

TEN LITTLE SAILOR BOYS

by *Spencer Mynott*

BREAKFAST was being served and we looked forward to another glorious day of sunbathing on deck, as the 9,000-ton liner, S.S. *Britannia*, neared the equator that morning of March 25, 1941.

On board the luxury liner were scores of civilians returning to Bombay, Army and RAF personnel, and 200 'sprog' naval ratings, drafted to an assortment of naval craft and establishments in the Far East.

I, naval telegraphist D/JX204083, was to join the frigate, H.M.S. *Falmouth*, operating in the Persian Gulf, and it was to be my first taste of active service afloat.

In mid-Atlantic, thirteen days out from Liverpool, we had left our convoy, and were 'going it alone', when an explosion shook the ship. A warning shot had been fired across our bows.

Our Scottish captain dropped smoke-flares, altered course, and tried to run for it, but salvos of eight-inch shells screamed at us, scoring hit after hit. One wiped out our only guncrew, leaving us unarmed, and at the mercy of a Nazi surface raider.

Soon, the after part of the boat deck was on fire, the first-class smoking-room was shattered and burning, and most of the lifeboats were damaged by shell splinters.

We helped to carry the wounded and dying into the dining-hall, and soon it was overcrowded. One of the

guncrew had both his arms and one leg torn off, but he was still conscious as I tried to shift him.

He asked me for a cigarette, and after a couple of puffs, he said: 'I'm posted this time, all right.' Then he died.

Someone shouted: 'Man the lifeboats!' while we were still under way. As I stood at the boat station, another salvo smacked into us, and I saw my best friend torn in half by shrapnel. All I suffered was a splinter of metal in the leg.

Unable to get out of range, the ship hove to, and the surrender flag was hoisted. But still the shells crashed into us.

Within minutes, our attacker came alongside. She was a German cruiser, bristling with armament. Hundreds of sailors lined the rails, peering at us. We thought they were going to come aboard, and take prisoners.

But a voice hailed us across the water in cold, clear English: 'I am giving you thirty minutes to abandon ship, then I am going to sink her.'

We lowered the wounded in those lifeboats that would still float, and tossed rafts overboard. Dead on time, the raider fired a salvo into the *Britannia*, just below the waterline, and our proud ship sank cleanly, and quickly, the old red duster flapping magnificently.

Then the raider made off under full steam, and was soon out of sight. They had not bothered to pick anyone up.

Hundreds of us milled round in the sea, 800 miles from the nearest land, trying to cling to anything that floated. I swam around for six hours, splashing from one piece of driftwood to another. All the time I was trying to keep clear of the burning patch of oil left by our blazing ship.

I was smothered with the thick, black oil, and the fierce equatorial sun beating down on it made me feel that I was being cooked.

I had almost given up hope, when I spotted it—a broken hatch-cover, blown from the ship, seven feet wide by about four feet, not much bigger than a hearthrug.

One man sat on it, head bowed and dejected. Under a mask of oil on his face I recognized a diamond merchant from Bombay whom I had seen aboard ship. I clambered up on to the oil-covered raft, and one by one other survivors reached it.

By nightfall there were six of us—two naval officers, three ratings, including myself, and the diamond merchant.

He sat with his back to us, hugging something closely to him that he did not want us to see.

Suddenly it grew cold, and we shivered in our tropical kit of white shirt and shorts.

The night dragged by with agonizing slowness. Every few minutes our raft overturned, or we were washed off, as a breeze whipped up the waves.

We struggled and fought to keep aboard. As one tried to get on, the rest were tipped back into the sea.

We had heard that man-eating sharks infested these waters, and hoped that our noisy splashing would keep them at bay.

By dawn we were huddled together for warmth in the centre, although we were almost on the equator. But the diamond merchant still sat alone, talking to no one.

Next day three of us who had found time to grab sun-helmets before we jumped overboard used them to paddle towards what looked like a lifeboat. But it was another raft, more crowded than ours. Four of the men on it swam to join us. And so we were ten.

As the day wore on, we prayed for night and the cold it would bring, because the fantastic heat of the sun was frying us alive.

Enormous sharks swished around us, diving under the raft and bumping us in their eagerness to taste human flesh. There was hardly enough room on the raft for all of us to sit comfortably. We sat with legs entwined round each other to save space. We took it in turns to sit at the edge, and thrash our legs in the water to scare the sharks.

By four o'clock on the second day we could hear the

sun sizzling the sea-spray on the bare parts of our bodies.

In the corner the stranger from Bombay began to rave. His eyes bulged like a drug addict's, and he jabbered hysterically about his wife, his children, his diamonds.

Crazy with thirst, he struggled to his feet, slipping on the oil-covered raft. For a second he stood, swaying, wild-eyed, foaming at the mouth.

Then with a hideous scream, he twisted and fell backwards among the threshing, man-hungry sharks.

I watched in horror as his sun-helmet floated on a patch of red-stained water.

