

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE SINKING BY GERMAN TORPEDO FIRE OF THE
WHITE STAR MERCHANT VESSEL 'CALIFORNIA STAR' IN MARCH
1943.**

**BY A MEMBER OF HER CREW
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During the Second World War, all Merchant Ships were equipped with guns. These were manned by Royal Navy Seamen, who were called DEMS Ratings (DEMS meaning Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships). I was called up with my age group (31 years of age) on New Years Day 1941, and left home, where I lived with my wife and little girl at a village near Newark, Notts called Ragnall, to join HMS Collingwood at Fareham, Portsmouth, where I was trained in seamanship and gunnery for ten weeks after which I went to Portsmouth Barracks from where I was drafted to 'HMS Glendower', (a Butlins Holiday Camp) taken over by the Admiralty in North Wales for further gunnery training. It was there that we learned that we were to be attached to Merchant Ships and called DEMS Ratings. I was eventually sent to North Shields to pick up a ship. This turned out to be a 35-year-old collier, and we took coal from Newcastle to the East End of London (Becton Gas Works) Barking and had to endure E Boats, Mines and Aircraft down the East Coast, not forgetting the 'muck'. I was extremely glad to get off that ship!

After some leave, and other ships, I was sent to a ship docked at Birkenhead called the CALIFORNIA STAR, a fridge ship, originally built for bringing fruit etc. from California, but changed over to meat, butter, cheese etc. owing to the War and these items of goods being more essential. The ship also took a lot of export commodities for cargo on its way to New Zealand and I made one trip on that ship there and back without incident.

I should point out here that we didn't go in convoy, as she was a fast ship- 16 knots- and relied on zigzagging at night as a form of defence. She also came back via the Pacific and Panama Canal and so circled the globe. On the second voyage out to New Zealand, we arrived at Wellington without incident and docked there for a few days. We then left for Napier, a small place where we loaded with New Zealand butter, lamb etc. And sailed from there sometime in January 1943. I remember, we had, as one of the passengers a man called Arthur Cook who was then Deputy Prime Minister of New Zealand, sailing with us to England on some political mission. He was not to survive the voyage.

We reached the Panama Canal safely and left there for home on the 4th March 1943 at 7.30pm. Somewhere about halfway between Panama and England we were hit by a torpedo on the port side. I was just about to turn in as I was due to go on watch at 12 until 4am and all I was wearing was a vest and blue football shorts as our cabin was near to the engine room and very warm. All the lights went out, we all grabbed what we could and scrambled out and made our way to various lifeboats and stations. When I reached the boat deck I found that the boat I should have been in had been blown away by the blast from the explosion along with the other port boat. I went over to starboard side and heard the 3rd Officer say, "we are getting as many as we can into these two boats" which they were lowering. Being very scantily clothed I dashed back below for more clothing and anything I could grab. Fortunately I had previously

grabbed a torch so that I could see. I got back on deck just in time to throw the clothes into the boat, which, by this time had been lowered and was full of men. I grabbed a rope and slid down (burning my hands in the process) just before the boat pushed out and away from the ship.

We were about 50 yards from the ship when the other starboard boat was lowered, the submarine put another torpedo into the starboard side of the ship and that lifeboat, full of men, was blown to bits. The blast from the explosion nearly overturned us 50 yards away. It was very dark but we could just make out the ship going down.

Shortly afterwards the submarine came along side us with two German sailors in oilskins on deck covering us with machine guns. Some one who we couldn't see shouted in broken English from the conning tower wanting the name of the ship and to take the Captain who wasn't at that time on the boat with us. They took the 3rd Officer and then went leaving us to do the best we could. The Purser took charge of our boat, which consisted of 17 merchant seamen, 4 stewards and 3 gunners- 24 of us in all. We were equipped with sails, compass etc., but because the 3rd Officer had been taken by the Submarine, we had no one who could navigate. The Purser decided we should keep in touch with the rafts, which we could see all round us by flashing troches. We rowed around until daylight and rowed to the nearest raft, which was a small one with four men on board, including the Captain and Chief Officer. The Purser explained that we wanted someone to navigate us but could only get one in our boat as it was already overcrowded. After some discussion the Captain (his name was Foulkes) and the Chief Officer (his name was Davis) stayed on the raft. We towed this raft to one of the others and eventually towed them altogether and then had to leave them. There were 28 men in all on the four rafts and they were at the mercy of the winds which ever way they blew. We were fortunate to have sails, compass and steering etc. I should state here that the only lifeboat with an engine in it was one of the ones blown away by the blast.

