

# Sinking of the SS Britannia

by Bill Lansley of Ferndown

I went aboard the SS Britannia at Liverpool as a passenger on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1941, en route for India to join my Regiment stationed on the North West Frontier. On the following day, the Britannia left Liverpool with a cargo consisting of nine thousand tons of 'war material', and approximately five hundred passengers and crew, of which twelve were women.

At first, we were sailing in a south westerly direction in convoy, but this split up near the Azores, and the Britannia was then steaming on her own at about 13/14 knots, some seven hundred miles off the west coast of Africa.

At dawn on 25<sup>th</sup> March, a vessel was sighted low on the horizon and any doubt as to the ship's identity was quickly removed when she opened fire. The Britannia being hit repeatedly, the Master had smoke flares dropped and increased speed at the same time altering course. Our gunners got off twelve rounds from her four-inch gun, being her only armament, mounted on the poop, but the enemy ship firing shells from her six-inch guns quickly put our gun out of action, at the same time killing or disabling the gun crew. A distress message had been transmitted by W/T as soon as the raider opened fire, but the main aerial had been damaged by one of the early salvos and the Britannia was unable to transmit any further messages.

More shells struck the Britannia amidships and part of the after boat deck was on fire. Fires had also started in other parts of the ship, and most of the lifeboats had been damaged by shell splinters, some badly, and sank on entering the water. At 9.20am the Master signalled the order to abandon ship. However, the signal appeared to have been misread or ignored, as the raider fired another salvo, the Britannia again being hit. The German raider then quickly steamed in and, when the lifeboats were clear, she fired several shells at close range and the Britannia, by then burning badly, quickly sank sending up a column of smoke and flame nearly 1,000ft high. The raider then steamed off at high speed in a northerly direction without any attempt to pick up survivors.

As a result of this enemy action, fourteen officers, including the Master, 89 ratings and twelve passengers were killed. The lifeboat I was to have boarded had sunk on being lowered into the water, and I eventually joined another lifeboat which was already in the water alongside the Britannia. She was very crowded and to board her I had to go over the ship's side, hand over hand, down a dangling rope. The lifeboat became overcrowded during the next hour which we spent picking up survivors from the sea, most of whom were clinging to pieces of wreckage or keeping afloat with the help of their lifejackets. The lifeboat was for that era a standard type, clinker built like a whaler, approximately 28ft long with a 10ft beam with a mast and two sails. The official complement was 56, but we now had some 76 survivors including two women and it was very overcrowded. We were, after several days at sea in the lifeboat, picked up by a Spanish liner. This rescue was carried out at night in a blaze of lights and to the cheers of the passengers lining the rails away above us. The liner was en route to Tenerife, her first port of call being Santa Cruz where we disembarked on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1941. Under International Law, all service personnel were promptly interned for the duration of the war and all commissioned officers were allocated accommodation in the Hotel Pino De Oro in Tenerife, which was also the residence of the British Consulate, to whom we were accountable at all times during our stay on the Island. However, our internment 'for the duration' did not prove to be the case (and there lies another story). In fact, we only had a short stay of about four months in Tenerife, and I arrived back in England, via Gibraltar, on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1941, and eventually reached India on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1942, at the second attempt.