A few moments ago there were ten of us on that make-shift raft, drifting near the equator. Ten pain-racked bodies, blistered and swollen by the merciless sun, smothered from head to foot in black oil. We were Ten Little Sailor Boys. Now there were only nine of us left to frizzle in the tropical sun without water or food.

Every minute seemed like an hour under that ball of fire in the sky.

Half-deranged in the glare I was momentarily back on the *Britannia*. There was a party going on, a wonderful party.

There was dancing, glamorous girls, a table laden with food and luscious tropical fruits.

I gulped a glass of cider. Then I was back to the reality of sea, sun and sharks.

Somehow we survived the night, but getting weaker, and worse, losing the will to carry on.

In the shimmering heat next day, a merchant seaman made a grab at my sun-hat, but I fought him off.

He turned to his mate and asked him to come for a walk. They jumped into the sea together. We never saw them again.

That left seven of us.

Before I had fully realized what had happened a naval sub-lieutenant—he came from the Midlands—stood up, mumbled insanelly and staggered over the side.

Now there were only six.

We drifted on. Then two more in our party, without regard for the danger, dangled their legs over the side, limply.

The sound of snapping jaws and slithering bodies and they were gone—pulled down by the legs.

Now there were four.

With terror in our eyes, we stared at each other—a naval lieutenant-surgeon, Ginger, a mechanic from Liverpool, Alf Warren from Worcester and myself, a telegraphist.

We were growing weaker, and it seemed only a matter of hours before we went too.

By the fourth sweltering day, our legs, feet and faces were swollen. It was agony to open our mouths.

I prayed for water to ease my parched throat. Then the naval surgeon scooped up some sea-water in both hands.

'Here! Have a drink,' he offered. 'It's lovely stuff.' He scooped more and swallowed thirstily.

That afternoon he fell off the raft, and the three of us struggled to pull him back.

He threw his arms round my neck and nearly strangled me. He fell off again, and became so violent that the next time he tried to get back we stopped him.

He threatened to kill us all, and tried to grab my sheath-knife. For three hours he clung there.

He was getting weaker. But every time we touched him he tried to pull us from the raft.

The blistering sun went down mercifully, and he swam out of sight in the darkness. Perhaps he was lucky enough to drown before the sharks got him.

Now there were three.

That night we faced the fury of a storm. Terrifying waves smashed over our heads, the raft turned over, but we managed to stay together.

As the storm died and the sea calmed, I 'saw' a small hut rise out of the water.

Out of the hut stepped a pig-tailed Chinaman in silken robes. Standing behind him was his daughter.

He asked me to come in for a cup of tea. I said I would love to, but was anxious to reach the mainland quickly.

He replied that he would help us. Turning to his daughter he gave her an order and she dived into the water.

In that instant the vision of the lovely girl disappeared and was replaced with the real and frightening one of a huge brown shark hurling itself at the raft.

By dawn on the fifth day one could tell what each of us was thinking—who goes next?

Our faces were stubbly and sore, covered with oil and blisters. Our eyes were puffed, our lips bloodless and parched.

Ginger shielded his eyes and glanced up at the blazing sun.

He had made up his mind. 'I'm jaggng in now. It's not worth going on,' he said.

Alf and I reminded him of the young bride he had married a few days before leaving England, but it made no difference. He shook hands with us, unstrapped his deflated lifebelt and slipped over the side.

We watched him drift away, his head well under the water.

Now there were two.

It was hours after Ginger had drifted into a circle of sharks that Alf, who had fallen asleep with his head on my knee, sat bolt upright.

'Look!' he shouted. 'On the horizon. Smoke!'

I raised myself unsteadily, with one hand on Alf's shoulder, and croaked as loud as my parched throat would allow, waving my sun-helmet.

The ship loomed nearer, but then seemed to veer away. Alf swung his legs over the side of the raft.

'She's going away!' he shouted. 'I'm going to paddle to her.'

In a flash a shark had his right leg in its jaws, to within an inch of the knee.

I plunged my knife into its snout and the monster slithered back into the water, ripping the flesh on Alf's leg to the bone.

I covered his wound with cloth torn from Ginger's discarded lifebelt.

By this time the ship was just a speck and a wisp of smoke. We resigned ourselves to another night of torture and slow death. Then, half an hour before dusk, I saw the ship again. She was heading straight for us!

I jumped up and almost upset the raft. I waved my sun-helmet until I was so weak that I had to use both hands to hold it above my head.

All lights ablaze, the Spanish passenger and cargo vessel, *Cabo de Hornos*, lowered a boat.

Gently Alf was carried aboard and that night he had an emergency operation.

I threw my arms around my Spanish rescuers and sobbed my gratitude.

We were landed at Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, and I was interned for four months. Then I reached Britain under a repatriation scheme.

Alf was taken to a clinic, outside the internment boundary.

I did not see Alf again until recently—the other one of the ten little sailor boys who helped me cheat that last line of the nursery rhyme:

'AND THEN THERE WAS NONE.'