We had rigged the mast and sails up by this time and the Captain explained our position. The nearest land was the Azores about 500 or 600 miles away and, as he was short on some piece of navigational equipment, he feared we might miss them, as they were so tiny. The alternative was to make for the mainland of Spain or Portugal, which would mean a longer time in the boat- about 30 days being estimated. The water ration was worked out about 2ozs per day along with the usual lifeboat rations. The boat was leaking and we were continually bailing out, so watches were fixed, the seamen on the tiller steering, and the rest of us bailing out. The seas had been fairly moderate up to now but after three or four days it became very rough. Huge waves were coming over and we were continually drenched by the seas. The boat took these waves awkwardly and a few times we nearly overturned. We then had a conference as to whether or not to take the sails down. It was blowing us in the direction we wanted to go so we decided to keep them up.

One morning when daylight came, we found one of the seamen dead. He was a young galley boy named Davis who used to peel 'spuds' etc. He hadn't much constitution. The weather became calmer and still we sailed in the right direction. On about the 10th day we sighted land about mid-day and when night came we saw a light (from a lighthouse) and kept steering towards it. We landed on a small island called Larges da Flores- one of a group of nine called the Azores.

Now I would like to write about my experiences while staying on this island where I was helped to recover for three weeks. When we landed, all the people were there on the beach, they must have watched us sailing and were all chattering in their native language. Suddenly I heard a voice say 'you come along my home'. I turned and there was an elderly man (about seventy I guessed). At least I thought, he speaks English, so I followed him. He took me to his bungalow type cottage. When you entered the door there was a kitchen, which led into the living room. This was more like a small church with an altar, candles etc at one end. These people were very religious. After crossing the living room there were two bedrooms, one of which they gave to me. The house was spotlessly clean with no floor coverings- very primitive with no modern conveniences, no radios etc. The man's name was Jose Pimental Soares, he was a farmer in a very small way and had spent some time in America, hence his English with an American accent. His wife could speak no English and Jose interpreted for me. His wife was also very religious and prayed all day long even when she was cooking. They had two sons who were away learning to be priests.

I was worried at this time because I hadn't been about to perform a natural function for ten days and, after my experience of the previous days, I wasn't feeling very well at all. I told Jose, who told his wife, who gave me a glass of awful yellow stuff, which I drank. She followed me around the house until it worked! The first week with these kind people I couldn't sleep at night. My toes and fingers ached and reminded me of when I went snowballing as a boy. It was to do with constantly sitting in water and circulation. I told Jose and after that every morning he went down to the sea and brought back a bottle of sea water and massaged my hands and feet with it. A funny incident, which I will relate, that they drank tea without milk. I told them that in England we had milk in our tea and after that his wife served me tea and a bowl of hot milk, which I had all the time I was there.

As my health improved I managed to get out to the village to meet the other lads. On returning one day I found Jose and his wife praying at their little altar. Out of respect I knelt too and was there about an hour. That was the first time I had seen them in prayer and was careful not to barge in on them again. I have never come across such devout people.

Jose had a donkey, which he used to take with a couple of milk cans each side of it up the hills till eventually he came to a field with one cow in it. He took the cow to a corner and milked it then took the milk to the village where he left the majority of it and kept some for his own use. It seems they all did the same sort of communal farming. The milk was exported to Lisbon. I went with him once or twice on this trip and once he asked me to take the donkey home for him, as he had to call somewhere. I thought I would find the lads from the ship and have a bit of fun but I couldn't make that donkey go anywhere but HOME.

When I eventually had to leave these kind people Jose's wife had tears in her eyes. They had grown to like me and I found their kindness to me very touching.

There was a doctor and a mayor on the Island where the Captain stayed. All our names were cabled to the Blue Star Offices in England as survivors of the ship. A tailor made us all a suit as hardly anyone had suitable clothing. All the Portuguese

were paid for their help, and things they had done for us, by the British Government. It was arranged that a Portugese ship on its way to Lisbon from America should pick us up. We stayed at Lisbon a week and then were flown home to England in a Liberator Aircraft. The Merchant Seamen were all sent to Gibraltar to pick up various ships.

Out of 70 men on board the California Star only 23 of us survived. The ones on the four rafts were never heard of again. I made several enquiries months afterwards at the Blue Star Offices in Liverpool.

The young galley boy who died from exposure was called Davis. The same name as the Chief Officer. When on the Island a cable came form the Blue Star Offices which read, ' Please state whether Davis-Chief Officer or Davis- Galley Boy?' They both died.