

THE WRECK OF THE GNEISENAU

The Gneisenau was a three-masted steam turbine frigate used for training naval cadets and cabin boys.

It had a crew of 466: made up of 19 officers, 51 naval cadets, 186 sailors and 210 cabin boys

It arrived in the port of Malaga between November 13th and 15th 1900. Its presence in the area was part of a general mission connected with the protection of German interests in Morocco, at that time undergoing some political turbulence.

Whilst present the ship engaged in some canon-firing practice – doing so at anchorage outside the harbour.

Over the next few weeks there was much free time for shore-leave for the crew, including sightseeing visits to Granada. The crew became familiar figures in the town, mixing with the local German community, and there was even a civic reception organised on board ship.

On the morning of Sunday December 16th, when anchored outside the harbour, a storm brew up – and by ten in the morning the winds had reached 100 kms per hour.

Despite local recommendation to return to within the harbour's protection, the commander of the vessel opted at 10.40 am to weigh anchor and manoeuvre under engine power away from the harbour, and so confront the storm a safe distance away from land.



But at 10.50 am the steam engines lost power, and the ship was blown by the easterly wind towards the rocks forming the harbour breakwater some 800 metres away. With the wind still gaining force an attempt was made to drop anchor, but to no avail – the anchors gaining no purchase from the rocky seabed.

At 11.05 am the vessel hit the breakwater rocks and the engine-room immediately flooded. The ship sank twenty minutes later, at 11.25 a.m.

Soon the bells of the Cathedral and the churches of San Juan, the Martyrs, Carmen and Santiago rang out the alarm that some disaster was occurring. People ran down the streets towards the harbour and witnessed the tragedy unfolding. Valiant attempts were made to get close to the stricken vessel but this was difficult owing to the strength of the storm.

Forty-one crew members together with their Commander were killed in the shipwreck; and twelve Malaguenos who had gone to rescue also lost their lives.

