo of one kind or another.

The crews - mostly young men wanting to gain experience - had to provide proof of at least 12 months sea-time to work as an Able Seaman aboard a sailing ship.

On Sunday 30 October, the *Preussen* was towed from the sailing ship dock, *Segelschiffshafen*, to the mooring piles outside Vorsetzen. The ship, being fully laden with cargo, lay low in the water, bound for Valparaiso and Iquique. In the process of leaving the docks and entering the river, she went aground on the mud flats. The tugs - four in total, I believe - had some difficulty in getting her off, but eventually they succeeded.

The next morning, Monday 31 October 1910, the tug *President de Leeuw* of Rotterdam arrived and joined the *Preussen* on the tide for what would be her last voyage. The tug had been especially contracted to tow the *Preussen* across the North Sea to the English Channel.

In the North Sea, the wind was from the west and the square sails were thus of little use; occasionally, however, the staysails could be set. When the wind backed to starboard, so that the yards could be braced fully round, the sails were hoisted and hauled down again when the wind veered. One night when they had to be set, my right hand man was nowhere to be found. All the yelling and calling for him was in vain. Meanwhile, the other masts had their sails set. I told my Ordinary Seaman and the boy to forget the sails until I found the hand in question. When he turned up, he was punished by having to haul the sails alone. I asked where he had been and got the answer that he had been amongst the others on the after deck; that is how they had always skived in the training ship on which he had previously served. However, the *Preussen* was by no means over-manned and there was no room for slackers.

The tow across the North Sea was undertaken without any greater difficulties. As Dungeness was passed on Saturday 5 November, more sail was gradually got on. The wind was about NNW, so now the square sails could be set. In the afternoon before dusk, the tug was discharged and disappeared eastward up the Channel.

All sails were set, and during the night the deck was cleared and everything stowed away. The voyage had only just begun, and we looked forward to the following day, Sunday, where we could enjoy being under sail aboard the great ship. The *Royal Sovereign* lightship and Beachy Head lights were passed during the evening's run. Towards the changing of the watch, I went with several friends to the starboard side of the aft deck. The weather was hazy as it so often is in the English Channel.

Suddenly, two top-mast lights hove into sight, somewhat across in front of the starboard bow. It advanced rapidly and we briefly discussed whether the steamer would cross ahead or behind us. When the foremost masthead light had disappeared behind the forward sails, I just managed to say, 'It will pass in front' – but, instantaneously, there was an almighty bang. The ship heeled over to starboard and straightened up again.

The fact was that we had collided. Of that there was no doubt, although the steamer went off to port. From the aft deck we could not see how much damage had been done but we knew straight away that it was serious. Immediately, commands rang out for various sailing manoeuvres. The collision occurred just before the change of watch and both watches were on deck ready for the handover. After a short while, the steamer returned and hove to at hailing distance. It turned out to be the British passenger steamer *Brighton* which was heading towards France on its route between Newhaven and Dieppe. Captain Nissen asked for a tug to be sent out to us, but he believed that the ship would survive the collision. The steamer then sailed back to Newhaven.

Aboard the *Preussen*, we were busy taking in sail; lower, topgallants and royals were fastened. The ship was put on a starboard tack that countered the wind and brought the ship almost to a standstill. Thus we lay until daylight, when the full extent of the damage could be assessed.

It did not look well up there in the front. Our jib-boom was severely damaged and lay at an angle of approximately 70° to port. It was still attached, but only just, to a plate on the port bow. All the jib-boom stays were torn from their fixing points on the starboard bow. The stem was twisted and the bow plates sprung down to below the load line. The fore peak was full of water but the watertight bulkhead was holding. The steamer had two funnels. Our jib-boom pierced the first, tearing a large hole in the after part, and the second funnel and mainmast were carried away. All the damage appeared to be on the port side; the davits, lifeboats, and railings - a tangle of twisted metal and splintered wood. Miraculously, nobody was injured.

After dawn on Sunday morning, the *Preussen* was worn round and, with her sails set, a course was laid in to take her eastward. The wind freshened and began to gust, blowing hard from the SW, and then it started to rain too. Captain Nissen's intention was to sail the ship back to Hamburg. In the afternoon we made good speed. The tug *John Bull*, which the steamer had sent out to us, followed at some distance. As we approached Dungeness, the German tug *Albatros*, came

within hailing distance. Captain Nissen was advised to anchor behind Dungeness, so that the signal station on shore could be contacted and instructions sought from the shipping company.

I was helmsman at this time and heard the conversation. It was to the effect that there were calm waters behind the lighthouse and the *Albatros* had anchored there shortly beforehand. Following this conversation, the captain decided to anchor in the shelter of Dungeness. Sail was reduced and adjusted for anchoring. As soon as we reached the anchorage, the port anchor was let go first. It struck bottom and held. Sparks flew off the chain stoppers – so the men told us later - and the chains jumped over the windlass, running out in their entirety and tearing the tump from the keelson with the sound of an explosion. The starboard anchor was then let go - but the same thing happened here. Anchoring under staysails, the ship had driven round so that it now lay with the battered bow to the south. Since both anchors were lost, the German tug threw a hawser aboard and was ordered to tow the *Preussen* to Hamburg.

