



# **Ships in Great Waters**

***By Ronald Snell***

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This narrative highlights two of the author's voyages during the Second World War:

The torpedoing and sinking of the *mv Norman Prince* by the U-156 in the Caribbean Sea, and the subsequent internment on the island of Martinique of the 32 members of the crew that were saved.

The maiden voyage of the *mv Highland Prince* and her involvement in "Operation Husky" on the first day of the Allied landings on Sicily.

*“ For as long as the people of the British Isles,  
and their friends and allies, depend for  
sustenance on the men who go down to the sea  
in ships to do business in great waters, the  
stories about them will deserve to be retold ”*

**John Alfred Terraine, 1921-2003**

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# Part One

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*"Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack  
Butting through the channel in the mad March days,  
With a cargo of Tyne coal,  
Road-rail, pig-lead,  
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays."*

**Cargoes - John Masfield**

# 1

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## The ship

The *Norman Prince* was a little over two years old when she was torpedoed. One of a class of four, her sisters were the *Tudor Prince*, *Lancastrian Prince* and the *Stuart Prince*.

Of 2,000 tons gross with a basic speed of 10 knots, these ships were built for the Furness Prince line for their Mediterranean service. They carried no passengers, and when launched were taken over by the Ministry of War Transport, though still managed by the Prince Line. They carried a nominal crew of 39 together with nine DEMS gunners who were signed on as “deck hands” to protect their identity should they fall into enemy hands.

The *Norman Prince* was a very happy ship and from her launch in 1940 she worked the West Indies trade mostly under charter to Messrs T J Harrison of Liverpool. Outward bound under charter she also carried a Purser who was responsible for cargo discharge at the various ports in the West Indies. Homeward bound she loaded mainly sugar in the islands, but on occasions went down to the South American coast to British and Dutch Guyana, and on one very eventful occasion voyaged up the Esequibo River to load greenheart logs. The class was never intended (or designed) to cope with winter North Atlantic conditions however, and her crews suffered some

horrific days and nights in convoys from Halifax and Sidney, Nova Scotia.

# 2

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## The last voyage

Towards the end of 1940, I transferred from the *mv Indian Prince* to sign on the *Norman Prince* as 2nd Cook, with the intention of sitting for a Chief Cook's Ticket in due course. This was essential in order to sail as Chief Steward, and eventually as Purser in passenger ships. In April 1942 I was on my sixth voyage on the *Norman Prince* - now sailing as 2nd Steward - and hopeful that with my "ticket" I might shortly be promoted to a berth as Chief Steward.

We signed articles in Liverpool on the 20 April 1942 under Capt W R Harries - a very popular Master. The Master and crew came from all over the country, as far afield as Lerwick and the Scilly Isles. The firemen, however, were mainly from the Liverpool area. We also had an AB from Trinidad, a 3rd Radio Officer from Madras, and two Abs from Newfoundland. Both of the latter had been torpedoed twice before, and had we given it thought it might have been an omen for the future!

We sailed from Liverpool on the 24 April under a T J Harrison charter bound as usual for the West Indies. The main ports of call were to be Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Antigua, St Kitts, St Lucia and St Thomas, but our final discharge was to be in Cartagena and Barranquilla in Colombia on the South

American coast. The latter were unpopular ports for British ships as the authorities and the inhabitants were very pro-German, and shore leave was not permitted. There was also a strong element of German Intelligence believed to be in radio communication with the U-Boat Headquarters in Brest.

Discharge in Barranquilla took a day and a half and we sailed on the forenoon tide, bound for St Lucia where we would commence loading for home. The date was the 25 May and little did we think that in less than 80 hours the *Norman Prince* would be heaving her stern skywards to slip beneath the waves of the Caribbean Sea.



# 3

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## Torpedoed

After some 51 years many of my memories are as sharp as on the day. Details fade - I can no longer remember names or see faces - but the happening remains vivid and, except for a time when I was unconscious, the details of the torpedoing are still very fresh.

It was shortly after 6.45 pm and I had left the saloon to go to my cabin for a cold beer before a shower. The *Norman Prince* was now light ship (ie without cargo), and as a result was rolling gently to a slight sea. It was just before 7.00 pm and nearly dark when the first torpedo hit us directly beneath my cabin on the starboard side of the ship. It was a flash explosion, as I remember seeing a yellow flame sweep past my open scuttle. The cabin lights were out and the scuttle open in order to give some air after a very hot day.

I grabbed my lifejacket and for some strange reason my blue uniform jacket hanging from the bunk rail. I made for my action station to the port side forward life raft strapped to the foremast stays. I was not on my own but cannot now remember faces or names of those around me. I did hear the Master call for "abandon ship", and I can still see the sharp inclination of the ship's foredeck as she began to settle in the water. I also remember slipping

the chocks holding the life raft to the stays. As the raft hit the water the line in my hands tightened and I leaned over the bulwark to see where it was. At this moment the second torpedo hit directly beneath where I stood. I remember feeling great pain and suffocation, and felt myself flying upwards, but then I must have passed out. The time was then a little after 7.30 pm.

My next recollection was floating among a great deal of debris, and then bumping alongside the ship's side and being caught in the cooling water discharge which was hot. There was a slight sea running which made looking around difficult, but I do remember seeing the red lights of my fellow crew members' lifejackets bobbing up and down from time to time. My chest and back were giving a deal of pain and the right side of my face was numb. I think I was slipping in and out of consciousness as my next firm recollection was of being hauled rather roughly onto a hatch board. Thank God for wooden hatch boards - they don't have them on modern ships! I later learned that my saviour was a donkeyman named Dunn.

When on the hatch board I heard the rumble of an explosion - this was probably the boilers, as at that point I can still see vividly the ship's stern and propeller outlined against the sky as she went down.

# 4

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## Saved

The following events are part memory and part information given to me after the event. It seems that only our No.2 lifeboat, port side, succeeded in getting away manned by the 3rd Officer Jennings and the Chief Steward Letchford. They managed to pick up a few survivors and then continued rowing around picking up more by sighting the lifejacket red lights. Once enough men were aboard this was made easier, but it was thought that Dunn and myself were almost the last to be found, and this after some four hours in the water. I do remember being hauled into the lifeboat. My legs were badly grazed between the heavy hatch board and the side of the lifeboat, but my chest and back gave me the most pain. When daylight came I was sitting on the starboard amidships thwarts, supported by the Chief Steward and another crew member. I know my head ached badly but I do not remember the back and chest pain. I was wearing my blue uniform jacket and white shorts - I do not remember putting the jacket on and, anyway, this was "winter rig" and we were in "summer whites"!

Shortly after joining the *Norman Prince* I had modified my lifejacket by stitching a strong pocket into the left hand side. In this I carried my seaman's identity card, my driving licence (what for I do not know), and some other details which I must at the time have thought important.

However, the most important item was a silver half flask of brandy. This was to be a lifesaver if I ended up dunked in the winter North Atlantic.

The lifeboat was registered to hold 24 persons and now held 32 of us with the 3rd Officer Harry Jennings in charge. The Master had not survived the sinking but the 2nd Officer (badly injured) had been saved. The Chief Officer had also been saved but was in no condition to take charge of the boat. The extra eight souls in the boat made conditions very uncomfortable. During the first day the numbness in my face eased, but my chest and back were painful. Sitting upright in the thwarts was misery, but there was no room to do anything else. By mid-day the sun became very hot. It dried us out but we had to erect the side screens over us for some protection. Looking back on this period I have little or no recollections. I can see the 2nd Officer McLaughlin being looked after forward in the bows and for a while I shared a spot on the flooring with somebody - I do not remember who, but my chest was too painful to lay down and I must have regained a seat on the thwarts.

After it was certain there were no further survivors, sail was raised and a course established to take us towards St Lucia. We knew roughly our position from the previous day's noon sights, and in the lifeboat with adequate wind we could probably make our original destination in two or three days. I am not sure to this day how long we were in the boat, but I think it was two nights. During the day that followed the 3rd Officer confirmed that we could not sail high enough to the wind to make St Lucia - in those days lifeboats with their limited lugsail could not sail closer to the wind than six points and, therefore, at best we would have to beat down to Trinidad and, failing that, the South American coast. I do not know whether we had water for these distances but there was no other option. Water rationing had already been established and only after 24 hours the meagre water ration was making itself felt.

