

Thomas Wilfred Caldwell

Ordnance Artificer (OA)

Diary entries re. SS Britannia

Diary started on setting sail from Liverpool on 12th March 1941 – Aged 20

Titled 'Voyage of Adventure' (*from daily notes written up after events)

Weds Mar 12th 1941

7 a.m – left Liverpool Princes Dock East. Headed North through the Irish Sea. Sighted Mull of Kintyre (Scotland) in the evening. Moonlight but cold. Hardly any roll to ship because of fairly calm water. In a convoy of 3 ships escorted by 2 destroyers. The other ships were the City Of Honkong [Hong Kong] and the Themistocles.

Thurs 13th Mar

Up early and on deck. Slept very well but the air in the cabin rather stuffy since we were not allowed to open the port-holes. Rather cold – especially the wind and the sea choppy. A slight roll on the ship but soon got used to it. The food is very nice and nicely cooked but there is not enough of it and we are always waiting for meals. We have been put into watches while on board (lookouts etc) and I am detailed for the 4" gun as lookout.

Friday 14th Mar

Weather colder and the ship rolling in heavy seas. Felt a little bit tipsy at times but managed to fight the feeling off. Several of the lads sick and ill and Jack Heard not feeling too good. An American destroyer, one of the escort, rolled very heavily in the swell and we thought ourselves lucky we weren't on her ourselves. The first class passengers seem to be very snobbish with us, except of course for an odd one or two. We have lifeboat drill every day nearly and as we see later it's a good job we did*.

Rather impressed by the way the table steward (and cabin steward) attended to all needs. Our table steward, an Indian, was 40 years old as we found out later, but he looked about 20. He told us he had travelled all over the world, had a boy of 11 yrs and a girl of 8 yrs and could speak, besides fairly good English, 7 of the Indian native languages. He was very good to us and from today onwards fetched me an extra plate of porridge every morning – and he had to do it on the sly.

The cabin steward kept the cabins clean and made the beds, or bunks, the upper one of which was mine. He also kept the drinking water flasks full and at that he was kept busy because the tang of sea air made us all very thirsty.

Saturday 15th Mar

We now seem to be heading direct West – so keeping well clear of the Northern Irish coast. Arrangements are being made to organize a tournament of all deck games and also talent has been called for to organize a concert. The weather is still cold but nice, although towards evening it turned dull with a little rain. We have an old folding piano and we do manage to create a bit of noise with it. I am learning to play solo in the evenings as well as reading now and then.

Now for another week things went on practically the same. We continued going West until we had put the clocks back 3 hours, so we must have been over half way across the Atlantic Ocean before we turned South. Our escort left us on Sat 15th and we split up and went our own way. The weather of course was still cold until we started going South. Then day by day we could notice it going warmer and warmer. The 4 hour watches that we were doing were a bit too much so we kicked up a row and had them changed so that we (the OA's) had nothing to do.

Everybody – who wasn't ill – was practising for the deck games and as we went further South still the sea was calmer and subsequently the "not well" people could be seen knocking round again. I bought two tins of Andrew's Liver Salts and take plenty of it – especially in the mornings! I had a haircut too which cost me 9^d and wasn't worth a tanner. I also had a bath in salt water and it took me all my time trying to get a lather. Then I had to shampoo my hair in fresh water to get all the salt out.

Well the weather becomes fairly warm and a few flying fish are seen. I got a lovely view of some one day while I was right on the prow of the ship. The largest would be about a foot long and about the same in wing span. They occasionally flap their wings but use them mostly for gliding. Another strange feature of the water, especially when we entered the Tropics, was the phosphorescent glow created by the wash of the ship just like thousands of glow-worms in the water. I was very interested in this phenomenon and intend to find out more about it later ¹. All this time I am slowly getting sunburnt as we have changed into tropical rig.

Monday 24th March

Today saw the start of the deck games competition. All the preliminaries were well under way. The weather was really lovely, very hot of course but lovely, clear and sunny. Four of us had an hour with the medicine ball straight after breakfast and certainly felt better for it. The crew put the canvas awnings on the for'ard well decks and also started to put the swimming bath up. It was about 14 foot by 10ft wide and about 5 foot deep.

