



# Britannia Sinking 25<sup>th</sup> March 1941

## Account by D.G Brown RN



EVENTS LEADING UP TO INTERNMENT IN TENERIFE

WHEN IT WAS SUGGESTED THAT I SHOULD TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOME OF MY EXPERIENCES DURING A PERIOD OF 30 YEARS SERVICE WITH THE ROYAL NAVY, I WAS SOMEWHAT APPREHENSIVE FOR FOUR MAIN REASONS.

FIRSTLY, I AM NO SPEAKER, SECONDLY, THESE EXPERIENCES OCCURRED MANY YEARS AGO, AND SOME ARE THEREFORE SOMEWHAT DIM IN MY MEMORY, THIRDELY, THERE ARE MANY MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCES PERHAPS MORE EXCITING AND HAVE EVEN WRITTEN BOOKS ABOUT THEM AND, FOURTHLY, THE USE OF THE FIRST PERSON IS NOT EASY TO PUT OVER.

HAVING SAID THAT, I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE EASIER FOR ME AND, I HOPE, MORE INTERESTING FOR YOU, IF I CONCENTRATED ON EVENTS IN EARLY 1941 WHICH LED UP TO MY BEING INTERNED FOR FOUR MONTHS IN TENERIFE IN THE CANARY ISLANDS. I MADE BRIEF NOTES OF THOSE EVENTS SOON AFTER THEY HAPPENED SO WILL REFER TO THE NARRATIVE I SUBSEQUENTLY DREW UP FROM THEM. *I will have the notes which were compiled on hotel notepaper whilst I was in hospital in Tenerife*

SEE APP A →

SINCE JUNE, 1940, WHEN THE SMALL VESSEL IN WHICH I WAS THEN SERVING WAS BLOWN UP BY A MINE WITH THE LOSS OF 18 OUT OF 26 OFFICERS AND MEN DURING OPERATION "DYNAMO" - THE EVACUATION OF THE B.E.F. AND OTHERS FROM DUNKIRK -, I HELD A TEACHING APPOINTMENT AT THE ROYAL NAVAL SEAMANSHIP SCHOOL AT PORTSMOUTH. ALTHOUGH INTERESTING AND SATISFYING A DUTY, I FELT THAT I SHOULD REALLY BE AT SEA ONCE MORE AND WAS VERY PLEASED WHEN IN FEBRUARY, 1941 I WAS APPOINTED TO THE BATTLESHIP, H.M.S. "BARHAM" WHICH WAS PART OF ADMIRAL CUNNINGHAM'S FORCE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

THE ADMIRALTY INSTRUCTED ME TO PROCEED TO LIVERPOOL TO ARRIVE THERE ON 11th MARCH IN ORDER TO TAKE PASSAGE IN A SHIP OF THE ANCHOR LINE NAMED S.S. "BRITANNIA", OF SOME 5,500 TONS. / <sup>CAPTION</sup> SHE WAS TO BE ROUTED IN CONVOY AS FAR AS THE LATITUDE OF GIBRALTAR, AFTER WHICH SHE WOULD PROCEED INDEPENDENTLY ROUND THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE AND ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN TO BOMBAY. FROM BOMBAY I WOULD BE ASSIGNED TO ANOTHER SHIP ROUTED TO ADEN, UP THE RED SEA AND THENCE TO ALEXANDRIA WHERE THE FLEET WAS THEN BASED. THIS WIDELY DIVERTED ROUTE WAS NECESSARY BECAUSE OF CONDITIONS PREVAILING AT SEA AT THAT TIME.

1941 WAS A VERY BAD YEAR FOR BRITAIN IN THE WAR AT SEA. THE NAVY HAD SUFFERED HEAVY LOSSES ESPECIALLY IN DESTROYERS AND ESCORT VESSELS AT DUNKIRK AND NORWAY; LET ALONE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN. CONSEQUENTLY THE PROVISION OF CONVOY ESCORTS WAS VERY THIN AND CONFINED MOSTLY TO THE NORTH ATLANTIC AND

SOUTH AS FAR AS THE LATITUDE OF GIBRALTAR. THE MEDITERRANEAN WAS CLOSED TO US WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SUPPLIES FOR MALTA AND THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE FEW CONVOYS WHICH RAN THE GAUNTLET WERE VERY HEAVILY DEFENDED BY BATTLESHIPS DOWNWARDS. EVEN THEN THEY SUFFERED DEVASTATING LOSSES.