It was late in the afternoon of the second day that the lookout raised the

lights of a steamer heading on our starboard side. Flares were sent up and within a short time recognised and acknowledged. She proved to be a French passenger ship (neutral Vichy) named the *Angoulême* and bound for the island of Martinique. She put down a launch, towed us alongside and transferred us aboard. She had a doctor and a small hospital and four of us were put to bed. She was sailing under a British and US Navy-Cert. carrying food etc. to the island of Martinique which was then under Allied blockade. The blockade was being applied to try to stop the Vichy authorities in Martinique victualling and bunkering U-Boats in the harbour of Fort-de-France.

# 5

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## Martinique

On arrival in Martinique four of us were transferred to hospital and the remainder of the crew dispatched as prisoners to an army base called Camp Balata, high up on Mount Didier. In truth this proved to be an army prison and the inmates were all serving some form of military sentence for wrongdoing.

I was given a very sympathetic welcome in the hospital. I remember having a small room to myself with a walkway outside overlooking the town and harbour. I was in the hospital for about four weeks until my ribs and back had healed. Food was not very good and somewhat limited - I remember having paw-paw, breadfruit and avocado pears. There was also lots of fresh lemonade and black chocolate drinks.

Once back on my feet I was able to visit our Second Officer who had lost an eye in the injuries received, and I was also introduced to another patient a few doors from my own ward. He proved to be an officer from a U-Boat who had been injured when their deck gun barrel had exploded in an engagement.

Now comes a most incredible coincidence, although at the time I had no

idea of its importance. During the last 18 months I have spent researching the loss of the *Norman Prince* and also the U-156, the U-Boat that sent us to the bottom, I happened upon a book that recounted an incident during the second war patrol of the U-156. It seems that at some point she came close inshore to the island of Aruba and her commander, Werner Hartenstein, attempted to shell the Royal Dutch oil refineries. It was suggested that over enthusiasm on the part of her guns crew resulted in failure to remove the tampion from the muzzle of the gun barrel which exploded on firing, severely injuring the Second Watch Officer and killing a young seaman. This officer was landed ashore in Martinique and hospitalised. He lost his leg in the action. The coincidence is that the U-156 shortly after this incident torpedoed the *Norman Prince* and I followed the Watch Officer into the same hospital.

# 6

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## Camp Balata

It has never been established by either the British or the American authorities as to our political status while on the island of Martinique. As we were confined to the camp during the whole of our stay, we have to assume that we were prisoners. However, we were never given any official status - either as prisoners of war or just internees to my knowledge. Also, neither the British nor the American military authorities were permitted to execute our release. Arrangements were made with some consulate - I do not know which - to act for us, but with the island under blockade there was little that could be done. I remember being told that somebody had communication with Trinidad, thus our position, etc could be reported and our families told of our survival.

When I eventually arrived at Camp Balata I found that we had been allocated two large barrack rooms - one down and one up in a large two-storey barracks. Straw mattresses and pillows had been issued to each crew member and I remember that these were well equipped with bed bugs and cockroaches! The first job, therefore, was to re-stuff them from the abundance of greenery present around the camp. The beds were crude wooden frames strung with rattan strappings upon which you laid the mattresses. One far from clean blanket was also issued with the mattress.



As I remember it, they were just a little better than nothing.

The camp occupied about two acres in rectangular form. The gates had armed guards dressed in nondescript uniforms, and the perimeter had a wire fence, barbed in places. On entering the gates a small administration building had a canteen selling beer twice a week. However, none of us had any money let alone the local currency needed to purchase it. Our meals were also issued from this building on large metal trays, and these were none too clean. Also, the only drinking water came from a small tap located in this building, but like the tap outside our barracks, was only in use for two hours each day. Cups or drinking utensils of any kind were noticeable by their total absence. Each of us was issued with a condensed milk tin, or similar, from which we were expected to drink.

A road led from the camp entrance around one side of the camp and down through a dogleg to our barracks. It also led to the Commandant's bungalow, which was about 200 yards from our barracks. The bungalow had an avocado pear tree growing near to the fence. A native guard was usually in sight, poorly dressed and carrying what appeared to be a First World War rifle. I doubt if he had been issued with ammunition! He certainly did not impress us, and his compatriots around the camp were of similar calibre.

Our toilets were definitely not the Savoy! They were at the far end of the camp and a stairway led up to a covered platform with four holes in the floor. It did have a roof! Old cut down oil drums received our offerings and these were emptied at irregular intervals by different prisoners. We often wondered where the contents of the drums went, but we never found out. Toilet paper? ... Banana leaves!

There was a shower building at the opposite end of our barracks. The cold water supply was irregular and not drinkable. The stone floor was very

slippery with the soap of ages and several of our lads slipped and hurt themselves. After a few weeks we acquired pieces of wood, plundered from our barracks, to stand on. We had no towels, but were issued from time to time with small pieces of coarse green soap of very poor quality. We dried ourselves in the heat of the sun au naturel.

The food was bad. Breakfast was plain grey coloured bread with cups of cold black chocolate at 6.30 am. This, like all meals, had to be collected from the canteen. A single tap outside the barracks dribbled for about two hours to allow 32 of us to wash etc. Dishes had to be returned to the canteen clean. Sometimes rather more so than when we received them. The main meal was served up at around 11.00 am and consisted of more bread and some greasy soup and local fruit. The soup was of very doubtful origin with a variety of unidentifiable bits floating in it. The floating bits were not so bad - it was the bits that did not float that worried us! By the time we got it, it was, of course, cold and looked worse. On Sundays we had a small piece of meat, which surprisingly was quite eatable. We also had a pudding - sometimes of sago or rice, which was quite good, and, on occasions, a cake that we actually looked forward to. This would be classed as a red-letter day!

The evening meal was more bread, local cheese and perhaps some fruit. We were supposed to have a cup of chocolate but as our lads were served last at the canteen, we often had to go without. (Complain? You must be joking!) I wondered sometimes just what else vanished from our rations before we got them.

Surprisingly enough this diet was not too bad at first, but after a time we all began to lose weight and the more enterprising elements of our family found alternatives to improve the menu. Two of the firemen broke out under the wire one night and made their way down the mountain to a small native village. They came back with several scraggy chickens. These were cooked

on a disused charcoal stove attached to one end of the barracks and added to our soup.

The two Newfoundlanders were much more ambitious. This was their third torpedoing and we called them Jinx 1 and Jinx 2. They stripped out some long lengths of wire from the fence, made a running noose of cord, and this was attached to one end of the wire, with the other end fixed to a long bamboo pole, which grew plentifully around the camp. Using bread as bait the pole was dangled through the fence into the shrubbery and they settled down to await the interest of the inevitable wild cat. When it stuck its nose into the noose a snatch on the pole secured the furious, scratching cat (not much larger than a kitten), and a thump on its head with a stick was the first stage towards an addition to our mid-day meal. I suppose looking back on it, cat would not be the first choice on the menu at home but when skinned they look much like small rabbits, and cut up small they look no worse than the unidentifiable pieces in our stew. Do not ask me what they tasted like - I really do not remember.

We also had a good supply of plantains growing around the camp. These we prepared by stewing (ugh!), baking (pretty foul), devoured raw (could be worse), and mashed to spread on bread. Remember, we were hungry then, but nowadays I could not look a banana in the skin.

The Commandant also had much of his avocado pear crop pinched, and we were eventually hauled up before some military gent and threatened with solitary confinement if it continued. I still have a tremendous liking for avocado pears.

At first the days were pretty boring - walking around the camp and chatting passed some of the time, but this stopped after a while as the main part of the camp was put out of bounds. Meals (as bad as they were) became a major highlight of the day. For a while we were allowed to walk out to a

headland where a guard post was located. This looked out over the sea towards St Lucia some 30 miles distance. On occasions small fishing boats were seen and they allowed us to dream up ideas of breaking out of the camp and stealing a boat from the harbour. The basic problems associated with this idea were:

- The camp was halfway up a mountain
- It was around 20 miles from the harbour
- None of us spoke enough French
- We had no money or adequate clothes
- No means of navigating a fishing boat to a British island

After I had been in the camp for some six weeks or so we received a visit from the Consul. He brought us some pencils and writing paper, which allowed us to write home. Our letters were to be picked up by a Red Cross aeroplane from Trinidad. Also we were told that Red Cross parcels would be sent from Trinidad in due course. I still have the first letter that I wrote home which my father saved, together with some newspaper cuttings and letters from the Prince Line advising my father of my internment. The letter and cuttings have helped me to fill in some details of my imprisonment.