The pilot cutter from Dover and London, stationed off Dungeness, sent a boat with two pilots aboard. They had a long conversation with Captain Nissen regarding the situation and suggested that the ship was to be taken into Dover where it was possible to moor it to the buoys in the outer harbour. In this situation - with damaged headgear, forepeak flooded and anchors lost - it was only natural that Dover was chosen.

The tug *John Bull* was now hailed to come alongside and was instructed to carry a message to the *Albatros*, countermanding the previous order and confirming that we should now be towed into Dover. Then the tug returned and put their own hawser aboard. Bringing the ship around was difficult but we managed it. Subsequently, a course was laid in for Dover. In order to avoid the risk of the ship being carried onto the piers, the intention was to take her into the harbour by the eastern entrance so that she could be brought head to wind.

But the wind was gusting and the seas were sharp. The tugs could not cope when we were to sway up against the wind. The *Preussen* now lay with her broadside on to the wind, taking the full force of the gale on her port. Despite both tugs working at a maximum, all three vessels were drifting slowly towards the shore. A small tug came out from Dover and got a hawser from the poop, beginning to assist on the lee side of the ship. It did help but unfortunately there was not enough time. To avoid pushing the tug into the surf, the hawser had to be cast off.

About the same time, one of the wire hawsers ahead snapped, after which the other on board was cast off.

The ship was then struck by the first jolt from a severe impact. It seemed as if everything would come down, blocks and yards alike. With the bow facing the shore, the ship remained afloat for a while yet. The lower topsails were hastily braced aback to drive the ship astern. It failed. We soon began to bump heavily on the rocks on the foreshore.

The time at which the ship struck was Sunday night at 16.50. I can remember it because fifteen minutes earlier one of the passengers and I were speculating about when the ship would go aground, and our guess turned out to be exact. He had been put on the helm with me, so we had the opportunity to note the time and talk to each other. Captain Nissen – who, despite the rainy weather, had been walking with his sou'wester in his hands for a while - finally gave orders to lash the helm, so 'it can not come to beat', he said. Proud *Preussen*; her sailing days were over.

All hands were ordered to make for the fo'c'sle as far forward as possible. Here we stood by and waited in case the foremast broke and came down. It was still standing but each time the ship grounded, it swayed like a whip in a peasant's cart. I asked the first Mate Jürs if he did not think it was better for us to stay on the poop; the mizzen-mast was the smallest and had all its stays and shrouds intact. He pointed out that the fore-mast had no fastenings in front and, if it fell, it could bring down the following mast and then the next, and so on and so forth.

At 8 o'clock in the evening, the foremast fractured at the top, snapping where the lower and topmasts joined. As the top-mast fell, there was a tremendous screech of tearing metal and the whole crew let out a spontaneous cheer. It was a great relief to be free of everything that swayed and rattled up there. The masts were made of steel right up to the button on the truck and likewise the yards.

The break occurred at a point where there would be no danger of anything else coming down. The topgallant sail yard had reached the port rail and broke there. The royal-yard had completely disappeared. The upper topsail yard came to stick through the shrouds, transversely above the boiler house, and extended beyond the starboard side. Directly above this, the lower topsail yard extended from beyond the port side and stuck out through the shrouds on the starboard side, still clinging onto the broken mast by the halyard. The fractured mast hung on to a twisted steel plate above. On the deck below lay a chaotic tangle of spars and rigging that had come crashing down.

We were now told to go down below under the fo'c'sle where there was shelter from the wind and rain. I went to the cabin to change my clothes. Although I had been in oilskins all day, I was soaked through to the skin. I changed completely and put on the best clothes I had. On top of this, I put on a dry set of oilskins and then joined the rest of the crew under the fo'c'sle. 'I've put on dry clothes now and it's a lot more comfortable', I said to a friend of mine. One of the boys who was standing nearby said in a pitiful voice, 'I would also like to change but I cannot get there.' I took him on my back through the tangle of rigging and spars that had crashed down and went with him to the cabin. As soon as he had changed, we both made our way back forward to our shipmates under the fo'c'sle.

Meanwhile, some victuals had appeared. We were very hungry because there had been no opportunity to get anything to eat since dinner. With a great lump of bread in one hand and a chunk of ham in the other, we stood or sat and ate with a voracious appetite.

Then to the pumps. We worked with both steam pumps and hand pumps. The hand pumps were of the twin cylinder type with a flywheel that was cranked round a great many times. But it was hopeless. In the evening I accompanied the carpenter to sound the water levels in the holds and bottom tanks. Tubes for sounding the water level in several locations were up to around a foot above the deckhead, so it was clear that the ship's bottom had already been breached.