IN MORE EXTENDED AREAS MERCHANT SHIPPING HAD GENERALLY TO RELY ON SPEED AND EVASIVE TACTICS SUCH AS ZIG-ZAGGING TO AVOID ATTACK BY SUBMARINES AND SURFACE RAIDERS. TO LESSEN THE LIKELY ATTACK FROM AIRCRAFT, SOUTH BOUND CONVOYS FROM THE U.K. WERE ROUTED WELL OUT INTO THE ATLANTIC BEFORE TURNING ON TO A SOUTHERLY COURSE. GERMAN SURFACE RAIDERS HOWEVEr CONSTITUTED THE GREATEST DANGER TO INDEPENDENTLY ROUTED MERCHANT SHIPPING. DURING THE FIRST QUARTER OF 1941, SIX OF THESE GERMAN SURFACE RAIDERS WERE OPERATING IN THE OUTER OCEANS. THEY WERE DESIGNATED BY THE ADMIRALTY AS RAIDERS A, B, C, D, E & F. A, C & D OPERATED IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, B IN THE PACIFIC AND E & F IN THE SOUTH AND CENTRAL ATLANTIC.

~~THIS; THEN; WAS THE BACKGROUND~~ TO THE SCENE WHEN S.S. "BRITANNIA" SAILED IN CONVOY FROM LIVERPOOL IN THE EARLY HOURS OF 12th MARCH, 1941. LIVERPOOL WAS VERY HEAVILY BOMBED ON THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, PRESUMABLY AIMED AT THE CONCENTRATION OF SHIPPING WHICH HAD, BY THEN, LEFT.

"BRITANNIA" WAS, OF COURSE, FULLY LOADED WITH WAR MATERIALS FOR INDIA. THE PASSENGERS WERE MAINLY ARMY PERSONNEL, SOME NURSES, A FEW CIVILIANS AND A SMALL NUMBER OF NAVAL OFFICERS AND RATINGS, ALL RELIEFS OR ADDITIONS TO VARIOUS FORCES. ACCOMMODATION, THOUGH CRAMPED, WAS COMFORTABLE AND FOOD ADEQUATE. THE WEATHER DURING THE FIRST THREE OR FOUR DAYS AT SEA WAS VERY COLD AND TIME SPENT ON THE UPPER DECK WAS LIMITED TO THE DAILY LIFEBOAT DRILL FOR WHICH WE ALL WORE COATS AND MUFFLERS.

THE CREW OF THE "BRITANNIA" WERE, IN THE MAIN, LASCARS AND GOANESE AND, AS THERE WERE INSUFFICIENT SHIP'S OFFICERS AND THEREFORE THE POSSIBILITY OF PANIC AMONG THE LASCARS, NAVAL OFFICER PASSENGERS WERE ASKED TO TAKE CHARGE OF THE LOWERING OF SOME OF THE LIFEBOATS, SHOULD THE NECESSITY ARISE. IN CONSEQUENCE I FOUND MYSELF IN CHARGE OF No. 8 BOAT, LOWERING IT AND GETTING IT AWAY WITH ITS QUOTA OF PASSENGERS.

GRADUALLY THE WEATHER BECAME WARMER, COATS AND MUFFLERS WERE DISCARDED AND PASSENGERS BEGAN TO TAKE AN INTEREST IN UPPER DECK GAMES. A FEW OF US THEN DECIDED TO TURN OUT EARLIER EACH MORNING FOR A FEW MINUTES P.T. AND RUN ROUND THE DECKS BEFORE BREAKFAST. THIS EFFORT DID, I AM SURE, STAND US IN GOOD STEAD A FEW DAYS LATER.

BECAUSE OF THE SHORTAGE OF CONVOY ESCORT VESSELS, WHICH I MENTIONED EARLIER, WE WERE NOT SURPRISED, AFTER ABOUT A WEEK AT SEA, TO FIND "BRITANNIA" ALL ON HER OWN.