The first of the Red Cross parcels arrived after we had been on the island for about two months. Along with the parcels we received information advising us that the American authorities were trying to exchange us for 140 political internees held in the United States. It did not help us much - we could not understand why the Americans could not send in a patrol boat and get us out. And why did our own Navy not send in a destroyer from Trinidad? Four-inch naval guns have a wonderfully persuasive way about them! It was all very depressing and the apparent total lack of interest in our predicament was demoralising.

However, the Red Cross parcels helped to alleviate the outlook. They really

were fantastic, containing all kinds of boots, socks, shirts, trousers, towels, toilet accessories (even toilet paper), and many odds and ends, which could be shared to help each other. The parcels also contained two footballs, cricket bats, ball and stumps, playing cards, chessmen and dominoes. A good supply of pencils and writing paper allowed us to send letters home.

The food parcels also made a tremendous improvement to our diet. They were mostly tinned products as fresh food had but a short life in the hot, humid conditions of Camp Balata. Unfortunately, all of our family did not use the contents for the purpose intended. Certain members found that items in the parcels could be exchanged with the guards for bottles of rum, which was manufactured in large quantities on the island, and in times of peace provided the islanders with a useful export trade. However, alcohol was the one thing we could do without, and an element of drunkenness started to creep into our lives. Fortunately, our Chief Officer was now well enough to assume authority and he threatened certain persons with report to the camp Commandant with a view to segregation and even solitary confinement. He also threatened bad discharges to anyone thus dealt with. This had a calming influence, although on occasions a high degree of merriment, and the singing of songs with the words of the unpublished variety, was obviously flavoured with an element of chuckle water! This was really no bad thing as there was very little present in our lives to relieve the basic monotony of the camp.

# 7

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## Release

After our torpedoing on the 28 May, and our arrival on Martinique, dates become blurredred and a bit of a guessing game. Letters sent to my father from the Prince Line (who kept him fully aware of our position) have helped a little as they mention the 3 June as the probable date on which we were landed safely on the island. They also advised him that I left Trinidad bound for the UK on the 29 October. Filling in the dates for the period between is guesswork to some extent.

It was towards the end of September that we received another visit from the Consul. His previous visits, though very welcome, did little to raise our future hopes. Also, we had absolutely no knowledge of how the war was progressing. This visit, however, was very different; we were to pack our few possessions immediately and be ready for moving off within 24 hours. Just try to imagine how everybody felt on receiving such news. Few of us really slept that night and next day we all worked hard cleaning up the barracks, bundling our personal effects, and then waiting impatiently for transport to arrive to take us to the harbour.

Few details had been given us - we had been told that the American authorities were bringing in a ship to take us out, but where to we did not

know. Most thought it would be somewhere Stateside; New York was definitely favourite, though a few felt it more likely we would be taken to Trinidad and handed over to the Naval authorities for repatriation home to the UK. Nobody guessed at what was really in store for us.

By mid-morning on what I believe to be the 21 September our transport arrived - two dirty, broken down open trucks. Nobody could care less and only the need to load our possessions was slowing things down. I shall never forget the moment when the gates opened and we rolled through. To ringing cheers we set off down the hill towards the town.

My next positive memory was at the dock. I seem to remember that it was afternoon, and a US Coastguard cutter – which I later identified as the US Unalga (1181/12.WPG 53), based upon Trinidad – was moored alongside awaiting us. She was lying well below the dock level and all of us had to be helped down to her deck. We were then seated in her main cabin and told not to move around or go outside on deck until she was well under way and outside French waters. I remember seeing a tarpaulin-covered gun on her foredeck, but that is about the extent of my memory. I am sure we must all have been in great spirits and I can remember being given the first decent food for five months during the trip. But that is all. And so “goodbye” to Fort-de-France.

# 8

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## British soil at last

I do not know when we were told where we were going but probably shortly after leaving the harbour. It transpired that our destination was not to be New York, not even the States, and not even Trinidad, but to that lovely island St Lucia, but a few short miles from Martinique. And so towards the late afternoon we arrived in Castries - the harbour most of us knew so well from previous voyages. Most of us had made six voyages in all to St Lucia, but never before did it occur to us that it would mean so much to see The Pitons and the harbour of Castries.

When we docked we were handed over to the care of the port authorities. Again memories are blurred, but I remember we were taken to the European Club sited on a low hill at the far end of the harbour and here we were made very welcome and given a decent meal. We were also called in one by one to see a Naval doctor and given a thorough medical check. None of us were ill to any serious degree, but many had some small ailment, which had not been given attention at Camp Balata. After we cleared the medical I seem to remember spending some time with members of the Club - this is vague - but I do remember being berthed down for the night in the Club until the following day.



The next morning we were divided up and taken to private houses where we were welcomed by the owners who it appeared had volunteered for this duty. I was to stay in a little house situated in the main square of Castries. (With very great regret this unfortunately no longer exists - some years ago there was a disastrous fire, and all the houses in the square were destroyed). All of these old wooden houses had two stories with a balcony running around the front and sides. I was given a little room overlooking the square. It must have been sheer bliss!

These folk were all Negro islanders and my host was the reporter for the local St Lucia newspaper. I wish that I could remember his name - I did write to him several times in the years following, but like so many things a note of his name and address have been lost. Also, my life at sea never took me back to the West Indies.

From the start these folk made it clear that we were to have a memorable time in their care. The food - mostly seafood - could have fed a battalion of Guards. Lobster, schnapper, shrimps and savoury rice dishes remain in my memory with huge pitchers of lemonade made from real lemons. Fruit was in abundance of course and I renewed my liking for avocado pears.

One of the crew, a young chap like myself named Webb, who was a DEMS gunner (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship), was also boarded with me. Together, we spent many hours with friends we made on the island, swimming in beautiful little coves with coral strands, palm trees and shimmering white sand. We took many picnics to the beaches and our presence seemed to attract the islanders from all around. They inevitably produced large quantities of lemonade and rum. The lemonade and rum bottles were lowered into pools among the rocks to keep cool, and none was ever returned. The same life that I enjoyed now costs around £1,200 for two weeks with Thompson's!

Evenings were usually spent on the verandas of the houses on the square. Everybody knew everybody else, of course, and we visited all the neighbours where we were made very welcome. These West Indian folk have a natural aptitude to friendliness and everybody we met went out of their way to make our stay memorable.

We also took part in football matches - we were all expected to perform like Stanley Matthews - at weekends, and I well remember playing in goal on one occasion with the goalmouth a sea of mud. All the locals played in bare feet and could kick the wet football better than we could in boots.

I never saw much of the other crew members - we had to report each week to the office of the shipping agent who kept us informed of the efforts to repatriate us, and after some two weeks of convalescence I for one was itching to be on my way home. One item of news from the agent was upsetting. Several of the crew had been arrested for drunkenness and theft and were to be kept in police custody until they could be shipped out. Every ship had its black sheep.

I was now quite well and had regained my normal weight. I had been to the agent to pester him to help me get a berth out - anywhere as long as it eventually took me northeast and home. He could only reiterate that British vessels calling at Castries were not prepared to sign on distressed British seamen. However, he suggested that one of the local fishermen might be prepared to take us to Trinidad where there was a better chance of getting a ship back to the UK. This suggestion, however, did not meet with official approval, but I still began to ask around my many friends for introductions to small boat owners in the harbour. It was, I think, my journalist friend who had some relative who ran a small sloop between the islands. The sloop had a crew of four to handle the boat and the little cargo it carried, and I eventually agreed to be aboard her when next she sailed for Trinidad.

Originally, Webb the gunner was to go with me, but he opted out on the day before; he was unsure of how the Naval authorities in Trinidad would react, as he was attached to the Royal Navy and the junior of the gunners aboard our ship. He did agree, though, to keep quiet until I had left the island and was well on my way, and then to let the shipping agent know of what I had done. I never saw or heard of the rest of the crew again, except one chap on one occasion. This man was a troublemaker as it happens and one of those arrested. One day in 1954, I was walking along Argyle Street in Birkenhead when I was accosted by someone who seemed vaguely familiar to me. It was "X", a fireman on the ship. I never liked the chap and always suspected it was he who stole a pair of boots from me while in Camp Balata. Renewal of his acquaintance was no pleasure. He eventually dunned me for the "loan" of 10 shillings (50 pence) and left - bound, I have no doubt, for the nearest public house.