Tuesday 25th March

Got up at 7 o'clock, washed, was ready for breakfast at 7.30. We had 2 boiled eggs for breakfast – besides the porridge of course – and then the usual jam and bread afterwards. I was just putting the jam on the first piece of bread – I

usually had about 4 or 5 – when the standby alarm bell started to ring. And during the ringing of it shells started bursting very near the ship and some must have made direct hits. Well of course we had to split up and put our lifebelts on. So doing this I went along to my cabin and got my jacket and sun helmet, so being ready in case of emergency.

Well after about a quarter of an hour the word was passed along for us to proceed to boat stations which we did – shells were bursting around all the time and several must have been killed while going from one deck to another. When we were at our boat stations we had to lie down on the deck to avoid the shrapnel from the bursting shells. We must have lay there for about half an hour and then the firing ceased for a while so we thought we had got out of the scrape. We had laid a smoke screen and seemed to be going at full speed and I thought we had got away from the raider. But it wasn't very long before he came tearing through the smoke screen and really gave us hell.

One of the boats was shot away – I saw that myself and the shrapnel was wizzing all over the place. He got a direct hit on the boat deck and I fancy it started a fire because there was a smell of burning. Then the signal “abandon ship” went which meant that we were to take to the lifeboats. I had been previously detailed to see to the “after [aft] fall” of the lifeboat – this is the lower end of the rope and blocks and is on the lifeboat. My pal J. Heard was detailed to the for'ard [forward] fall.

So the boat was lowered to the water – a distance of about 25 feet from the promenade deck where we had boarded her. As the waves caught the boat I unhooked the after fall and by a real stroke of luck my pal unhooked his at exactly the same time. If we had not have done them together the boat would have tipped up and been swamped.

The next few hours seemed like a nightmare and I don't remember much about them. But water came pouring in from a hole made by shrapnel and I had to rip up boards to get at it. Then I found that it was each side of one of the ribs so the only thing to be done was to stuff my scarf and handkerchief into the hole and hold it. The water got to about a foot deep or more and then until 1pm everything went vague. I do remember that we had taken two injured men into the lifeboat first thing – they were two of the gun's crew and I had often spoken to them whilst on watch.

Altogether we had 65 in the lifeboat including 3 that we took in off a raft and the normal complement should have been 50. The 65 composed of:

26 naval ratings

5 women including the ship's doctor ²

6 naval officers, one being a captain

2 engineers (2nd & 3rd)

2 civilians – one being an Indian

22 of the native (topas) crew

Then of course there were the two injured men.

We were very cramped in the boat and had no room to use our oars. The sail was put up and we made our way from the side of the ship. I did just glimpse the raider very near to - she had stopped firing now having seen us take to the boats. But I was down in the bottom of the boat trying to hold the leak so I didn't see very much. Then of course bailing was going on all the time and it certainly looked as if it was getting the better of us but slowly but surely the level was brought down lower and it was a job keeping it down too. The sun was very hot and there wasn't much breeze, so I suppose we didn't make much head way in the boat. The natives had immediately fallen asleep and didn't stir themselves at all to help us with the bailing out.

The day passed very quickly indeed in that boat and we had nothing to eat or drink. Many were sick because the sea was rolling fairly heavy and the boat was tossed about like a cork. At about 6.30pm the doctor went to see the injured men and found that one had died. He was layed over the side and it was a very grim sight. He must have bled a great deal because the water in the boat was red with blood and while bailing it out it smelt awful. Many more turned sick through that.

Just before it went dark we had a small service in which I said a small prayer and then we all sang a verse of a hymn. I felt greatly strengthened after that and prepared to face the night.

Well, as can be imagined no one could sleep. We were all soaking wet through and a cold wind blew when the sun had gone down. Then the bailing had to go on all night long and I was warmer doing that than nothing. It was a blessing that we were in tropical waters which are warm or else I think many would not have lasted that night. It was a long night and everyone was thankful when dawn came.