ALL WAS WELL, HOWEVER, UNTIL THE THIRTEENTH DAY AT SEA. ON THE MORNING OF 25th MARCH, OUR P.T. PARTY, HAVING DONE ITS STUFF, WAS RESTING ON THE RAILS WHEN ONE OF THEM REMARKED, "LOOK. A SHIP - THE FIRST WE HAVE SEEN SINCE LEAVING THE CONVOY." WE ALL LOOKED AND SURE ENOUGH A SHIP WAS APPEARING OVER THE WESTERN HORIZON. THINKING NOTHING MORE ABOUT IT WE WENT BELOW TO BATH AND SHAVE. I WAS HALF SHAVED WHEN THE ALARM BELLS SOUNDED, SHORTLY FOLLOWED BY THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE. THE SHIP WE HAD SIGHTED SHORTLY BEFORE HAD TURNED OUT TO BE A WELL ARMED GERMAN SURFACE RAIDER. I DID NOT KNOW THEN, BUT KNOW NOW, THAT SHE WAS, IN FACT, RAIDER 'E', NAMED "THOR". HER ARMAMENT WAS SIX 5.9" GUNS AND FOUR TORPEDO TUBES.

EVERYONE KNEW WHAT TO DO WHEN THE ALARM BELLS SOUNDED. DRESS QUICKLY, GET A COAT AND SUN HELMET, GRAB VALUABLES, ON LIFEBELT AND SPREAD ABOUT THE SHIP TO AVOID LARGE NUMBERS OF CASUALTIES. I THOUGHT THE BAR AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY, BESIDES WHICH IT WAS NEAR THE BOAT I WOULD HAVE TO LOWER, SHOULD THE NECESSITY ARISE. I HAD NOT BEEN THERE FOR VERY LONG BEFORE A SALVO FROM THE RAIDER STRUCK AND HIT, BESIDES OTHER PARTS OF THE SHIP, OUR ONLY GUN SITUATED AT THE STERN AND DESTROYED IT WITH ALL THE CREW. IT WAS AN OLD 6" GUN OF FIRST WORLD WAR VINTAGE AND WAS INTENDED, APART FROM GIVING MORAL COURAGE, FOR FIRING AT AN ATTACKER WHILST RUNNING AWAY FROM IT.

WITH THE FIRST SHOCK OF KNOWING THAT WE WERE UNDER ACCURATE FIRE AND A FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS, I SUDDENLY REALISED I HAD LEFT A PHOTOGRAPH OF MY WIFE IN MY CABIN SO DASHED DOWN TO GET IT. HAVING COLLECTED IT, I WAS ON MY WAY BACK TO THE BAR WHEN THE CRASH OF ANOTHER SALVO WAS HEARD. THE BAR HAD DISAPPEARED AND WITH IT THE WIRELESS COMPARTMENT WHICH WAS ABOVE IT. ALL THIS TIME, "BRITANNIA" WAS ZIG-ZAGGING AND MAKING SMOKE SCREENS IN AN ATTEMPT TO SPOIL THE ENEMY'S GUNNERY. BUT TO NO PURPOSE. "BRITANNIA" WAS REPEATEDLY HIT AND EVENTUALLY STOPPED, A BURNING WRECK WITH DEAD AND WOUNDED LYING ALL OVER THE SHIP. SOME OF THE WOUNDED WERE BEING ATTENDED BY THE SHIP'S DOCTOR IN THE DINING SALOON. VERY SOON, THE GERMAN SURFACE RAIDER CLOSED AND SIGNALLED "BRITANNIA" TO ABANDON SHIP AT ONCE, ADDING THAT SHE WOULD SINK THE SHIP AT THE EXPIRATION OF HALF AN HOUR. THE CAPTAIN OF "BRITANNIA" HAD NO OPTION. CONTINUAL SHORT BLASTS ON THE "BRITANNIA'S" WHISTLE SENT WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE PASSENGERS AND SHIP'S COMPLEMENT SCURRYING TO LIFEBOAT STATIONS. HAVING GOT MY BOAT FULL, I LOWERED HER INTO THE

WATER, AFTER WHICH I INTENDED GOING DOWN TWO DECKS TO GET IN MYSELF BY MEANS OF A CHAIN LADDER RIGGED FOR THAT PURPOSE.

