

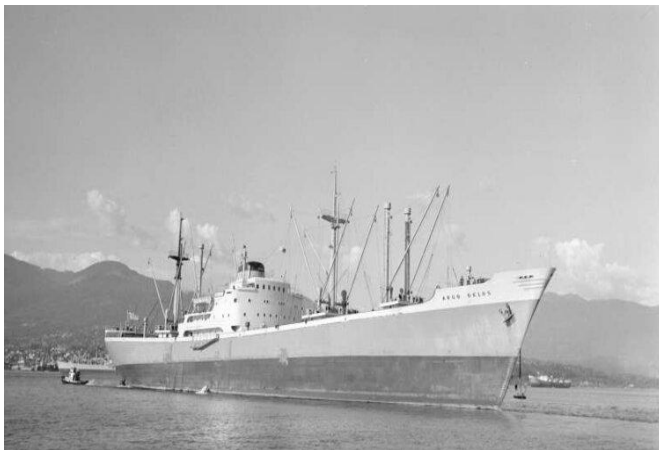
60th Anniversary of the Argo Delos Shipwreck

Nicholas Worthington Chairman of the Inishtrahull Initiative

The sinking of the *Argo Delos* on the 22nd October 1960 has to be amongst the most fascinating of the Inishtrahull Sounds shipwrecks. I first heard the intriguing story on Inishtrahull itself back in June 2020 whilst looking North at the Tor Rocks, the sight of the disaster and, depending on how you feel about Rockall Island, Ireland's most northerly point. Hearing the story from John McCarron, one of my all-time favourite Inishowen's, and his fellow West Inishowen History & Heritage Society member I was fascinated.

The *Argo Delos* was a typical 1950s Greek cargo ship built in 1958 as part of the massive Greek merchant fleet, registered in the Greek port of Piraeus, which even today tops ranks as the largest merchant fleet in the world above Japan, China and Germany, which goes some way to explaining why, for those of you who don't know, why a Greek merchant ship would be travelling past Inishtrahull in the first place.

The *Argo Delos* was on quite the Cold War journey, a Greek cargo ship leaving from a major British port sailing for newly Communist Cuba on behalf of Communist China due to transport Cuban sugar for the Chinese market. Proving that Cold War trade was certainly not as bipolar as one would assume. At the end of the day, money knows no ideological constraint.



Argo Delos



Argo Delos on Tor Rocks

Alas, as we know the *Argo Delos* didn't quite make it to the sugar-rich, sun-drenched coasts of the Caribbean instead ending up at the equally splendid, if a little less tropical, turbot-drenched coast of Inishtrahull.

The 10,392 ton *Argo Delos* ran aground on rocks and the vessel broke in two with the *Argo Delos* Stern section sinking whilst undertow and its bow section beaching itself on Inishtrahull's two sisters to the north Tor More and Tor Beg, which makes up the Tor Rocks. The 14 crew of the *Argo Delos* was successfully rescued by the Portrush RNLi lifeboat. Fortunately, with no fatalities.

Nicholas Worthington



"From Laura to Katie- The story of the Portrush Lifeboats"

by Hugh McGrattan

"The alarm having been raised at 2:30 in the morning, the lifeboat *Lady Scott* was launched at five minutes past 3 am in deteriorating weather conditions to go to the aid of the Greek cargo vessel *Argo Delos* which had gone aground on Torr Beg, a rocky islet five miles north-east of Malin Head and almost 25 sailing miles from Portrush.

The wind was blowing from the north-east, gale force eight, increasing, and the lifeboat ploughed through murderous seas as it proceeded to the wreck, arriving there just as dawn was breaking. Her distress call had also been picked up by the Royal Navy frigate *HMS Leopard*, which had been on exercise, only 30 miles away. With its much greater speed, the frigate was already standing by when the lifeboat arrived.



Lady Scott Lifeboat approaching the Argo Delos

take off the crew would have to be made from the weather side. The *Argo Delos* was flooding and without electrical power, so Mr Cunningham tried to explain over a loud hailer to the men on board what he intended to do, but without success, because of language difficulties. A naval party from the *Lepoard* was therefore landed on the deck of the *Argo Delos* with a portable radio so that communications could be maintained.

Mr Cunningham then made three dummy runs to ascertain the best way of taking off the Greek vessel's crew. At 8:15am the lifeboat was ready to make its first attempt at a rescue. Coxswain Cunningham displayed superb seamanship as he took the *Lady Scott* alongside the 10,400 ton vessel several times in the course of the next two hours. Seas were constantly breaking over the wreck and because of the rocks at the stern of the *Argo Delos*, the approach each time had to be made head-on, with a hard turn to starboard to bring the *Lady Scott* within a few feet of the cargo ship's side.

Fourteen crew members were eventually taken off the *Argo Delos* over a period of an hour and three quarters. Each man had to jump backwards from the ladder when the lifeboat coxswain shouted to him and two lifeboat men were standing ready to catch him. The lifeboat was rising and falling 15 feet and ropes parted on three occasions.

In the cold grey early morning light, the lifeboat men were able to see the hazardous situation which they faced, with the *Argo Delos* grounded fore and aft, her bows on an isolated rock and her stern on Torr Beg itself. The sea was constantly crashing over her bows. In the conditions, it was felt that there was a better chance of a successful rescue by lifeboat, rather than by helicopter, which in those days were limited in their control and carrying capacity. Sam Cunningham decided that instead of approaching the ship on the Port (lee) side, an attempt to

But the operation was becoming more and more hazardous. oil leaking from the damaged hull of the *Argo Delos* was making the deck of the lifeboat extremely slippery and, with the constant sea breaking over her, the vessel was flooding fast. A last single rope linked the two vessels and, as the *Lady Scott* dropped in a sudden trough, the pressure on the bollard to which it was attached lifted some of the lifeboat's deck planking and damaged two deck beams. Other damage was being caused as the lifeboat occasionally crashed against the cargo ship's side. then the rope fouled the port propeller and that vital engine became useless.

Mr Cunningham headed the *Lady Scott* towards the *HMS Leopard* on one engine so that the rescued men could be transferred to the frigate. Then he took the lifeboat to the lee of a rock to the west of Inishtrahull and in calmer waters the rope around the propeller was released. But the lifeboat's active role in the rescue was over and the *Lady Scott* stood by as a Whirlwind helicopter from the Royal Navy Air Station at Eglinton near Londonderry (now City of Derry Airport) lifted the remaining 15 men from the *Argo Delos* and transferred them one at a time to the *Leopard*, which was about a mile away.



Lifeboat Lady Scott Crew; Sam Cunningham (coxswain), Gilbert Chambers (mechanic) , Richard McKay, Jimmy Stewart, Kenny McMullan, Robert McMullan and Jack King.

The *Lady Scott* set course for home. She had been on service for more than 14 hours and arrived back in Portrush Harbour as night was falling, the seven lifeboat men on board exhausted after what had been an exceptional rescue mission. Twenty-nine crew members of the *Argo Delos* were rescued 14 of them by the Portrush Lifeboat.

Not surprisingly, Coxswain Sam Cunningham was awarded the RNLi Silver Medal for his courage and seamanship while a Bronze Medal went to Second Coxswain Robert McMullan who had stayed on deck of the oil-covered deck of the lifeboat throughout the entire-operation

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Nicholas and Hugh for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters. 22nd October 2020.