

ARANDORA STAR CONDITIONS ON BOARD AND THE DISASTER.
REPORT OF CAPT. F.J. ROBERTSON — Interpreter to Italian Internees.

In accordance with my orders I reported at 11 hours on 30th June to the Embarkation Officers, The Landing Stage, Liverpool and was instructed to go on board the Arandora Star by 14.45.

When guards had been posted, the Internees were embarked.

They numbered, if I remember rightly, 1278 being approximately 700 Italians and 528 Germans. The latter were composed of merchant seamen, Nazis, Anti-Nazis and Jews. They were allotted cabins, reception rooms and sheds by the Embarkation Officers and handed over to the Officer Commanding, Major Bethell, Tank Corps.

In the meantime with the other interpreters, I had reported to the C.O. but owing to the confusion, consequent upon the embarkation and the issue of palliasses and blankets, he was unable to issue any orders to us. I stationed myself outside the Orderly Room so as to be available when required.

The day was very hot and stifling, and the air between decks became very oppressive. Internees complained of having been kept standing about for hours, many without food since a very early breakfast and older men were exhausted by carrying their baggage up and down gangways and stairs etc. There were many appeals for water and eventually after considerable exertions on the part of the officers on duty, Interpreters, and Provost Sergeants, drinking water was provided in buckets. Trouble was also experienced in one of the sheds forward owing to the great heat and lack of ventilation. Several men collapsed and Major Bethell ordered the shed, promptly christened THE BLACK HOLE OF CALCUTTA, to be evacuated until the ship was under way and ventilation made possible.

It was now about 18 hours and the Chief Steward, who had charge of stores and rations, approached me and asked me to take steps for the distribution of plates, mugs etc. and the evening meal. I told him I could not issue any orders on the matter but would willingly confer with him over the details.

DETAILS OF MESSING AND DRAWING OF RATIONS.

Internees were to be divided up in messes of 20. Three men from each mess were to draw plates, mugs and spoons from the stores for each mess. Two men per mess were then to draw rations and tea. About 19 hours Major Bethell arrived and agreed to the details and requested Interpreters to take charge of proceedings.

It is impossible to describe the confusion caused by endless processions of mess orderlies passing and repassing each other along narrow corridors and staircases. Further trouble was caused by having to draw rations from one quarter and tea from another.

It was midnight before the last man had fed and the Interpreters were able to get their own meal.

Major Bethell was very sympathetic and called officers for a conference next morning at 11 hours, to which he invited the First Officer and the Purser. We learned that the Captain or Major Bethell, or both, I do not remember precisely, had flatly refused to take on board

another 500 Prisoners of War, that the crew were 80% newly signed on that morning and that we were sailing without escort.

The Arandora Star sailed in the night, I do not know the precise hour.

MONDAY, Conference and after.

The issue of breakfast was attended with less confusion as utensils had already been issued. Rations only were required to be drawn and people had begun to be better acquainted with the ship.

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Exchange of Quarters.

At the conference an important point was raised which was to have a very great and perhaps fatal influence on the subsequent salvage operations.

240 German seamen were quartered in the ballroom and during the night it was reported that these men had set up a Swastika Flag and had sung Nazi choruses. In view of this spirit and the fact that they were seamen, Ships Officers reported that their presence in the ballroom aft in proximity of the steering arrangements constituted a danger. O.C. Guards and other Officers suggested to Major Bethell that they should be exchanged for a similar number of Italians quartered in cabins A and B decks forward. This was agreed to by the C.O. and written orders were issued to that effect, for the exchange to begin at 15 hours if I recollect correctly. Interpreter Capt, Brown was to be in charge of the German party and Capt. Lee and myself of the Italians.

BOATDRILL

The First Officer then raised the question of boat drill, and suggested that it should be held that afternoon at 4 pm or, if desired, the next day. From the previous day's experience of the confusion it was decided to postpone Boat Drill. In any case owing to the insufficient number of boats it was considered advisable not to include the Internees in the drill so as not to create an uneasy feeling, and as this entailed leaving the guards on duty, the Drill was to be confined to ships crew and some NCO's of the escort.

Disposition of Guards.