APART FROM BEING ANNOYED, I WAS VERY SURPRISED TO FIND THE BOAT HAD BEEN PULLED AWAY BY THE TIME I GOT TO THE LADDER. AS I DID NOT RELISH GETTING WET BEFORE TIME, I DASHED ROUND LOOKING FOR ANOTHER BOAT AND FOUND No10 BEING TURNED OUT FROM THE POOP, NEAR WHERE THE GUN HAD BEEN. AFTER A BIT OF FUSSING, A CROWD OF US EVENTUALLY GOT THE BOAT INTO THE WATER AND THEN GOT INTO THE BOAT BY SLIDING DOWN THE FALLS. BECAUSE OF THE HOLES MADE IN HER WHEN THE GUN WAS DESTROYED, THIS BOAT SANK ALMOST TO THE GUNWHALES AND IT WAS THE BOUYANCY TANKS WHICH PREVENTED HER FROM SINKING ALTOGETHER. BUT IT WAS BETTER THAN NOTHING. ONE POOR LASCAR WAS STRUCK ON THE HEAD BY A SWINGING BLOCK AND DISAPPEARED INTO THE SEA. AT LAST THE BOAT WAS PULLED CLEAR OF THE SHIP - PULLING A WATERLOGGED BOAT IS NO EASY TASK. SOON AFTERWARDS THE ENEMY RAIDER CLOSED "BRITANNIA" TO WITHIN ABOUT 400 YARDS AND FIRED A FEW SHELLS INTO HER BELOW THE WATERLINE. SOME FEW MINUTES LATER, THE "BRITANNIA", WITH HER CARGO OF WAR MATERIALS AND DEAD PASSENGERS DISAPPEARED BENEATH THE WAVES, AFTER WHICH THE GERMAN RAIDER RETIRED AT HIGH SPEED, NEVER TO BE SEEN BY US AGAIN.

THERE WE WERE, WITH OTHER BOATS AND RAFTS, ON A FAIRLY CALM SEA BUT HEAVY SWELL, SOME 700 MILES WEST OF FREETOWN. WE LOOKED ABOUT. OTHER BOATS WERE EITHER MAKING SAIL OR PULLING, THE OCCUPANTS WAVING TO EACH OTHER, ALL EXCEPT FOR ONE BOAT WHICH, LIKE OURS, WAS WATERLOGGED. THIS BOAT CARRIED A STEWARDESS AND MANY GOANESE. WE TRANSFERRED THEM TO OUR BOAT. WE ALSO ATTACHED TWO RAFTS WHICH HAD BEEN SET ADRIPT BY ONE OF THE BOATS NOW UNDER SAIL.

THE OCCUPANTS OF NO.10 BOAT NOW CONSISTED OF 12 WHITES AND 38 GOANESE AND LASCARS. A TOTAL OF 50 PERSONS IN A BOAT DESIGNED TO HOLD 35 PERSONS UNDER NORMAL CONDITIONS.

AN ATTEMPT WAS MADE TO BALE OUT THE BOAT WITH SUN HELMETS, CAPS, SHOES AND ANYTHING WHICH WOULD HOLD WATER BUT VERY LITTLE, IF ANY, IMPRESSION WAS MADE. AS WE COULD NOT PULL OR SAIL A WATERLOGGED BOAT FOR ANY DISTANCE AND THE SEA WAS RISING, IT WAS DECIDED THAT THE ONLY THING LEFT TO DO WAS TO TRY TO KEEP THE BOAT HEAD TO SEA BY MEANS OF AN OAR OVER THE STERN AND HOPE THAT WE WOULD SOMEHOW BE PICKED UP. THE STEWARDESS AND COLOURED CREW WERE NOT EXPECTED NOR, IN THE LATTER CASE TRUSTED, TO TAKE A HAND EITHER AS LOOKOUTS OR ON THE OAR, SO THESE DUTIES WERE APPORTIONED TO THE OTHER ELEVEN WHITES. IT MAY SOUND CURIOUS BUT IT IS NEVERTHELESS A FACT THAT NO ONE THOUGHT OF FOOD OR DRINK UNTIL THE EVENING. IT WAS THEN REALISED THAT IF ANY PROVISIONS

WERE CARRIED THEY WOULD BE WELL UNDER WATER AND WOULD HAVE TO BE GROPED FOR DURING DAYLIGHT NEXT DAY.