When we started, the carpenter asked me how much water I thought was in the ship. I guessed and said, 'It must almost be full because she doesn't cut into the rocks anymore.' There appeared to be up to 16 feet of water in the wreck. After that the pumping stopped. The crew gathered again under the fo'c'sle deck, with a few taking refuge in the cabins on the starboard side. At high tide, the sea swamped the port side from the after edge of the fo'c'sle, along the foredeck above the gunnels and the superstructure amidships. It was, however, possible to move around on the deck at will during low tide.

The stranded *Preussen* was kept illuminated throughout the whole night by searchlights from within Dover harbour. A tug with a lifeboat in tow also stood by all night and the following day, but, naturally, kept out of the surf. The next day the wind was still blowing a full gale. More tugs and salvage vessels stood by to render assistance, amongst them the *President de Leeuw* that had towed the *Preussen* to the Channel. On the third day, the storm abated and we left the ship in our own boats. We were towed to Dover where the rest of the crew were staying at the

Seamen's Home. Weather permitting, there was always a boat out to the stranded ship in the mornings.

A production company came out to film the event on one of the first days we were aboard the wreck. However, since we were only a small party of seamen, they put some film people in oilskins and climbed up into the shrouds. It was a pitiful sight for a seaman to behold.

Amongst the tugs and salvage vessels present there was also the Danish salvage tug *Viking*, belonging to Svitzer. On a calm day, they came alongside and put four hoses into the holds in an attempt to pump out the ship. The Danish salvage people told me that if the water level in the vessel went down with the four suction hoses, all available equipment would be deployed. The pumping, however, remained unrewarding. The offloading of salvaged cargo began. It was stowed in barges sent from Hamburg. The crew salvaged the sails and whatever else they could from the ship's interior, which was also taken off by a barge. I received my discharge papers on 19 November 1910. I was in the last party of the *Preussen's* crew to be repatriated to Hamburg via London.

For many years, the wreck of the *Preussen* remained there under the chalk cliffs, right on the spot where she had stranded. Gradually, however, she disappeared more and more beneath the waves. Later, as master of my own ship, whenever I passed Dover at low tide, I kept close into the shore. Even as late as just prior to the last world war, I could see a few frames protruding above the water - the remains of one of the largest and most beautiful sailing ships ever made.

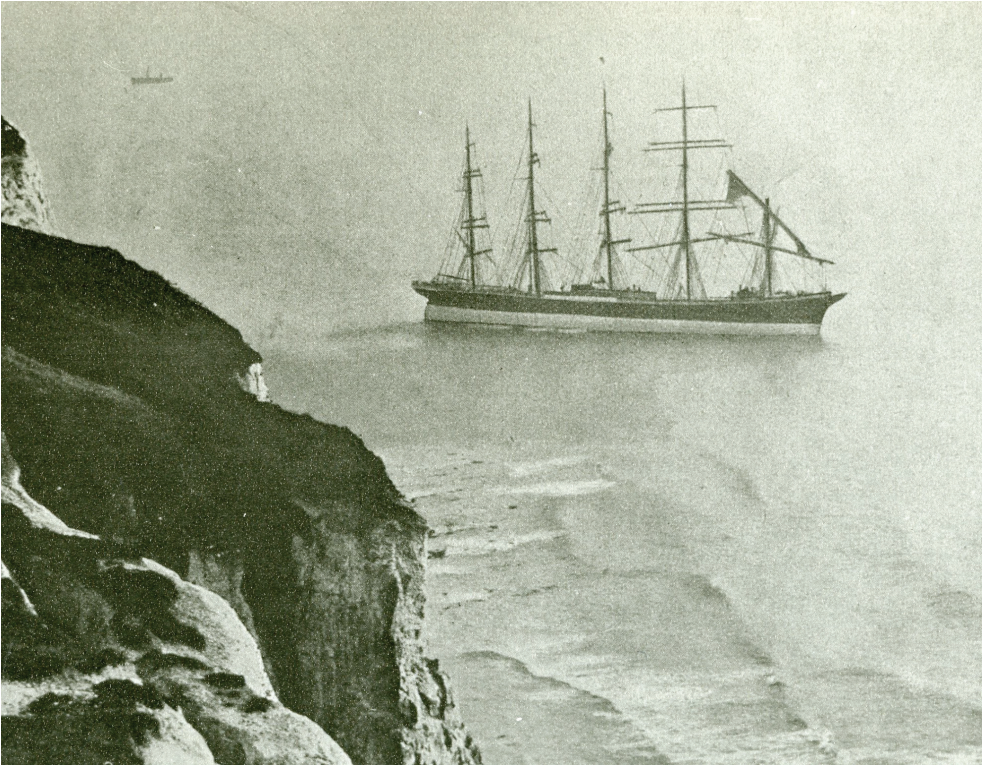


Figure 3. (Courtesy of the German Maritime Museum)