

Log of Lifeboat No 7 S.S. "Britannia"
1941

Tuesday March 25th

Action warning sounded 0755, followed by sound of bursting shells from German A.M.C. "Britannia" made smoke and opened fire with the 4" gun mounted on poop.

Firing ceased and re-commenced at 0855. At 0920 Captain struck colours and ordered Abandon Ship. Lifeboat No. 7 successfully lowered and got away, and after picking up persons from rafts, contained 82 people, 18 Europeans and 64 Natives. Set foresail and ran before wind on Southerly course. Boat making water fast and energetic bailing required. Issued 1 bottle water at sundown, which was shared by all.

March 26th

Bailed ceaselessly all night. After discussion decided to make for African coast estimated 600 miles. Hoisted main sail and endeavoured to sail N.E. into wind. Unable to do so and forced to decision to sail to Brazil, estimated 1200 miles. Set course W.S.W and ran before fresh wind and made good head way. Boat still leaking badly, so lowered main sail while repairs were carried out – 3 Shrapnel holes plugged with Union cloth & covered with tingles made of tin from tobacco box. At 0700 ship sighted 6 – 8 miles away, but did not see us.

Sorted out personnel into groups – native crew in bows, native passengers amidships, Europeans in stern. Also made inventory of contents of boat.

Moved water breakers aft for safety. Found we had following food and water: - 2 breakers fresh water, holding 2 gallons each, 48 tins condensed milk, 2 bins biscuits. Decided to issue $\frac{1}{3}$ dipper of water (about eggcupful) & one biscuit at sun down, & 1 tin of milk at sunrise & one at sundown spread on biscuits.

March 27th

Milk served at sunrise with wooden spoon. Most people discarded life belts. At noon saw ship, estimated 7 – 9 miles away, but failed to see us. Found small tank fresh water holding about 4 gallons under a lower thwart. Wind almost dead in afternoon. Natives seen drinking sea water & warned. Poor progress compared with yesterday.

March 28th

At midnight 27th saw steaming lights of another ship, but much too far away to see us. Main halliards broke, so had to make repairs. Some natives helped to bail. Arranged rota of duties for Europeans.

March 29th

Several persons fainted during night. Placed oars across boat to separate Europeans from natives. Cleaned our section of boat & endeavoured to re-arrange positions. Began washing by stripping to waist & laying over gunwhale while others poured water over with 2 tins. Saw shoals of fish and improvised fishing hooks & spinners, no success. Fixed Harman with his injured leg in stern locker. Made fairly good headway.

March 30th

Many had first sleep since leaving "Britannia". Estimated at noon we had covered 299 miles and altered course to S.W. Saw several "Portuguese Man of War" fish. Had short service – Hymn & Prayers. McIntosh fixed up sea anchor on star-gunwhale ready for immediate use. Found difficulty in eating biscuits owing to great thirst.

March 31st

Suspended usual baling rota during night & divided into 3 long watches. At 0130 native Chief Cook threw himself overboard, he had been drinking seawater. Looked like rain & made preparations to catch rain water, but only rained a little. Made good headway before a strong wind.

April 1st

Very restless night, so arranged for 2 men to be sleeping in most comfortable positions – changing every hour so each has some rest. Several natives reported sick in early hours of morning attended to 6 at daybreak and brought them around by douching with sea water. Heat is terrific & all feeling very weak and exhausted. Saw school of whales. Made good headway throughout day & night. Estimated at 4 knots.

April 2nd

During night wind changed to E.N.E. indicating we are getting well westward & into S.E. Trade winds. Altered set of sails accordingly. Natives quarrelsome during night – some are weak & crying continuously for water. Made slight increase in evening water ration. Still making good progress, estimated 3 knots.

April 3rd

Weather is very hot, we have to keep covered. All are getting salt water boils & sores making rest in any position difficult. Made alteration in evening food issue. Gave milk & water all round & only gave biscuits to those who asked – many are now unable to swallow biscuit. Tried soaking biscuit in salt water but not too sure of effects. Still making good headway.

April 4th

Two Europeans fainted during the night & others are very weak. Continuous baling is proving a strain in our weakened condition. Natives quarrelled badly during night. Heat very bad – erected boat cover as protection against sun.

April 5th

Several native crew died during night. Many more are weakening. Increased water ration and divided so as to have some in morning. Had several showers of rain. Took main sail down to catch rain water but did not get enough rain.

April 6th

It rained last night & we lowered main sail & tried to collect water, but unsuccessfully as natives spoilt our efforts.

Harman & Beck died in early hours of morning. Heavy rain fell during morning. We collected about 2 gallons, but again natives frustrated our efforts. Lost steel helmet & dipper during storm. All very cold but refreshed.

April 7th

Erected awning before sun too high as all feeling tired and weak. Had short service of remembrance for Harman & Beck & thanksgiving for rain. Expect to make land about Good Friday at present rate of progress. Unshipped empty biscuit tank ready for rain water. Had full cup of milk each at sundown.

April 8th

Rained hard for several hours. Collected several gallons of water from mainsail & from foresail, which we had rigged over a broken oar. Saw large freighter just before storm broke but were unable to attract attention. Had full cup of milk each at sun down. Soon after dark we had severe storms lasting until midnight & had to lower mainsail & run before wind, baling frantically.

April 9th

All very wet & cold after storm. Lyons went down with malaria. Liddell died, also several natives. Made slight increase in water ration.

April 10th

No wind during the night & made little headway. Estimated we are getting near the equator. Several natives died during the night & many more are very ill. Wind freshened in afternoon. Soaked biscuit wrapped in handkerchief in water tank so as to make more palatable. Saw oil tanker shortly before dusk steaming southwards. Short heavy storm soon after dark caught a little rain water.