# 9

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## Trinidad

Once again dates become a problem. I know I left Trinidad on the 29 October - this date is logged in my discharge book - but I do not really know when I arrived at Port of Spain. I think I was there for about three weeks or so; some of my memories suggest this. I do remember that on arrival I fell foul of the Trinidad Dock Police when they boarded the sloop to check it out, and I was then taken to an office somewhere on the docks. There were several hours of questioning and they were reluctant to let me report to the Shipping Master. Unlike St Lucia, there was an official Maritime Shipping Office staffed by British and local people, but eventually the police contacted the Shipping Office who sent somebody to take me to the Shipping Master.

More questioning eventually satisfied them as to my *persona grata*. I had my seaman's identify card and they had records of the *Norman Prince's* previous visits to the island. They still had to await a cable from St Lucia before they would treat me as a "distressed British seaman". I was eventually sent to the Missions to Seamen situated on Frederick Street (the main street of Port of Spain) where they gave me a small comfortable room. This I remember had a bed, dressing table, chair and a huge punka loovah in the ceiling, which never seemed to stop. Everything was very clean and the bed had a mosquito net (essential on the island), and the window looked

out towards the main square. I was lucky again!

My real concern now was to obtain some cash. The Shipping Master would not give folding money to DBS as there was so much cheap rum and beer that it was simply wasted on drunkenness. He did, however, supply the essentials such as toilet goods, clothes and stamps for letters home. This came out of the DBS emergency fund. I therefore decided to visit the banks to try to acquire funds from home. These days this would take a few hours but in 1942 it could take months. I cannot now remember which bank it was, but it turned out that they were the agents for my father's bank, the Midland, in England, and the manager actually came out to talk to me. It was explained how hard it was to get cash out of the UK but he agreed to try. I would have to pay the cable charges however. With no cash at all I was stuck so I returned to the Mission. Some days later I received a note to go to see the bank manager. He told me that they had cabled the Midland Bank head office in Leadenhall Street, London, and had confirmation that my father had authorised payment of £15.0s.0d. This was a small fortune, and on top of that the bank manager waived the cable charges and invited me to his home for dinner.

I really do not remember much of Trinidad. I knew Port of Spain well from previous visits of course, and much of the day would be spent visiting new places. I watched a cricket match on the green opposite Government House, and I also spent time on a visit to a Harrison Line ship in the docks. I cannot remember her name, but the Chief Steward gave me a tin of 50 cigarettes when I left.

Each day I reported in the morning to the Shipping Office in the faint hope of a berth available to take me home, but there were several hundred DBS in Port of Spain including masters, chief officers, chief engineers and crew of all types - all wanting home, and the majority not prepared to work their passage.

After, I think, some two or three weeks the Shipping Office advised me that a mess room steward from a tanker had been put ashore in hospital and his berth was vacant. Now tankers, especially petroleum tankers, were not the most popular of berths at this time! However, this might be a chance to get home, so I went across to the tanker terminal and found she was lying in the roads. Her name was the *mv Cordelia*, one of Messrs C T Bowring's of Liverpool. I eventually found a tally boat that agreed to take me out to her and I met the Chief Steward. He was more than happy to have a 2nd Steward sign on as mess room steward and then, after meeting the Master, I agreed to attend the Shipping Office the following morning. I was told that the *Cordelia*, of 10,000 gross tons and loaded with high-octane fuel from Curaçao, was eventually bound for the UK. However, the Master did warn me that once signed on Articles I would have to complete the voyage wherever the destination. He did promise though that he would sign me off on reaching the first UK port. There was never any guarantee with tankers, as I was to find out!

# 10

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## Homeward bound

I signed Articles on the 28 October and the *Cordelia* sailed on the 29th bound for the UK. There were two routes for home from Trinidad during the war. And with tanker cargoes so essential to the war effort, the route to be taken would depend a lot upon U-Boat activity reported. The United States coast during 1942 was known by the U-Boat commanders as “happy time” as there was virtually no protection for ships in American waters. They had not yet learned the lessons of escorted ships in convoy. Neither had the royal Navy any spare escort vessels to take ships up to New York, Halifax or Sydney, Nova Scotia, where the Atlantic convoys assembled. These convoys were specific; if a ship could not make nine knots consistently then she was sent to Sydney. Sydney convoys were classified “SC”. If you could make more than nine knots without trouble then you generally sailed from Halifax, classified “HX”.

The alternative route was to sail south from Trinidad down the South American coast and then with the Guyanas off to starboard, alter course northeast for Freetown. At Freetown you waited for the twice-weekly convoy from the Cape, which would hold over for a few days, and thence on to the UK. Unfortunately for us there was a pack of four U-Boats known as the Groupe Eisbar (Polar Bear Group) operating along the first part of this route.

They were the U-156 (which sank the *Norman Prince*), the U-68 (Carl Frederick Merton), the U-172 (Carl Emmerman) and the U-504 (Fritz Poske). A few days before we were to leave Trinidad they were active and the U-156 sank the Quebec City off the Guyanas. It would appear that due to this activity the authorities must have decided that for us a North Atlantic convoy would be a safer bet despite the need to sail unescorted up to New York. I only have vague memories of my voyage home on the *Cordelia*. She proved to be a very pleasant ship, well run, and I got on very well with all aboard.

We made the Brooklyn Navy Yard on New York's East River without incident and a few days later we joined a convoy to take us up to Halifax for the last leg of the journey home. She was fully laden and a typical tanker with little or no freeboard and taking green water the full length of her decks when the sea started to lift a little. It was now November. We had arrived in Halifax from New York on 10 November and then left in convoy on the 13th, and after an uneventful crossing (except for the weather) we arrived at Oban on the 24th.

My last voyage on the *Norman Prince* was now coming to an end at last. But was it? On the morning of the 24th my few possessions were packed and I was awaiting with the Master for the arrival of the port authorities' launch to take us ashore. We arrived at the jetty and climbed to the dock to be met by two armed soldiers requesting our papers. The Master produced his credentials and explained that as a DBS for discharge ashore, I had no papers.

After a long discussion with an officer in the guardhouse, the Master was allowed to continue but I had to stay until permission to land was obtained from the Naval authorities. My seaman's identity card did not count for much in Oban! The whole of Oban and district was a restricted area and a convoy base - nobody was allowed in or out unless they had the proper



papers. When the Master returned it was to tell me that he could not obtain permission for me to land and that I had to return to the ship. So that was that. My voyage home was still not finished. It was very demoralising with Scottish hills and heather so near and yet so far.

When we moved off to return to the ship, the guard asked the Master for my clearance papers to allow me to leave the dock. This really was incredible. I did not have a pass to leave Oban because officially I had not arrived. This made no difference whatsoever. Officialdom demanded the pass, and as a result I had to stay in the guardhouse that night until the Master could sort it out the following day with the Navy. This caused the ship to be delayed for 24 hours and I believe the Naval authorities were furious. My pass never did arrive; a Naval launch took the master and I back to the ship, hopefully for the final leg of my journey.

I now had to wait until we were at sea and had dropped the pilot to find out where my home was finally to be. I now had visions of docking in Liverpool or Birkenhead and then a train back home to London with a few weeks leave, but when the Master told me he was bound for Scapa Flow I knew my luck had finally deserted me!

We arrived in Scapa and I paid off the *Cordelia* on 28 November and reported straight away to the Royal Naval Routing Office. Luck was now with me again as the island ferry was sailing straight away. They gave me a travel warrant from Thurso to London with a night's stay at the Royal Hotel in Thurso, and at 8.00 am on the morning of the next day - the 29th - I joined the "Jellico" train for the long run south.

As though to keep me from home for as long as possible, the train took hours to arrive at Inverness - stopping and starting for no obvious reason. On arrival at Inverness a battalion of Scottish infantry boarded the train, which did not recommence its journey until very late into the night.

Travelling by night was common due to the bombing.

We finally arrived at King's Cross Station, London, at around 6.00 am, some 22 hours after leaving Thurso. After a wash and brush-up at King's Cross, I had some breakfast and then made my way to the Prince Lines offices in Leadenhall Street. On learning who I was they gave me a great welcome and, after meeting with several of the directors, I was told that I must now report to an office in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall. I was puzzled by this, and still am today. I was taken to a room on the first floor and after some introductory remarks they began to question me about my stay in Fort-de-France. What did I see? Where were we kept? Were there any German military present? Were there any foreign civilians in the camp? All kinds of questions that I seemed to answer satisfactorily. I did ask them if we were to be classified as prisoners of war, but they would not answer direct questions of any kind. After about an hour they thanked me and I left. I never did hear any more but it appeared that I was the first of the crew to reach home.

