Unexpected Histories

Volume 4

Safe Havens Then and Now

Edward Barnard

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Edward W. Barnard

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Also By Edward W. Barnard

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Chapter 1. First Rate

Sunken Treasure

[Pumping Gold Bullion from the Sea](Scientific American 105, 22, 473; November 1911) gushed a century ago:

> During the past summer season efforts were renewed to recover more treasure from the wreck of the old British frigate "Lutine." This waterlogged hulk has been a fascinating speculation for a good many years, and the alluring part of the project lies in the fact that no one knows just how much specie and bullion the ship carried when lost. What is known, however, is that something like half a million dollars worth of gold and silver bars and coins have been reclaimed in the course of the past century. There is every reason for the belief that the frigate had many times this treasure on board when she sailed from England on the 9th of October, 1799, and this belief has inspired the efforts made from time to time to bring to the surface the buried riches.

Hamburg had rather suddenly become the principal commercial port for northern Europe. But her bankers were unprepared with enough funds to support the increase in commerce. British merchants worked with British bankers to get funds shipped to Hamburg.

Figure 1.1. HMS Lutine

It was finally decided to dispatch the gold and silver in a man-of-war because of the amount involved. It was believed that in this way the menace of the French cruisers could best be avoided and the treasure more speedily and safely delivered in Hamburg. Accordingly, Admiral Duncan, then commanding the British North Sea Fleet, detailed the frigate "Lutine"–a ship captured from the French some years before–for this service.

Lutine (Figure 1.1, "HMS Lutine") served both the French Navy and the Royal Navy. She was originally a 32-gun frigate, launched at Toulon in 1779. During the French Revolution, *Lutine* came under French Royalist control. On 18 December 1793 she was one of sixteen ships handed over to a British fleet at the end of the horrific Siege of Toulon to prevent her being captured by the French Republicans. In 1795 the British rebuilt her as the fifth-rate HMS *Lutine* with 38 guns.

Figure 1.2. Evacuation of Toulon

Figure 1.2, "Evacuation of Toulon," shows the evacuation of Toulon, December 1793, with the destruction of the French fleet and arsenal by fire. The historic-fiction book *H.M.S. Cockerel* (The Alan Lewrie Naval Adventures #6, 1995), by Dewey Lambdin, brings the siege and its consequences to vibrant life.

Scientific American continued:

> The "Lutine" was loaded with her precious cargo secretly in order that the enemy across the Channel should not know of her mission. This secretiveness has been principally responsible for a large measure of the uncertainty which has since existed in regard to the quantity of bullion and specie dispatched. On the 9th of October, 1799, the "Lutine" sailed from Yarmouth Roads and headed north for Hamburg in the teeth of a heavy wind. By the time the ship reached the North Sea the wind had grown into a gale blowing directly toward the Dutch coast.
>
> In the gloom of that fateful night and under the pressure of the wind and the treacherous sweep of the North Sea currents, the "Lutine" struck the Dutch coast near the entrance to the Zuyder Zee. It is quite probable that none of her officers knew of her danger. She

hit the sands at full speed, and immediately was thrown over on her beam's end. At the time, she carried quite three hundred persons aboard, but so sudden was the disaster that but two of this total number survived... At that time, the Dutch government was an ally of France, and claimed the wreck as spoils of war for the British to do anything toward salving the sunken property.

Figure 1.3. HMS Lutine being blown ashore

Figure 1.3, "HMS Lutine being blown ashore," is a contemporary engraving depicting HMS *Lutine* being blown ashore onto Terschelling where she wrecked the night of 9-10 October 1799.

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