Owing to the insufficient number of the escort, and their general ignorance of ships and their ways, it was found that Internees had discovered unguarded hatchways, companion ladders etc, and were roaming about and visiting other decks. Various suggestions were made but nothing but nothing definite was decided.

Issue of Knives and Forks.

It was debated whether knives and forks should be issued to all Internees or in part only and the final decision was to issue one knife per mess to cut the bread and this was to be returned to the store after each meal. It had been suggested that the ship's cooks should cut up the bread for each meal with the Bread Slicer but this was rejected by the Purser on the grounds of time required and the lack of personnel.

THE MOVE

It had been arranged that the Italians in the forward cabins of Decks A and B should shift out and move on to the Open Decks port and starboard on Deck D and wait there until the Ballroom had been evacuated by the German Seamen. Orders had been issued to the leaders immediately after the conference but apparently these had not been circulated or were ignored, for when I went below at 15 hours, being entrusted with the task of getting the Italians to move out, I immediately encountered great difficulty. Protests, threats of resistance, and tricks were all used and it took me two hours to penetrate the labyrinth of the cabins and get them cleared. In the meantime Capt. Lee was marshalling them on D Deck and as a cold wind was blowing considerable annoyance was caused to the huddled exposed mass all this time on the open deck, thanks to their reluctance to shift their quarters. Capt. Brown had by this time cleared the Ballroom of 200 Germans — 40 of the youngest and least violent being left.

At about/

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At about 19 hours the Italians poured in. To our consternation instead of the 200 arranged for something like 400 squeezed in. Many Italians from other quarters mistaking their orders, or hoping to get better quarters, had attached themselves to the party. It was impossible to find room for all this mass of people and uproar ensued, some men becoming hysterical. I then told them that it was obvious that a mistake had been made and they were to sit down and wait while I straightened things out. I immediately reported to Major Bethell, then at dinner, what had occurred but he had no suggestion to offer and merely told me to see what I could do.

I thereupon proceeded to search the ship for accommodation and was only able to discover room for some 25 on the lower forward shed. It was now getting very late and I instructed the Italian Messing Orderlies to get their food and eat it as best they could.

During all this period Tenente Colonelle Borghi and the Rev. Fr. Toncher were of invaluable assistance to me in calming their complaints, organising their messes and searching the ship with me. Our impression was that the German party had occupied more cabins than they were entitled to but this was impossible to prove at the moment. e.g. a cabin which had previously contained 5 Italians might now be occupied by 2 or 3 Germans, who on being questioned as to their number, would say 5 and pointing to the palliasses left on the ground by the previous Italian occupants, indicating that their missing companions were in the lavatories or on fatigues. At this juncture the chief steward came to our aid and suggested that we use the large shed aft on the sports deck (E) which had been intended for the extra 500 prisoners of war not embarked; which had been kept locked. I obtained permission to use this shed and returned to the ballroom. I explained the situation, took some of the Internees to visit the shed and was able to persuade some 30 or 40 to make use of the shed. The rest preferred the warmth of the crowded ballroom to the empty bleakness of the after shed, although I pointed out how much safer it would be in the case of an accident, as E Deck was much nearer to the lifeboats. At last all settled down for the night and about midnight Capt. Brown and I were able to obtain some food for ourselves.

TORPEDOING AND SINKING OF THE SHIP

At about 4.45 Tuesday 2nd I was half awakened by the bugle announcing the changing of the guards and was lying in my bunk awaiting a cup of tea when I was fully aroused by a shock and the crash, apparently of glass, and the lights extinguished. The shock did not appear very severe to me and at first I imagined it to be some minor accident in the engine room. But the sound of rushing feet and the alarm given made me realise we had been struck. I put on a coat and lifebelt and went on deck, where members of the crew and escort were throwing rafts overboard. This proved to be an error as the ship had a considerable way (?) on her and when she eventually stopped and sank the rafts were a considerable distance away.

I saw the first boat on the port side filled by a rush of Internees, crew and soldiers and saw that she was already overloaded. I then proceeded to the second boat and when she was lowered level with the deck, Lieut. Constable, of the escort gave the order to enter and Major Dury and I took our places without more ado. In the meantime the people from below were pouring up and when our boat was absolutely packed we lowered away. We were held first by the aft davit tackle and hacked ourselves free with a bayonet, then with great difficulty manning two pairs of oars we pulled slowly away from the ship. I am glad to say that during this period there were no signs of any panic and the O.R. who came on our boat did not forget to bring their rifles with them.