I SPENT THAT FIRST NIGHT IN THE BOAT WORKING ON THE STERN OAR FROM 7 P.M. UNTIL 9 A.M. NEXT MORNING. DURING THE NIGHT WE COULD SEE FLASHES FROM TORCHES IN OTHER BOATS. AT DAYLIGHT NEXT DAY, HOWEVER, THERE WAS ONLY ONE BOAT LEFT IN SIGHT AND SHE WAS HIDDEN FROM TIME TO TIME BY THE SWELL AND ROUGH SEA. THE EFFORT OF TRYING TO KEEP THE BOAT HEAD TO WIND AND SEA WAS AGONISING AND IT WAS WITH GREAT JOY THAT WE SEARCHED FOR AND FOUND A SEA ANCHOR. THIS WAS A CANVAS DROGUE, SHREDDED LIKE THE SOCK ONE SEES ON AIRFIELDS. WHEN ATTACHED TO A LENGTH OF ROPE AND THROWN OVER THE BOWS, ITS DRAG HAD THE EFFECT OF KEEPING THE BOAT HEADED INTO THE SEA, THUS MINIMISING THE LIKELYHOOD OF CAPSISING. IT WAS A GREAT HELP. FURTHER SEARCH OF THE BOAT THAT MORNING DISCLOSED A LAMP WITHOUT OIL OR WICK AND SOME FLARES BUT NO DRY PROVISIONS AND NO WATER. THE FLARES, IF DRIED, MIGHT BE USEFUL, BUT WE HAD NOWHERE TO DRY THEM. WE WERE SITTING WAIST OR BREST HIGH IN WATER. THIS FACT LED TO THE MAST BEING PUT UP. FIRST THE SHROUDS AND THEN THE HALLIARDS CARRIED AWAY BUT EVENTUALLY WE FOUND SOME SPARE CORDAGE AND THE MAST WAS SECURED. THE FLARES WERE THEN TIED TO THE MAST. AS THE DAY WORE ON SO THE HEAT INCREASED. WITH THE ENERGY EXPENDED ON BALING, THIRST BEGAN TO MAKE ITSELF APPARENT. A TALK WAS GIVEN TO ALL ON THE BAD EFFECT OF DRINKING SALT WATER. DURING THIS DAY, WE FOUND A SAIL AND WITH THE HELP OF AN OAR AND MORE SPARE CORDAGE IT WAS RIGGED TO HELP KEEP THE BOAT UP TO THE WIND. OTHER ACTIVITIES INCLUDED SPELLS OF LOOKOUT DUTIES AND DIVING IN THE BOAT TO FIND AND PLUG SHELL HOLES. IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, ONE OF THE RAFTS HOLDING THREE LASCARS WAS SET ADRIFT BY ANOTHER LASCAR. WE NEVER SAW THEM AGAIN. THEN SALT WATER DRINKING BEGAN, DESPITE THE WARNING GIVEN. IT WAS PITIFUL TO WATCH. THE UNFORTUNATES WOULD GAZE AT THE WATER FOR A LONG TIME AND THEN SUDDENLY SCOOP SOME UP IN THEIR CUPPED HANDS. HAVING TAKEN SOME, THEIR THIRST GREW UNTIL THEY DRANK MORE AND MORE, EVENTUALLY BEING VIOLENTLY SICK AND THEN EITHER GOING STARK RAVING MAD OR LYING DOWN TO DIE. BY LYING DOWN IN THIS BOAT THEY AUTOMATICALLY DROWNED THEMSELVES. DURING THIS SECOND DAY WE LOST FIVE OF OUR COLOURED BOAT OCCUPANTS AND THREE FROM THE RAFT. EVERYONE WAS A BIT ROUGH AFTER TWO DAYS OF BEING THREE QUARTERS IMMERSED IN WATER, BEING BUFFETED ABOUT AND KNOCKED BY OARS EACH TIME THE BOAT ROLLED AND PITCHED AND WITHOUT ANY FOOD OR FRESH WATER TO SUSTAIN THEM. SO PASSED WEDNESDAY 26th MARCH. WHEN IT WAS DARK, THE DEAD BODIES WERE DIVESTED OF THEIR LIFE BELTS AND, AFTER A SHORT PRAYER, THROWN OVER THE SIDE. THIS MAY SOUND RATHER CALLOUS, BUT THE ROOM WAS NEEDED BY THE LIVING.