During the morning that followed we each had a sip of condensed milk and it made a lot sick again. The doctor ² found that the other man had died so he was also lowered over the side.

It would be about 10am when we sighted a smudge of smoke far away to our stern but she seemed to be going away from us. We put a flare up and the signalling lamp was found and one of the coders used it. The lieutenant tried the whistle too but I think we were too far away for that to be heard.

Eventually she stopped so we turned round and headed back towards her and she steamed towards us too. She was a Spanish merchantman of about 3000 to 4000 tons named Bachi of Bilbao ³. She made a lea for us and after some hard rowing we got alongside. They took everything up – lifeboat and stores and all and we had our first drink of water. The Spaniards were very friendly and very good to us. The captain brought out wine and brandy and gave us everything he could. Now that we were safe we ate plenty of the lifeboat's "ships biscuits" and they were very good to eat after being without for so long.

The Bachi had a crew of 30 and there were 63 of us so of course something had to be done about the food and water. She was 21 days out from Buenos

Aires and obviously wouldn't have [had] much stores left. But they had 3 cows and several sheep and hens on board so they killed a cow start with. We each had a bottle of water for each day so we didn't do too bad. They made us a good meal of rice, eggs and onions but I didn't have any, I just ate some of the ship's biscuits instead. They made several pots of tea and chicory which we soon drank with the condensed milk.

We had 5 days to go to the Canary Islands which is where we would probably have been interned. That night (Weds 26th) we slept on the after hatch cover under a canvas awning. I didn't sleep because I was up with one of the darkie crew all night who had got some shrapnel in his leg. He was restless and kept wanting water so I stopped up with him. All the lights were on all night so it wasn't too bad although I was very tired.

The next day (27th) I did manage to get a bit of a sleep although not much because it was so hot. We had two meals, one at 11am and one at 6pm then we had tea at 9pm. Just before it went dark we had a little short service of thanksgiving on the after deck. That night I got a bit more sleep as the injured man was much more comfortable and slept well. At dawn in the morning (28th) we were awakened; there was a ship approaching on the starboard side. She was a big armed merchant cruiser and she circled us twice and signalled us to stop, which of course we did do. She then sent a cutter ⁴ out to us and finding us on board of course took us off and on to their own ship which was The Cilicia (about 12000 tons, a converted Anchor Line ship).

They did all they could. We had a good feed and the messman in the P.O's mess lent me some clothes and a towel to have a bath, and he washed the clothes I had had on. Jack Heard and myself had a cabin between us and everything was fine. The captain gave us cigarettes free and everybody wanted to help us.

We then headed back to Freetown (800 miles away) which was for us 2 days voyage.

Thomas Wilfred Caldwell continued to serve for the remainder of the conflict. in Africa and the Mediterranean. He was posted to The Edinburgh Castle, the Nelson, Duchess of Atholl (troopship), Sidi Bishr (naval camp base), HMS Canopus (shore establishment, Malta) and HMS Sphinx (shore establishment, Alexandria), HMS Ajax (cruiser), HMS Sphinx and HMS Phoenix.

He died in 1966, aged 46 years.

Footnotes:

¹ *Noctiluca scintillans*. Also known as sea sparkle, these bioluminescent plankton float under the surface and flash brightly when disturbed, possibly to scare off or distract predators. They typically live in warmer seas, both subtropical and tropical, and are more abundant when it's warm.

² Dr Adaline Nancy Miller. Later awarded an MBE for bravery in carrying on under gunfire.

³ The Bachi of Bilbao. Naviera Bachi was the Bilbao-based shipping company. In 1942 the Germans bought controlling interest in several 'neutral' fleets, Bachi being one of them, which were then used for German supply operations. The British fleet subsequently sank 2 of the Bachi ships.

⁴ Cutter - a small to medium-sized vessel, depending on its role. Single or double-masted, decked sailcraft designed for speed rather than capacity. Historically a workboat for ferrying passengers between larger craft and shore.