We numbered 58 persons and there was not an inch of space left. Our steersman was a member of the crew and our complement was approximately Crew 4, Army Officers 3, Other Ranks 10, Germans 5, Italians 35 (The latter mostly from the after shed, Deck E)

We lay/

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We lay about 40 - 50 yards from the ship and watched her go down.

Comparing times, it seems she was struck approximately at 6.30 and sank in about 20 minutes or less. Unfortunately she was on a fairly even keel for only about 12 minutes and then suddenly her stern went down and she reared up perpendicularly, hurling down in a tangle of wreckage and loose objects.

Many unfortunate people who were clustering forward retreating from the water, and went down in a dive. Without doubt many were killed outright at this moment or stunned and then drowned. The thick oil spreading on the surface of the water also seems to have caused some loss, some of the survivors complaining afterwards of having been half choked by it.

We then prepared to pick up survivors but unfortunately had by this time drifted too far to be of any use. A motor pinnace then reached us and relieved us of Lieut. Constable and half a dozen men, and passed us on its way back to the ship to pick up survivors. We were then able to organise ourselves and commence bailing with a bucket given us by the Pinnace and a couple of steel helmets. I am pleased to be able to say that at no time did any of the people in my boat show any slightest sign of panic. Soldiers and Italians though all mightily sick and chilled to the bone, remained calm and even cheerful, never refusing to take a turn at bailing or rowing. The only men who refused to work on the grounds of sickness were two young Germans.

THE RESCUE

At about 11.30 a Sunderland Flying Boat was observed on the horizon and she soon discovered us and flew around dropping flares and encouraging messages which were picked up by the motor pinnace and repeated to the other boats. At about 14.30 we sighted two destroyers coming towards us at great speed. At 15 hours approximately our boat was able to pick up 8 men from a raft and by 16 hours the last boat had been embarked on H.M. Canadian ship St. Laurent

???? ST.LAURENT

It is impossible to praise too highly the efficiency and kindness of the officers and crew of the St. Laurent. How a little destroyer could ??? on board more than 800 passengers, including several stretcher cases, ??? feed and comfort such a multitude surpasses understanding. I am pleased to report that when we disembarked at Greenock each party, shipwrecked crew, escort, Germans and Italians as it formed up to march away, gave three heartfelt cheers for the St. Laurent. I hope that in due course, it may be possible for the survivors of the Arandora Star to express their gratitude to a very gallant ships company of the seaplane in a more tangible manner.

RECEPTION AT GREENOCK

We reached Greenock at 8 hours on 3rd July and disembarked, our ships crew first and then the escort. The survivors of the escort under Lieut. Constable with magnificent discipline and calm stolidity fell in, many half naked, bare footed, and oil stained with perhaps one rifle amongst ten men and prepared to carry on their duties as if nothing had happened.

Fortunately a large escort of the Highland Light Infantry arrived and took over.

I regret to say that owing to lack of instructions and stores, nothing much could be done for us. The Local Commandant did all he could to order up food and clothing but the response was very tardy and he was further handicapped by the fact that the day happened to be Greenock s annual fair and all shops were shut.

The sick and wounded were left on the quay for some considerable time until ambulances eventually arrived and took them off to hospital.

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The rest of the survivors were marched into an empty factory or warehouse known as the Joinery Sheds and were kept waiting for hours many half naked and bare foot standing on the cement while food and clothing were being sought. Many were in a state of nervous agitation and protested against being herded between two lines of armed men. I was eventually able to persuade the Commandant to remove the guards from the room and content himself with sentries at the doors. By this time blankets became available and were spread on the ground for the Internees to stand or sit upon. Food and tea was provided at least about mid day and as I had promised the Italians that I wouldn t leave them until they had all been fed and clothed, I felt obliged to share their meal when all had been served.

The matter next in order of importance was the problem of communicating with the families of the survivors and as soon as we arrived in the Joinery Stores I requested an issue of Field Service Postcards but none were available.