DURING THAT NIGHT WE LOST SIGHT OF THE OTHER BOAT AND THE WIND GREW STRONGER. THE SEA ANCHOR CARRIED AWAY AND THERE WAS NO MORE SPARE CORDAGE WITH WHICH TO CONSTRUCT A SUBSTITUTE WITH THE OARS. IN THE LIGHT OF THURSDAY MORNING WE DECIDED TO RIG A CANVAS SCREEN ON THE WEATHER SIDE OF THE BOAT SO AS TO KEEP OUT SOME OF THE SPRAY. BALING WAS ALSO CONTINUED BUT AT A VERY SLOW PACE. WE WERE ALL SHEWING SIGNS OF EXHAUSTION DUE TO LACK OF FOOD AND WATER, EXPOSURE TO THE VERY HOT SUN DURING THE DAY, THE COLD BY NIGHT AND IMMERSION IN WATER ALL THE TIME. THE SKIN ON OUR BODIES BELOW WATER WAS CRINKLED, SIMILAR TO THE HANDS OF A WOMAN AFTER DOING THE WEEK'S WASHING IN THE DAYS BEFORE WASHING MACHINES. EVERY KNOCK ON OUR BODIES PRODUCED HIDEOUS SALT WATER SORES AND IT WAS AN AGONY TO MOVE FROM ONE POSITION TO ANOTHER. THE FIRST WHITE CASUALTY OCCURRED THAT DAY WHEN THE SHIP'S GUNNERY OFFICER WENT COMPLETELY MAD AND JUMPED, OR MORE LIKELY FELL OVERBOARD. HE COULD NOT BE REACHED IN TIME BEFORE HE WAS SEIZED BY A SHARK, SEVERAL OF WHICH WERE NOW LURKING ABOUT THE BOAT, HAVING NO DOUBT DISPOSED OF THE BODIES WE HAD PUT OVER THE SIDE THE PREVIOUS NIGHT. THEN ANOTHER WHITE, A WIRELESS RATING, STARTED TO RAVE BUT HE WAS, WITH DIFFICULTY, GRABBED AND HELD DOWN WHILST HIS LIPS WHICH, LIKE EVERYONES, WERE PARCHED DRY, WERE RUBBED WITH THE CORK OF A SAL VOLATILE BOTTLE WHICH WE HAD FOUND. THIS APPEARED TO SIMMER HIM DOWN SO WE ALL TRIED IT AND FOUND IT A LITTLE RELIEVING. DURING THE DAY WE LOST TEN MORE OF OUR COLOURED BAND AND THAT EVENING, AFTER MUMBLED PRAYERS AND REMOVAL OF THEIR LIFE BELTS, THE BODIES WERE PUT INTO THE SEA. THIS WAS TERRIBLE, BUT ONE DID NOT HAVE TO WATCH AND THE EXTRA SPACE WAS NEEDED BY THOSE STILL LIVING. ALSO THAT EVENING WE LIGHTED TWO FLARES BUT WITHOUT ANY RESPONSE. THE NIGHT PASSED IN COMPARATIVE SILENCE BROKEN NOW AND AGAIN BY A GROAN OF DEPARTING LIFE. A SEARCH OF THE BOAT NEXT MORNING YIELDED TWELVE BODIES, TWO OF THEM WHITE. THEIR BODIES WERE DESPATCHED AT ONCE.

