

TED BARTON

Ted, a member of the Merchant Navy, joined the MV Duke of Athens as a 16 year old galley boy at Fremantle on the 27th of May 1942. The ship picked up a load of wheat at Geraldton and set sail for Europe via the Capetown. The ship joined a convoy which assembled at Freetown, Sierra Leone.

In crossing the Indian Ocean, the ship went south-west-wards to sail into the Roaring Forties. Galley boy Ted had to go outside the galley into the frequent storms to pump water into the urn. Woe betide him if he didn't keep that urn full! It wasn't only the cook, but the other hands as well who made tea and coffee at all hours of the night and day. Ted became accustomed to the big waves that frequently broke on the side of the ship. One day was particularly rough and the ship was rolling badly. As Ted pumped away a colossal wave suddenly broke over the ship. The parapet was more than ten feet above him, and the wave was higher than that. He wore no safety belt; it is doubtful if the ship had one. Ted hung on to the pump handle, facing a grim death. Although the galley was closed, water flooded it. Ted clung to the pump handle and watched the water flood down the scuppers, a gaping hole a metre by two metres wide. Later Ted mentioned to a sailor mate that he wondered if the ship would have been able to turn around and recover him should he have washed away. He was informed that it would be futile to make the attempt as the propeller would have made mince of him as he flowed by!

About a fortnight out of Freetown, Ted's ship was on the port side of the convoy and the third in the line. The leading ship exploded without warning and sank in a few minutes. It was very bewildering to a lad of 16 to observe how a ship could be there one minute and then disappear forever. Later that night, star shells were fired from an escort, which illuminated the sky. The next day saw two more ships sunk and the armed Merchant escorting cruiser was hit in the bows. Most of the day the crew were at action stations. As ships were sunk the ships moved up the line. Ted's ship was shortly the leader, which was now considered to be an unlucky location.

Nearing the Irish Channel more escorts joined the convoy. A submarine was sighted, the escorts dropped depth charges, but fortunately Glasgow was reached. Ted went to London to visit relatives, and there he heard the wailing Air Raid Sirens. He joined the SS Fort McLeod, anchored at the mouth of the Thames and again experienced the Air Raid Warnings continuously. Leaving London on the 10th October 1942, down through "Bomb Alley" and "U-Boat Alley" for Glasgow, which took fourteen days. They had called at several ports, and by the cargo that had been stowed, the crew assessed that a second front was being established.

They assembled to form a convoy at Gourouch. The crew did not sleep too well that night. The crew gained the information of their destination because the radio operator, had gleaned the information from the poor BBC broadcast reception. It was to be North Africa, through the Mediterranean Sea. The 20th November saw three ships of the convoy sunk, the attacks coming earlier than expected. There was another ship in the convoy that was on fire and beginning to lag. At the same time a plane was seen skirting the convoy which Ted assumed to be friendly. When it neared the convoy a warning shot was fired across its bows for it to establish its identity. It did not respond to the challenge and many ships engaged it. It successfully passed the escorts and then it was every ship for itself. It was a float plane flying directly at their ship. Ted thought that the gunner had waited too long before he opened fire on it. But the man was perfectly accurate and immediately hit the plane with a number of shots. Ted feared that the plane, now on fire, would crash on the deck, but at the last moment it veered and fell into the seas some fifty metres to the side. Ted returned to the other side of the ship to notice that the burning ship was about to sink. The convoy continued and frequent alarms occurred day and night until Algiers was reached on the 25th November 1942.

Some years later Ted was discussing the incident with a Royal Navy man who also had been in the same convoy taking supplies for the North African campaign when they thought that they were being attacked by a Catalina type plane with a German crew. The man made the remark that it was strange that Ted

should mention the incident, for a Sunderland had skirted the convoy, dropped the wrong identification signal and was shot down. The BBC news that evening had stated that the Duke of Kent had failed to return to base.

Returning to Wales from North Africa the empty ship struck a severe storm in the Atlantic. A lifeboat become insecure and nearly caused extreme damage to the ammunition locker. With considerable difficulty between squalls and the extreme rolling the crew, aware of an impending explosion, was able to cut it free and let it drop into the sea. A cup of tea was enjoyed.

Ted was sent to Glasgow to join the "SS Orbita" and went back to Algiers, a trouble free trip. They were only in the port at Algiers one day but there was a high altitude air attack causing no damage to his ship. The next few months saw considerable sailing without many alarms and very few scares.

However, when leaving India one of the crew mentioned that "things" were appearing to smell. In fact, things were beginning to stink, for troops had been taken aboard. On reaching Port Said dozens of troopships were lying around at anchor. Barges replaced lifeboats. Once through the Suez Canal Ted's ship was tucked away in Alexandria, empty, for the troops had been landed. The crew pondered what it was all about. The troops returned a few days later with books on Sicily. Later the skipper called the crew onto the top deck to inform them that they were to be part of the invasion of Sicily. As if they didn't already know!

Arriving at Saracusa they saw many crashed gliders on shore. There were ships that had been hit in the harbour and only partly sunk and guns firing like hell on shore all day. It appears somebody was getting a hiding and they hoped that things were going their way for a change. Alerts occurred all day. A plane fell in flames from the sky, on whose side Ted did not know. They left the same evening, only just in time, for a very heavy attack commenced astern. The Jerry artillery was fiercely hitting back good and hard. Suddenly there was a blinding flash, followed by a loud explosion. The crew rushed to the side of the battleship to ascertain what had happened, some saying that it was a flying bomb or rocket, others being uncertain.

Later in the Mediterranean, homeward bound, some of the crew were on deck relaxing, talking of the things that they would like to do on being discharged. Without warning there were the sounds of loud explosions. Ted thought that it must be an air raid on shore, but he was told that there was no land around. explosions followed and again more a few minutes later. Some gun fire rang out. Next morning, they discovered that a U Boat had been sunk.

Returning to Alexandria via Malta several months passed without incident. Then to London to spend his leave where he found that there were air raids every night, some bombs falling nearby. At various times Ted experienced flying bombs and rockets. He found it much better to be back on board making for Algiers with fresh troops. Being on night duty Ted was asleep in his bunk one afternoon. He heard someone in the alley-way say, "She has hit us". He went to wake his mate and said, "We have been torpedoed". "Ya're balmy, mate", he replied, "the Duchess of Bedford' has rammed us". They returned to Gibraltar for repairs.

After being hospitalised in London with a throat infection, catalysed by being run down through the harsh naval conditions, he returned safely to Sydney for discharge.