And so finally I come to the end of my narrative, which charts the progress of some nine months of my life. For the most part, that period after the sinking of the ship is pleasant enough to look back upon. However, it was with great regret that, as a result of some further research into the loss of both the *Norman Prince* and the U-156, I learned that on her very next voyage from Curaçao to the Clyde (Convoy HX220) the *Cordelia* was torpedoed in the North Atlantic by the U0632 (Lieut. Hans Karpf). All lives were lost but one – a young lad who was rescued by the U-632. Under questioning he gave away the information that a further convoy was but a few days behind. How he knew this is not known but the information undoubtedly helped the Wolf packs to savage this convoy with the loss of many lives. Did I know this lad? Perhaps he joined the *Cordelia* on this last voyage as my replacement?

And what of the U-156? And how did she fare? She was a Type IXc boat

commissioned in September 1941 under Lieutenant Werner Hartenstein. She served four war patrols and sunk 22 merchantmen. She sunk the *Norman Prince* on her third patrol. She herself was sunk on 8 March 1943, off Barbados by a depth charge from a United States Navy Catalina aircraft piloted by Lieutenant Dryden of A/O PatRon 53 Squ(D) in position 12 38'N 54 39'W (not very many miles from where she sunk the *Norman Prince*). Lieutenant Dryden took 17 photographs including 11 survivors in the water. None were saved. He was awarded the Air Medal for the sinking.

The U-632 had a less fruitful life. Commissioned under Lieut. Hans Karpf in December 1942, she sunk four ships in the North Atlantic (including the *Cordelia*), and then returned to Brest at the end of her patrol. The lad saved from the *Cordelia* was landed ashore and then shipped off to a POW camp (Milag Nord). U-632 then sailed for a further North Atlantic patrol where she was depth-charged by a Sunderland aircraft piloted by Flight Officer Burcher of 86 Squadron, just south of Iceland.

I have enjoyed recalling the details of the "*Norman's*" last voyage and the research which has enabled me to fill in the background to my memories. To my knowledge none of these facts have been published in any of the many books written on the subject of the U-Boat war. I think it might be too late now to rectify the omission – but then perhaps I might just be tempted to do that one of these days.

# Part Two

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*"Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.*

*This be the verse you grave for me:  
'Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill'."*

**Requiem - Robert Louis Stevenson**

# 1

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## A new ship - a new voyage

It was towards the middle of December 1942. I was then living in the village of Bracknell in Berkshire and nearing the end of my survivor's leave earned from the sinking of the *ss Norman Prince* and subsequent internment on the island of Martinique by the Vichy French in May 1942.

I awoke one morning to find a letter from the Prince Line Steamers (Furness Withy Ltd) requesting me to join the brand new *ss Highland Prince* at the Burntisland Shipbuilding Company's yard across the river from Leith in Scotland. This gave me some pleasure as I was now being credited a "company man". (As a company man you continued to receive a wage while not signed on Articles).

Burntisland was none too easy to reach from Bracknell, and it required a train first to London and then on the long overnight run up to Edinburgh. I remember nothing of the journey now or how I arrived at Burntisland, but on locating the *Highland* at the fitting out berth, and stepping up the gangway my heart dropped to see the utter chaos present on her decks - debris from the ship-fitters and dock-workers who had never been trained in the art of clearing up at the end of a job!

Looking back over the 53 years I think the general phlegmatic attitude to life in those days helped me to accept the conditions, and I proceeded to find the Chief Steward to report for duty. For this voyage I was signing on as a 2nd Cook and Baker - a necessary step towards gaining my Chief Cook's Ticket and eventually a berth as Chief Steward.

As I remember, the only members of the ship's future crew were the Master, Chief Officer, Chief Steward, Chief Engineer and 2nd Engineer, the Chief Cook and myself. The crew proper would be signed on in Leith where the *Highland* would load after her proving trials. I think we lay at Burntisland for something like a week while she was cleaned up and prepared for acceptance trials. These (unlike in peace time) were undertaken and completed in one day and we then proceeded up river to her loading berth in Leith.

Over the next few days the catering staff, deck and engineering officers, carpenter and bosun joined her, and the Master opened ship's Articles. The *Highland* was a standard five-hatch cargo liner, single screw motor ship, with a speed of 12 knots. She had been laid down to serve the company's South Africa trade and was equipped with a 30 ton "jumbo" derrick forward of the bridge. Her accommodation was very comfortable, and the first ship on which I had a small cabin to myself. she would have had a regular crew of 42 but this was augmented by six DEMS ratings, the senior of which was a long service Marine. Her armament included a very old 4" naval gun and 9mm HA gun on her stern poop; a Bofers gun on each bridge wing and two Marlin machine guns mounted above the galley deckhead. More than capable of giving a good account of herself if required.

Articles were opened at the shipping office on the 21 December. Loading for an unknown destination had already commenced, but it was what we were loading that began to give us some trepidation! It was obvious from the large

quantities of ammunition boxes and other obvious military supplies that we could not expect a “holiday run” around the West Indies, or a relaxing trip up the west coast of the United States to Vancouver.

As with all merchant ships during the war, actual destinations were only disclosed after convoys broke up at 32°W and the “Old Man” could open his sealed orders. However, as usual the “galley sink radio” soon predicted exactly where we were bound for, and just how long we should expect to be away! The fact that we were obviously loading a full cargo of military stores put the lie to one hopeful prediction ... Australia and the Pacific!

I spent three very pleasant weeks in Leith (including Christmas and the New Year) while the ship completed loading and preparations for her maiden voyage, but now looking back to those weeks (and the 14 months I spent on her), I cannot remember one name or bring to mind a single face. Did nothing occur on that voyage to imprint on my memory one single shipmate?

Most evenings were spent ashore in Edinburgh, and my favourite watering hole was either the Royal British Hotel or the Waverley Hotel on Princes Street. I think the Royal British hotel may no longer be there. The main bar at the RBH had been more or less taken over by the Navy and the RAF. Uniform was essential to get a drink (Gin Pims was favourite), and it was here that I met an attractive WREN who had a special liking for ice skating, and we made several visits to the ice rink. She was stationed at Newbridge and I remember that, after seeing her back to her billet, walking some distance to the Turnhouse RAF station to scrounge a lift back into Edinburgh.

My memory follows a similar pattern as before regarding my WREN's name. Jane? Janet? “J” seems familiar but I have no reason for thinking so. Funny, really, because I know I wrote home to my parents to tell them about her and I wanted to keep the friendship alive. We promised to write and I

did so once; I never received a letter from her. Many letters went astray between services during the war: was her letter on a torpedoed mail ship? I like to think that this might be the reason for our failed correspondence.



# 2

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## Convoy ... to where?

We eventually sailed towards the end of January 1943, and our course was north-about through the Pentland Firth bound for the convoy station at Loch Ewe. Our convoy when formed was composed of some 40 to 50 ships, which was normal. We still had no idea from the conditions around us as to our eventual destination.

The convoy eventually sailed and after some days it appeared that we were making a westerly passage, and on reaching 32°W and the dispersal of the convoy, our course was set for the Greenland coast. The north-west course took us into some foul weather - typical winter North Atlantic - and it was now fairly obvious we would eventually reach some point on the United States easterly seaboard. But would we? Anything could happen in the wartime Merchant Navy and we finally had to accept that the *Highland Prince* had the worst adjusted “galley sink radio” in the service!

I don't know when we finally changed course, but the Greenland coast was now astern and we were making a southeasterly heading. If this course were to remain steady we would drive straight down to the South Atlantic and possibly South Africa, South America or even on into the Indian Ocean and India.

This was one voyage where the Master did not tell us where we were bound when we broke convoy, so there was somewhere and something very special booked for us ... and it was definitely highly secret. We eventually learned that we were bound for Cape Town for bunkers and stores, but still no final destination. Cape Town was great. Those of us who knew Cape Town headed straight for the Del Monico. This was a huge dance hall with bars, together with a large domed roof that swung back to let in the night sky during summer.

Bunkering, watering and provisions took two days to complete but we had to wait on “the hook” for several ships to form a convoy. But where to? When the convoy sailed the course was easterly towards Madagascar. Now the “GSR” (galley sink radio) was in full song and knew exactly where we were going - India, and probably for discharge at the naval base at Trincomalee, Ceylon ( ... except for the fact that the stores we watched being loaded in Leith were anything but naval stores). We eventually learned that our next port was to be Aden where we bunkered and took on water before heading for the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. (the “GSR” was making no further predictions!)