BY THIS TIME MOST OF THE SURVIVORS WERE SOMEWHAT DELIRIOUS BUT STILL DETERMINED TO KEEP GOING. BALING WAS STILL ATTEMPTED. WE WERE ALL VERY WEAK. DURING THE FORENOON OF THIS FRIDAY THE TELEGRAPHIST WENT OVER THE SIDE AND, WITH ENERGY WHICH SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE AT THIS STAGE, SWAM AWAY FROM THE BOAT. THE SHIP'S APPRENTICE WENT AFTER HIM; DESPITE ORDERS TO REMAIN IN THE BOAT. HE WAS BITTEN IN THE LEG BY A SHARK BUT HAULED BACK INTO THE BOAT WHERE WE BOUND HIS WOUND AS BEST WE COULD WITH A SHIRT. THE TELEGRAPHIST DISAPPEARED. DURING THE DAYLIGHT HOURS WE SUFFERED EIGHT MORE COLOURED DEATHS. THIS LEFT NO. 10 BOAT WITH EIGHT WHITES, INCLUDING THE STEWARDESS WHO HAD CONDUCTED HERSELF WITH THE UTMOST FORTITUDE AND BRAVERY, AND FIVE

COLOURED MEN. BY THIS TIME WE COULD NOT SPEAK COHERENTLY BUT CROAKED AT EACH OTHER LIKE FROGS. ANYHOW, WE LEARNED THAT THE STEWARDESS WAS A WIDOW WHOSE HUSBAND HAD BEEN TORPEDOED AND LOST WHILST IN THE MERCHANT SERVICE AT THE TIME OF THE 1914-18 WAR.

THE NIGHT OF FRIDAY WAS A TERRIBLE ONE. MEN WERE ORDERING WHISKIES AND SODAS, BEERS AND CURSING AN INVISIBLE WAITER WHEN NONE APPEARED, AND THE BOAT WAS AS THOUGH FULL OF MAD FROGS. I SUPPOSE WE WERE BY THAT TIME HALF MAD, SOME MORE THAN HALF MAD. THE APPRENTICE WAS MAKING HORRIBLE NOISES AND WE GUESSED HIS WOUND WAS RACKING HIM. THE TWO OR THREE OF US MORE OR LESS STILL IN POSSESSION OF OUR SENSES WERE CERTAIN THAT THE NEXT DAY WOULD BE VERY CRITICAL BUT WE SOON FORGOT OUR TROUBLES AT THE SIGHT OF RAIN CLOUDS. HOW WE PRAYED FOR RAIN THAT NIGHT, FEELING THAT JUST ONE CUPPED HANDFUL WOULD KEEP US GOING FOR DAYS. BUT NONE CAME. DURING THAT NIGHT OUR SECOND RAFT DISAPPEARED AND THE APPRENTICE DIED IN MY ARMS.

THE NEXT MORNING, SATURDAY, BEGAN WITH THE USUAL PAINFUL GROPING FOR BODIES AND WE FOUND THOSE OF THE STEWARDESS AND THREE MORE LASCARS. THAT DAY, WITH FAILING STRENGTH BUT DETERMINATION, WE TRIED BALING AGAIN BUT OUR DEPLETED NUMBERS AND SLOW WORK DID NOT LOWER THE WATER LEVEL IN THE BOAT. IN THE AFTERNOON AND WITH GREAT HOPE WE SAW AN OBJECT DRIFTING TOWARDS THE BOAT. WE THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE SOME PROVISIONS BUT IT TURNED OUT TO BE A CORK FENDER. OUR DISAPPOINTMENT WAS ACUTE. ONE OF THE REMAINING LASCARS DIED AS SOON AS HE WAS TOLD -"NO FOOD". THE REST OF US NOW REALISED THAT WITHOUT FRESH WATER VERY SOON, WE WOULD DIE. WE WERE NOT ONLY PARCHED BUT UTTERLY EXHAUSTED THROUGH EXPOSURE AND NOT HAVING SLEPT SINCE LEAVING "BRITANNIA". TO HAVE SLEPT WOULD HAVE INVITED DEATH BY DROWNING. IT IS A CURIOUS FACT THAT ALTHOUGH THE BODY RECEIVES NO WATER IT CAN STILL PASS SOME AND DURING THE EARLY EVENING OF SATURDAY WE DID RESORT TO DRINKING OUR OWN URINE.