April 11th

Spent a very miserable night owing to being wet & cold. Another ship passed us during the night but could only see its steaming lights. A native threw a baling bucket overboard, now baling with empty First Aid box and milk tins. Made good speed – 4 knots.

April 12th

Did no baling during night & had about 12" water to remove by daylight. Made our quarters larger by removing oars dividing us from natives. Amanuel the native Missionary died. We expect to reach land in about 4 days' time.

April 13th

A good wind during the night & we made good headway. Had extra milk ration for breakfast as it was Easter Sunday.

We had several storms and caught a little rain water.

Held short service of prayers & Easter hymn. Smith died.

April 14th

Made excellent headway during night. Sea was choppy and we shipped a few seas. At daylight made repairs to sails & had much baling to do. We calculated we should see land anytime now, & saw a sea gull just before dark which we consider a hopeful sign.

April 15th

Considerable excitement at dawn this morning for when the breeze came up it brought an earthy land smell & the water appeared a dirty shore green, & we saw some driftwood. Land was sighted at 11.40. By 1600 we were running N.W. along the coast but unable to land owing to surf. Stood well out during night.

April 16th

No sight of land at dawn so alter d course S.W. and again saw land at noon. Boat grounded at 1600 & we all waded ashore. Made camp on beach. Lyons died, 10.30.

April 17th

Met by fishermen & taken to their huts. Stayed with them, resting, eating & sleeping.

April 18th

Police Commissar arrived with interpreter at 1300. Made seven hour journey through night in canoes to Mocajutuba & then transferred to cars.

April 19th

Arrived at Police station Sao Luiz 0630 & later went to Portuguese hospital.

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Days in Boat – 23

Distance covered (approx..) – 1400

Landed at island of Curupu Maranhao, N. Brazil

Europeans treated at Portuguese Hospital, Sao Luiz

Natives treated at General Infirmary, Sao Luiz

Deaths in Lifeboat

Europeans	5
Native Passengers	15
Native Crew	<u>24</u>
Total	<u>44</u>

Survivors

Europeans	13
Native Passengers	10
Native Crew	<u>15</u>
Total	<u>38</u>

Appendix 1

The Lifeboat and its Equipment, etc.

The lifeboat was of the standard type, clinker built, like a whaler (i.e. pointed at each end). She was 28 ft. long, 10ft. beam & 3'9" depth. Along either side were series of large copper buoyancy tanks over the top of which was a longitudinal thwart & large panels covered the tank at the sides so that they were completely enclosed. Forward there was a small platform. There were 4 thwarts at the same level as the top of the tanks, & beneath 2 of these thwarts were 2 break tanks. They were long thin metal ones as broad as the thwarts having a round screw lid in the side, about 6" dia., through which one could get the biscuits. In between these thwarts there were others lower down. Under one of these was a fresh water tank holding about 4 gallons of water, reached through a small screw cap in the thwart, about 20 ft. high. There were only 2 sails, fore & main, & the only rigging consisted of 2 stays. Her rig is known as that of a dipping lug cutter. She was a most difficult boat to sail.

The food at the commencement consisted of: -

2 tins of ships biscuits : 48 tins condensed milk : approx. 16 gallons of water.

The equipment was: -

Sea anchor with tow line and tipping line

Various lengths of rope

Boat covers of stout canvas (much was rotten)

8½ ash oars about 14' long

Small hatchet

2 iron bars for opening bread tins

Bucket & dipper for baling

Lantern & 2 gallon tins of Colza oil

Watertight tin holding 12 red flares & about 30 matches

Boat compass

Electric dry battery and bulb

Small canvas bag containing knife & tin opener, palm & needle, sailmaker's twine, hank of cod line, length of 2 line.

Box of First Aid equipment containing assorted roller bandages, 4 mines dressings, roll cotton wool, roll boracic lint, spool adhesive tape, S.J.A.B. type tourniquet, card of large safety-pins, bottle iodine, bottle sal-volatile.

Also included were a small prismatic illuminous compass, one automatic pistol, one Webley revolver, 2 pairs field glasses, pair of scissors, one steel helmet, and a pint bottle.

Appendix 2
Personnel in the Lifeboat at Commencement
Of Voyage

<u>Europeans</u>		<u>Natives</u>	
Naval Officers	8	Passengers	25
Ship Officers	2	Crew	<u>39</u>
Passengers	1	Total	<u>64</u>
Naval Ratings	6		
Soldiers	<u>1</u>		
Total	<u>18</u>	<u>Grand Total 82 persons</u>	

Names of Europeans

Lieut. (SP) F. Lawrence West, R.N.V.R. (A)
 (D) Sub-Lieut. (SP) K. G. Harman, R.N.V.R.
 (D) Lieut. L. Lyons, R.N.R.
 Sub-Lieut. (A) T.H. Blank, R.N.V.R.
 Mr W.F.M. Davies, Warrant shipright, R.N.
 Mr E.G. Westgarth, Gunner (T) R.N.
 Sub-Lieut. L.S. McIntosh, R.N.
 Mr W. MacVicar, 3rd officer S/S "Britannia"
 (D) Mr Liddell, 7th Engineer
 (D) Mr P. Smith, Passenger

D. Purdie, S.A.
 R. McKinnon, A/F
 J. Wheater, A/F
 W. Carney, A/B
 W. Beck (D)
 D. Hawcroft, Pte

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Glossary of Terms (added 2 Jan 2018)

A.M.C. – Armed Merchant Cruiser

Gunwhale – the upper edge of a boat's side

Halliard - rope for hoisting sails

S.J.A.B. – St John Ambulance Brigade

Thwart – seat or bench in a boat

Tingle – small nail

Water breaker – cask for holding drinking water aboard ship