The convoy had broken up before changing course for Aden and from Aden on we were to sail unescorted, and we now settled down to suffer the voyage through the Red Sea. P.O.S.H. was essentially the manner in which to travel through the Red Sea in the “big ships”. Knowledgeable passengers always ensured they had cabins PORT SIDE out and STARBOARD SIDE home - hence posh - as the prevailing winds came off the Arabian shore and helped to relieve the incessant heat. They sometimes included a few hundred thousand tons of red sand off the desert (hence the Red Sea) and then you closed your scuttle, heat or no heat. The sand was worst!

# 3

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## Unexpected ports of call

We reached Suez Bay and dropped the hook to wait for further instructions. I cannot remember for how long, but we eventually went alongside in Port Tewfic. This was only for bunkers and provisions and we were soon moved back to the bay to await convoy through the canal.

Our turn came at last and we joined a line of several ships for the slow crawl up to the Great Bitter Lakes where you anchor to allow convoys coming from Port Said to pass. However, we were held in the Lakes for several days and once “finished with engines” was rung down, we lowered the gangway to water level to give us a swimming platform. Swimming was a very welcome break from the heat of Egypt, especially for the engine room personnel, and the boredom of shipboard life and routine.

At last we were called up to join a convoy through to Port Said. But where were we going? It was about two months since we left the UK - the Axis forces were now being pushed out of Africa and we thought that our cargo might well have been intended for the Africa campaign. But not the way we were going! When we left Port Said our course was north - vaguely in the direction of Turkey. Needless to say that we never reached Turkey, but we did reach Lebanon and dropped anchor in Beirut of all places. But what for?

There was certainly no war in this neck of the woods so where, for Heaven's sake, were we going? It was some time - days I suppose - before we were given a berth alongside. We had been virtually ship bound for over a month since leaving Cape Town and it was on the cards that there would be some momentous sore heads in the morning after docking! The Lebanese money was 10 Lebanese pounds to one pound Sterling, and £50 would buy you a part share in any one of the local bars! The best beer was Stella and brewed in Egypt (the local brew was undrinkable) and the brandy came from Cyprus. There were several grades of Cyprus brandy; the very best quality would burn a hole in the ship's wooden decking.

Beirut before the war was a lovely port, and we soon found that it still was. The climate for the most part was very pleasant and the town and the people were exceptionally friendly. The main square was tree-lined and surrounded with small shops, bars and restaurants. The evenings saw the whole community parading around the square or taking a beer or a coffee at one of the pavement cafes, and we tended to do likewise.

The Lebanon pound went a long way as snacks (such as hard boiled eggs, stuffed vine leaves, tasty meat and rice rissoles) were very cheap. Beer was also cheap and proved the downfall for quite a few of our crew. Life on board ship became very relaxed while we waited to hear from fate, but after some weeks boredom began to set in. The "Old Man" was now beginning to ration cash advances to the crew (who as usual attempted to spend twice as much as they earned) and consequently he lost some popularity.

It was now obvious that our cargo was required for something special in the future, and with a general lack of the "readdies", it was essential that something had to be done to raise morale. There were several other ships alongside and efforts were made to interest other British crews in competitive sporting activities. Picnics were organised - Beirut has beautiful beaches and glorious water for swimming. Football became very popular

when the ship's chandler obtained permission for teams to play on the American university pitch. The pitch was not grass but very finely ground sand and silica. Knees, arms and elbows took an awful lot of stick if you fell, and bad scratches had to have medical attention for fear of turning septic. We also found that running around barefoot could be dangerous due to a minute insect burrowing into the soles of the feet resulting in a medical condition epidermophytosis. Lack of early diagnosis and attention could lead to hospitalisation.

After some weeks the ship became the attention of a number of Navy and Army bigwigs, and shortly afterwards some cargo from our for'ard holds began to be discharged. Once empty, gangs of joiners and labourers, supervised by the Royal Engineers, began constructing what eventually turned out to be crude living quarters in the upper 'tween decks. Much of the discharged cargo was now returned to the lower holds and finally the *Highland's* decks were fitted out to accept tanks and other military vehicles. Massive shackles were welded to the decks in order to make the vehicles secure in bad weather. On top of her after hatches, sandbags were built to form a large square about 12 inches deep and this was filled with sand. Bedded down in the sand were field kitchens, and we now began to realise that something big was on the cards for the *Highland Prince*.

# 4

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## Alexandria will do nicely!

I think it was towards the middle of June when we left Beirut. Again, we were not told of our destination, but after three days on an easterly course we awoke to see the coast of Egypt, but this time the approaches to Alexandria. However, it was not for us to go alongside to taste the fleshpots of Alex, but to go on the buoys in the naval basin, and very much a “no-no” to going ashore in any circumstances.

I don't remember how long we spent in Alexandria - a couple of weeks, perhaps three. There was a lot of coming and going of Army people but eventually we were taken off the buoys and brought alongside the wharf. Immediately everything started to move. Royal Engineers' stevedores came aboard to rig our heavy lift on the foredeck, and then the tanks came rolling down the quay. Shore side cranes also began lifting half-track vehicles, lorries and Jeeps on to the ship and before long it became a steeplechase on deck to get from for'ard to aft.

It was now obvious that we were destined for some theatre of war, but where? The Axis forces were now out of Africa and we would hardly be loading like this for Burma or the Pacific somewhere east. Malta had been relieved and the Mediterranean was now open for routing ships in convoy

from either end. The general consensus was that we were headed in the direction of Gibraltar.

It was now the end of June and we were moved off the wharf and back on to the buoys, just inside the harbour. What a sight! There were dozens of ships from small to large; most were basic cargo liners like ourselves, but some were passenger ships converted for trooping and their parentage was easily recognised by many of us. Tramps and sea-going tugs were also to be seen and all the cargo ships were down to their marks like us with everything and anything on wheels.

At the time I never thought deeply on what I was seeing. During the past four years all of my working hours had been spent with convoys of ships in great waters. This was another convoy forming up with the overtones of war shrouding it, and we on the *Highland Prince* were just another cog in this huge wheel.

We were now into July and we awoke one morning to feverish activity. Out on deck we were to see dozens of landing craft (LCTs) packed with troops making for each ship. There were already several berthed alongside us and our ABs were engaged in lowering our starboard gangway. These lads, we were to learn, were battle-hardened troops of the 50th Infantry Brigade, incorporating the 69th, 151st and 168th Units. NCOs were soon directing a steady stream up our gangway and directing them to their berths in our forward holds. By nightfall all troop movements were complete and later that night we heard the engine room telegraph calling for "standby" and the sound of the forepeak winches hauling in the cables attaching us to the buoys. By daylight next day we were clear of the land and looked out upon the assembled convoy moving slowly northwest. We were later to learn from the naval signaller that this was Convoy MWF37 (12 knots), and that we would be meeting up with three other convoys during the coming week. Two or three days later the Master spoke to all the crew mustered on the

after boat deck and told us that we were part of a major assault upon Italy and that we were to assist in the landings on Sicily to create a beach-head. Our sector was to be assault sector "Acid South" on the Avola beaches and that the action would take place on the 10 July at 6.00 am. It was somewhat unfortunate to learn that our sector was below Catania, which apparently was the headquarters division of the German Army!

After nearly six months and I don't know how many thousands of miles, and how many wrong destination predictions, the news was received without any real enthusiasm. After all, we were only civilians employed on our normal every day jobs, except that we did not know where we were going. Now we knew it came much as a relief as anything, and certainly gave us something specific to talk about. It also gave us something to look forward to in a sense. Fortunately we did not know what we were going to have to face or we would not have been so light-hearted.



# 5

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## Cruising the "Meddy"

Shortly after leaving Alexandria we joined up with another convoy. This was escorted by several destroyers and motor torpedo boats (MTBs), and all day long messages were passing between the ships and destroyers. Ships began to change places from line astern to line ahead and whole lanes were changing positions. Presumably this was to ensure ships were in their correct positions for landing troops and stores when we hit the beachhead. A large liner, the Hiliary, joined us and we learned that it contained the headquarters staff in charge of the sector of the beach to which we were allocated. All the ships were, like us, carrying troops and several were specially fitted out with huge landing craft slung outboard ready to be dropped into the sea. Also like us, scramble nets were slung over the side ready for troops to disembark. Every ship also had their cargo hoists topped and ready for use; no ships ever put to sea normally like this.

We were now steaming slowly, less than 10 knots. It was the 9 July and the word went around that we were to slow through the night and hit the beachhead at 6.00 am the following morning. I don't suppose anybody slept much that night. By midnight the whole ship was a hive of activity with troops moving around to take up their disembarking positions, vehicles being freed from their shackles, engines roaring into life and the constant

shout of voices, with the click-clack of the signal lamp shutters sending and acknowledging messages on the bridge.