DURING THE FIVE DAYS IN THE BOAT WE WERE ABLE TO KNOW THE TIME FROM A WATERPROOF WATCH. AT 7 P.M. ON SATURDAY, 29th MARCH SOME ONE CROAKED - "A SHIP - A SHIP". WE HAD HEARD THIS BEFORE FROM OTHERS WHO, AFTER CALLING OUT "A SHIP - A SHIP", HAD COLLAPSED AND DIED, SO AT FIRST WE TOOK NO NOTICE. THIS TIME, HOWEVER, THE CRY WAS INSISTENT SO WE LOOKED. AND IT WAS A SHIP.

I CANNOT DESCRIBE MY FULL REACTION BUT DO REMEMBER HIPPING OFF THE REMAINS OF MY SHIRT AND FIRING IT WITH A FLARE WHICH HAD BEEN LIT BY SOMEONE ELSE. OUR REMAINING LASCAR COLLAPSED AND DIED WITH EXCITEMENT. WE WERE SOON ALL CROAKING, FONDLY IMAGINING THAT WE WERE SHOUTING I SUPPOSE. IT WAS GETTING DARK AND THE SHIP WAS BURNING A SEARCHLIGHT. I CAN REMEMBER WONDERING IF



IT MAY BE AN ENEMY SHIP. BUT EVEN SO, I THOUGHT, THEY WOULD AT LEAST GIVE US SOME WATER.

EVENTUALLY A BOAT FROM THE SHIP CAME ALONGSIDE OURS AND WE WERE HAULED OUT, OUR BOAT SUNK AND WE WERE SOON BEING HOISTED ABOARD THE SHIP. I KNOCKED A FEW PROJECTIONS ON THE WAY UP AND MUST HAVE PASSED OUT BECAUSE THE NEXT THING I REMEMBERED WAS BEING IN A BED IN A SICK BAY. WE HAD BEEN PICKED UP AT LAST BY THE SPANISH LINER "CABO DE HORNOS" BOUND FOR TENERIFE FROM SOUTH AMERICA.

THAT, THEN, IS THE STORY OF HOW SEVEN OUT OF FIFTY SURVIVED IN A LIFEBOAT FOR FIVE DAYS WITHOUT FOOD OR WATER. THE SPANIARDS CARED FOR US IN A ROYAL MANNER AND ON APRIL 3rd AT 2 A.M. I WAS LANDED IN A STRETCHER AT SANTA CRUZ, TENERIFE AND TAKEN TO A SPANISH HOSPITAL. SUBSEQUENTLY THE SURVIVORS WERE INTERNED BY THE SPANISH AUTHORITIES - BUT THAT IS ANOTHER STORY.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, I NEVER DID TAKE UP MY APPOINTMENT TO H.M.S. "BARHAM" WHICH, FOR ME PERSONALLY, WAS JUST AS WELL BECAUSE, IN THE AFTERNOON OF 25th NOVEMBER, 1941, WHILST IN COMPANY WITH OTHER FORCES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, SHE WAS HIT BY THREE TORPEDOES FROM A U-BOAT AND TURNED ON HER BEAM ENDS. <sup>U331 - BARON VON TIESENHAUSEN 1/c</sup> WITHIN SECONDS ONE OF HER MAIN MAGAZINES IGNITED AND THE 30,000 TONS BATTLESHIP BLEW UP WITH A TREMENDOUS EXPLOSION AND A MINUTE LATER HAD DISAPPEARED, TAKING WITH HER SOME 800 OF HER COMPLEMENT OF ABOUT 1200 OFFICERS AND MEN, INCLUDING HER CAPTAIN WHO HAD SPECIALLY ASKED FOR ME TO BE APPOINTED TO HIS COMMAND AND THE OFFICER WHO WAS PATIENTLY WAITING FOR ME TO RELIEVE HIM.



**Thor**