News of the disaster had flashed already through Greenock and small crowds gathered in the vicinity of the sheds. The chief anxiety of the survivors was that their relatives should not be in distress as these would have heard of the disaster and would probably deduce from the newspaper accounts that they were on board.

I assured them that it was impossible that the news would be announced immediately and that in all probability they would be able to notify their families first.

It was very annoying to discover that evening that the sinking of the Arandora Star made Headline News in many of the morning papers. Gradually the worst cases were fitted out and Officer survivors felt they could accept the Commandant's invitation to go to his house for tea and a bat. About 16 hours we were recalled to the Joinery Sheds to meet Major General Borrett, and at once acquaint him of what we considered necessary. He at once acted with great energy, ordering the immediate issue of stores from Glasgow, and an issue of Field Service Post Cards. Then he relieved us of our charges and sent us by car to the Beresford Hotel, Glasgow.

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

It is difficult for anyone not an eye witness, to realise the chaos that reigned on this disastrous mismanaged trip or the exasperation of Officers, men and Internees, and the needless suffering inflicted by the complete absence of any forethought or organisation. It is hoped that the following comments may be of use to mitigate the effects of another disaster.

OVERLOADED SHIP

It is obvious that a ship originally fitted out for 4 or 500 passengers cannot embark 1500 without incurring some danger in the event of a panic. But add barbed wire barricades, and the ship becomes a death trap.

VAVAL ESCORT

There was no escort.

INSUFFICIENT BOATS

There were no doubt sufficient boats for 400 or 500 peace time passengers, but we were 1,500. I saw few rafts utilised.

BOAT DRILL

Had the 200 dangerous Germans not been quartered in a vital part of the ship, there would have been no necessity for the move on the Monday and boat drill would have been carried out. Not that the boat drill with insufficient boats would necessarily have saved more lives, but at least there would have been more confidence, boats, equipment, and Devitts, could have been inspected and with a better organisation, it could, I think be asserted that more people might have been saved.

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SEGREGATION IOF INTERNEES

There was endless friction between Italians and Germans, Nazis and Anti-Nazis, Germans and Jews, which of course did not lead to smooth work.

CREW

It seems to be courting trouble to form a ships company in the way we were formed. We were told by the ships officers that 80% of the crew had been signed on the morning we sailed.

ESCORT

It seems advisable that escorts proceeding overseas might be formed or contain a proportion of RNVR, or men who are fully at home at sea. I have already noted how difficult it was for our guards to control the movements of our Internees, and of course they were useless with the boats.

ORGANISATION

For lack of an Officer in charge of each company too much work of an exhausting nature was switched on to the Interpreters. We would very well have done with Provost-Sergeants.

It would have simplified matters if Internees had already been forward ??? in their masses before they embarked, and had been properly instructed. ???leaders might have been issued with distinctive labels. All Officers proceeding on these duties should receive clear instructions, and not be left to grope their way to a solution of the various problems by a system of trial and error.

There remains only to put on record the steadiness and discipline of the escort and their Officers devotion to duty. Lieutenant Constable ??? notable for his unflagging energy and zeal Captains Brown and ???, Interpreters were indefatigable. All the Italians in my boat behaved very well and I would like to mention in particular Tenente ??? Borghi for his calm demeanour and Tenente Pro시오 for his ??? cheerfulness in spite of a smashed finger. Both these gentlemen rendered ??? assistance in maintaining a good spirit among their fellow countrymen. I should also commend very highly Signor Virgiglio Bolognini who went down with the ship and had two ribs broken by the cracking of a ??? In spite of his injuries he was able to cling to a floating bench and ?? managed to grasp round the neck first a Sergeant, and afterwards a soldier, who were on the point of drowning, and help them keep afloat. After about 9 hours in the water all three were picked up by the motor pinnace. Provost Sergeant Riddler was also of immense assistance to me in looking after Italian Internees and also went down with the ship, standing by and taking orders from the C.O. to last. Thanks to his powerful physique he was able to cling to some wreckage although injured he struggled hard to save two other swimmers but was unfortunately, through exhaustion, compelled to let them go.

I am glad to state definitely, having been fortunate enough to get in the second boat launched on the Port side, that I observed no fighting or struggling for places and no sign of any panic at any time.

Signed: F. J. Robertson, Capt.