The chief cook and I were called at around 3.00 am after only a couple of hours sleep. The Army catering staff no longer had their field kitchens on the after deck and would be relying upon the ship's galley to help out with tea and hot rations. We had a constant stream of troops coming to the galley to pick up their canteens to take back to their disembarking positions. All were fully equipped with back packs, guns, etc. and most to be remembered was the general air of good fellowship. They also constantly thanked us for our help. These chaps were actually looking forward to the events later in the day, and although we all understood only too well the problems to be faced, these chaps would not be found lacking when the dice were down.

# 6

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## Sicily: the landings

Some 6.00 am this 10 July, the coastline of Sicily was directly ahead. Slight changes of course were constantly being made in order that each ship would be in a position to lower its anchor exactly where prescribed in the overall plan. We were in the first line to come to anchor some quarter of a mile from the beachhead, and even before the anchor was out and chocked off the troop landing craft were edging alongside and the troops were going over the side on the nets.

Steam had been on the deck winches for some time and the winches were manned by the Royal Engineers, who were waiting for our crew to remove tarpaulins and open up hatches. It was quite unrealistic in a sense. This was a full scale landing on enemy territory, but it was more like a peacetime practice - it was all so easy - but of course we were civilians, and we had had no previous experience of coming face to face with the enemy. Our enemy spent his time below the waves. We understood him, and we simply took our chances and hoped that the next day we should still be afloat. At the moment there was really nothing to disturb what was, in effect, a relatively pleasant morning.

And then it started. The Germans, it transpired, had heavy fortifications all along the coast between Avola and Syracuse. Their main artillery were 88mm Howitzers and they were very good at getting the best out of them. Within a very short time those 88s were supported by the Luftwaffe who came in like a swarm of bees from between two hills that lay a couple of miles back from the coast. Before our air defences could find the range, the sea started to boil as bomb after bomb plummeted towards us. Most missed their intended marks, but not all. A Harrison freighter directly ahead of us caught two - one down her forward hatches and a second hit directly forward of the bridge. This apparently bounced through the forward accommodation but did not explode.

Life in the galley was murder. The two Marlin machine guns were mounted directly above the galley deckhead and kept up a continuous barrage of fire which after a while made the eardrums ache. The scream of the Stukas coming out of a dive, followed by the exploding of their bombs in a near miss, was perhaps the most frightening. Was the next one for us?

Anchored some little way aft of us was a flat deck ship that had no obvious purpose. All along her decks were what appeared to be batches of metal tubes in units of perhaps 12 tubes. These were pointed upwards and outwards towards the coast. They were not unlike the FAM rocket launchers fitted to some merchant ships. We soon learned what they were; in fact, they were rocket launchers and this was a rocket ship. When they fired it was salvo after salvo with a breathtaking display of pyrotechnics. The rockets poured into the woods hiding the German 88s, quickly silencing them. These rockets left the firing nozzles with a deafening roar and you could smell the cordite fumes from several hundred yards. The deck of the ship was kept streaming with water and steam, and we later learned that the rearward blast on firing heated the deck to danger level and the water had to be continually hosed to reduce the heat.

It was now obvious that the landings had taken the Germans completely by surprise and research into "Operation Husky" shows that they had been hoodwinked by a false cover target. Some months earlier a false operation - "Operation Mincemeat" - had been devised by the Allies. The body of an unknown civilian dressed as a "Major Martin", a Royal Marine Officer on Mountbatten's staff, was dropped overboard from a submarine, HMS Seraph, off the southeast coast of Spain where it would drift ashore. His pockets contained secret documents for Allied plans together with back-up material such as personal letters etc. These letters purported to come from Major Martin's bank and, most importantly, one was from General Archibald Nye, describing certain secret proposals. This letter was actually signed by him in case the Germans tried to check the signature. These proposals were, in fact, detailed plans for the second front landing on Sardinia. After cessation of hostilities, captured German documents showed that the Germans had swallowed "Operation Mincemeat" hook, line and sinker. It also accounted for the very light opposition met with on Sicily.

One of my more lasting memories was of our destroyers steaming backwards and forwards along the coast, bombarding the shore defences with their four-inch guns. These guns had a terrible effect ashore, finding their targets quite easily, as was to be seen by the massive explosions occurring when the shells hit ammunition dumps and petroleum storage tanks.

All ships were now working at their limits to move cargoes ashore and work carried on throughout the night with the aid of overhead cargo cluster lights. There were very few air attacks after dark and those planes attempting to bomb us were easily driven off. We also had a strong backup from sea borne carriers, and from Malta, and this after the first few days ensured that Stukas and JU87s were kept at bay.

# 7

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## Are we going home?

I am not sure just how long we took to complete discharge - about a week perhaps. The Royal Engineers working our winches didn't hang around, and most of our cargo was quite bulky, aiding a fast discharge, and it was not long before we were hauling in our anchor and heading for the open sea. At this point we were fairly certain that the UK would not be our immediate destination and most of us rather expected a return to Alexandria to load further supplies to back up the drive through Sicily and into mainland Italy. But no, two days later we were picking up the pilot to take us into Tripoli. Tripoli harbour was a disaster zone with sunken and burned out ships creating a major hazard. The quays and the town had also been very badly mauled, both from the 8th Army's push through Libya and from the German Luftwaffe in their attempts to stop us. US troops were being employed to patch up things sufficiently to allow ships to take on the remainder of the military supplies left from the 8th Army's trouncing of Rommel into surrender.

We soon learned that we were to return to Sicily and, once alongside, we began to work the huge mountain of supplies needed to support the drive through to Italy. At one point we were horrified to see 10 gallon "jerry cans" of petrol coming aboard in net slings, and a great number of them were

leaking their contents. Further, no effort was being made to segregate these leaking drums. Smoking anywhere in the ship was now prohibited, except in the confines of the engine room, and looking back I think we must have been extremely worried, as the slightest spark could have sent us to eternity.

We lay in Tripoli for quite some time and I made several friends among the US troops. They invited a couple of us back to their PX (canteen), which to us was akin to Aladdin's Cave. I cannot think of a single luxury they did not have - cigarettes at a few cents a pack, Pabst Blue Ribbon bottled beer, chocolate bars of all kinds (Hershey!), and what was more there was no limit on the quantity that could be purchased - if you had the cash! They also had a Ten-Pin bowling alley with limitless amounts of Coke and assorted soft drinks.

On completing loading we learned that we were bound this time for the Port of Catania which had been cleared of German troops, and who were now fighting a stiff rearguard action at Messina, the take-off point for the Italian mainland. There was no resistance in Catania - not even air attacks - and we were allowed ashore during the day, but while we were there a curfew was in place at night. Catania had been the German headquarters and unlike the Italians, who at the first sign of trouble had put on their backward running boots, the Germans had remained dug in. Actually, the US troops had badly misjudged the resistance to be expected at Catania, and as a result the town had suffered severe damage. It was also our own lads that had had to break the German resistance and push them down towards Messina. The local people had made us very welcome when Catania eventually changed hands; they hated the Hun, who had treated them like dirt.

There was really nothing to go ashore for except for a few glasses of wine at the odd bar that had started up, but we had no local money. Cigarettes and

tobacco were good currency but these were becoming in short supply on the ship, and we had had no opportunity to replenish stores. Cigarettes and tobacco could also buy the services of certain of the local women. They were to be found in the vicinity of the ships every night, until the US MPs chased them off.

On completing discharge we went to anchor in the harbour to await embarkation of several hundred German and Italian prisoners of war. These were to be shipped to Tripoli and then on to a POW camp somewhere in Libya. They were a very mixed bunch and a heavy guard was put on board to look after them. The Italians and Germans did not mix; they were kept in separate hatches, and a lot of the Germans remained arrogant and assured us that their present predicament was only temporary and that Hitler would, in due course, reverse their situation. When we eventually put them ashore I for one was sorry to see the Italians go. For a couple of good meals a day I had them peeling potatoes, washing pans, cleaning down the galley and any other jobs that I generally disliked doing myself!

The ship was now urgently needing basic stores, water and bunkers. Only water was available in Tripoli and this we took on to discharge at Malta where they had a constant shortage due to the huge concentration of troops. At Malta we went alongside a Royal Navy tanker to take sufficient fuel for the run to Alexandria and the next phase of our operations. On arrival at the Grand Pass and the approach to Alex, we received orders to proceed to Port Said where we were berthed alongside for stores, water and bunkers. I can no longer remember dates. I had my 23rd birthday (31 August) in Tripoli and we arrived in the Canal Zone some time in November.



# 8

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## "Home is the sailor, home from sea"

It was now nearly twelve months since I joined the *Highland* in Burntisland, and this voyage was the longest I had undertaken, and it was not finished yet by any means. We passed through the Canal to anchor off Suez (Port Tewfic) to take on further provisions, and it was here that we learned that we were homeward bound for the UK after loading general cargo down the South African coast. Ironic really, because this was the very trade for which the *Highland Prince* was originally built to service.

At last the time came to up anchor, take on the pilot, and slowly make a heading for the Red Sea. We had a dickens of a long way to go before we made home, but the general air was cheerful, especially as several bags of mail were taken on at Tewfic. This had been following us around for several months, and there is nothing worse than the lack of mail when so far from home for so long. With the pilot dropped our first port was to be Port Sudan, about two days steaming, and then round the head of Africa and down to Kilindini, the docks for Mombassa. From Mombassa it was down the coast a short way to Dar-es-Salaam and Lindi. Mombassa and Dar-es-Salaam were well-established ports, but Lindi was no more than a settlement in a sheltered bay. I cannot remember what we loaded in these smaller places, and there were no docks, and lighters came alongside to service the cargo.

Some years later, Lindi became the centre for the ill-fated groundnut scheme on which some £500,000 was squandered without a single groundnut being grown.

Our next ports of call were Beira, Lourenço-Marques (now Maputo), and then to the real gem of the coast - Durban. British ships had a tremendous welcome from the local people, and crews were never short of invitations from British residents. I do not remember much of our visit except that a tailor sold me a length of blue and white pinstripe cloth that I later had made up into a suit at Cape Town.

After leaving Durban our next ports were East London, Port Elizabeth and finally Cape Town. While in Port Elizabeth I visited the famous Bell Tower at the head of the docks to take a look at the bell. This bell was cast in Croydon where my Uncle Frederick was General Foundry Manager. We left Cape Town towards the end of 1944 to call briefly at Walvis Bay (now Walvisbaai, Namibia), and from here we made the long haul up to Freetown to join a convoy for home. The ship was now back in the old routine of double watches and lookouts, and a blackout through the hours of night. The days of wondering whether we would still be afloat the next morning were past. We knew that the worst of the U-Boat menace was gone, but ships were still being lost despite the presence of MAC ships with each convoy and the continuous surveillance from the Sunderland patrols.

Our course from Freetown was north by north east to pass the Azores to starboard, and thence due north to pick up Malin Head light off the north coast of Ireland, and here we left the convoy and picked up speed to make the North Channel and the approaches to the River Mersey. With the pilot aboard it was but a few hours to a Liverpool dock and pay-off within 24 hours. The following day was the 21 February (I'm very sure of this because it is recorded in my Discharge Book), and within a few hours of signing off I was on the London bound train for home.

The voyage had occupied nearly 14 months of my life and had given me more than enough sea-time to allow me to sit for my chief cook's ticket, which I did and passed without problems. Prince Line Steamers were unable to offer me immediate promotion to chief steward and thus I took up an offer from Shell Tankers to serve as probationary chief steward on the mv Ninella, signing on as 2nd steward outward to Abadan, and thence to be promoted to the senior rank when the serving chief left the ship in that port. But this is another voyage altogether!



Ron Snell as a young sailor at the outbreak of the Second World War

The local newspaper for Ron Snell's home town breaks the news of the sinking of the *Norman Prince*



Some of the *Norman Prince* crew, pictured on the French passenger ship *Angoulême* after being rescued

Commander Werner Hartenstein



## WALLINGTON MAN'S ADVENTURES TORPEDOED WHILE IN CONVOY CLUNG TO HATCH IN HEAVY SEAS

A WALLINGTON young man's adventures when torpedoed in the Atlantic in a merchantman is revealed in a letter which his parents have received. The young man is Mr. R. S. Snell, the son of Mr. & Mrs. J. Smith, of the Iron-foundry, Wallington. For three years he was a member of the Borough Surveyor's staff.

Mr. Snell joined the Merchant Navy in 1929 to train for a senior steward's position. He made many trips abroad without accident but not without excitement, for while in one convoy he was complimented for his share in destroying a German mine which attacked his vessel. He was also in a vessel which the gallant action of the "Jervis Bay" enabled to escape.

### TWO TORPEDOES

"I am, together with 31 other survivors, interned in a Military Camp in Martinique," writes Mr. Snell. "About ten minutes to seven the first torpedo hit us; the second one about 15 minutes past seven o'clock. I was standing on the forward deck with three others, awaiting orders to get on the life raft when the second torpedo hit us some 20 feet distant from where I was standing.

"The explosion blew me clean off the ship and into the air. That was the last I knew until the shock of the cold water brought me to. I found myself drifting along to the ship among a great deal of debris. I faintly remember people jumping from the ship's stern, which was pointing into the air.

"My chest was giving me a great deal of pain as well, but I can also remember, but after that, everything went black. When I came to, I found myself scarce a mile-covered together with another fellow, one of the dockmen, to whom I owe my life, at that moment the ship began to go down properly. Her stern began to rise right clean out of the water, and she slid slowly out of sight.

"All this time I had just been clinging on to the hatch-board with the other chaps, paddling it clear from the suction of the ship.

### HEAVY SWELL RUNNING

"There was a very heavy swell running and the seas kept breaking over the small board we were clinging to. Some three or four times we turned over, and each time managed to remain the only chaps we had of our party. The sea was so rough that I saw the rest emergency lights.

"Once I had a nip from my flask in my life-rocket, which pulled me up and kept my mind on the job of floating on. After about half-an-hour the dockerman spotted a life-boat, the only one to get away from the ship. By then I was quite helpless. My chest seemed to be suffocating me, and I had difficulty in breathing, but the dockerman managed to get me up as near enough for them to hear his shouts.

"As I had I can remember for some hours then my leg being crushed against the side of the life-boat as they pulled me along side. I must have been pulling like the devil, because when I came to again, everything was quiet and the sea all empty.

"The next 24 hours I will not dwell upon. We spent one hell of a night and all next day under that sun, with hardly any protection and soaking wet. About 9 o'clock the following

night we sighted lights of a ship, obviously neutral.

"We went up three and began signalling with a flashlight. It was about an hour later when we were eventually picked up by the steamer which had turned out to be of British nationality, named St. Martin. We received marvellous treatment, and on reaching port the following day, four of us were treated off to hospital, the other three being a dozen hands with a fractured foot, the second officer with a badly smashed face the has since lost an eye, and the chief officer, with both legs badly bruised and a raised arch.

### MILITARY CAMP

"The other 28 were transferred to Camp Balaisa, a military camp about 15 miles inland in the mountains. My chest was treated and proved to have two small fractures, left side. The rest of my chest and body was just bruised—but what a bruise! It was black, yellow, blue and dotted with livid red marks.

I spent ten days here, and as soon as the fractures had mended sufficiently, and I was able to get about, I was transferred to the camp with the other 28. At the moment I am feeling quite well, although my side gives me a little trouble now and again, and I have difficulty in sleeping.

"We lost 16 lives altogether, the Captain included. The French people on the island have been very kind to us. They have done everything they can to make us comfortable, but the island is naturally under our blockade and is very badly starving."

## BROKE INTO SCHOOL BOYS' ESCAPEE

TWO eleven-year-old Crofton boys were charged at Wallington Juvenile Court on Tuesday with being concerned together in stealing 25s. in cash and jewellery, valued 3s. 6d., from Highview School, Wallington. They pleaded guilty to the first charge, but not guilty to the second.

Frederick Charles Cripps told the court he looked up the school escapee and was "very sorry" to see the boys thrown all over the place, pictures torn down from walls and there was a "general state of disorder." A penknife and 25s. in cash were missing.

### CLIMBED DRAIN PIPE

Detective Monthé gave evidence of arresting one of the boys who denied knowing anything about the school being broken into, saying he was at the pictures that day.

When told he would be taken to the police station the boy said: "We climbed on the chimney and into the flat roof. We got in by opening a window on the ground floor in the rear. I had about 2s. 6d. of the money."

The other boy was arrested at Heston, and admitted having had 10s. of the money. The boy's mother said he had spent the money on a bicycle. Both boys were remanded for four weeks to be sent to an approved school.

Ships in Great Waters  
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