JAMES HUME WARTIME DIARY

Life on HMS Conway

Viewed from the Liverpool Landing Stage on a foggy September evening nothing could have been more depressing, there was a slight fog and damp drizzle, and no sign of any ferry or other means of reaching the ship, which was only just discernible up river, anchored in the Sloyne off Rock Ferry.

The Landing Stage where I had disembarked from the *S.S.Ballycotton* was almost deserted and with some trepidation I approached a somewhat alarming wharfie, or was he a watchman? I asked him how to get to the *"Conway".* He said (in what I later learnt was a broad Liverpool-Irish accent, which was barely intelligible) that I would have to catch a ferry from the other end of the landing stage to Rock Ferry, past Birkenhead, where one of the ship's boats would arrive in due course, if not tonight, at least in the morning. "Go home while you can- Bloody cradle snatching!" He added as an afterthought, and spat into the muddy river and fast ebbing tide.

The Ferry Master was hardly more encouraging and said that he doubted whether they would have a boat into Rock Ferry this late, but added "you can always get a room at the Royal Rock Hotel, which is only a short distance from the landing and they always have boat in for the milk and papers at 0600" (6 AM). "Hop onboard, I'll take you to the Hotel if there is no boat in". To add further to my misery, as we approached Rock Ferry Landing Stage I heard a mother telling her child that unless he behaved she would send him to that ship, which was for bad boys, pointing towards "Conway". However, the Ferry master having established the presence of a boat, handed me over to the care of its coxswain and soon I was on my way to the ship that now loomed forbidding in the closing darkness, in now heavier falling rain and cold. I felt cold, wet and miserable and the boat's crew added to my discomfiture by predicting all sorts of terrible consequences that my arrival would entail at this late hour.

I was greeted by an alarming officer, (Lieutenant Lawrence) who demanded to know who I was, what was I doing coming aboard at this late hour in an officer's boat, and to add to my confusion, bugles were blowing and there was a mad rush of bodies as the boat in which I had arrived was hoisted by hand. I was hustled out of the way and passed from person to person, none of who seemed to regard me as other than nuisance imposed on them by higher authority, ultimately landing with my bag and hammock on top of me on the orlop deck, to be informed that I wasn't due until tomorrow with the rest of the new chums and that I was too late to get an evening meal. At this juncture a kind boy (Peter Moxon) took pity on me and showed me where to and how to sling my hammock, where the heads (toilets) were and where I could get a wash. So exhausted I turned in, to be promptly tipped out of my hammock by a fierce looking warrant officer (Bossy Phelps) with the admonition not to get in again until after

prayers, for which one had to kneel beside one's hammock in silence for three minutes, controlled by the bugle. I was soon to learn that this three minute supposed silence was a period for villainy. Then, I was informed that I had six days to learn the Ship's song and would be required to sing it on the following Sunday or else! The 'else' was not spelt out, but left to one's imagination.

The Conway Song

Where the tide runs in from the open sea,
The Old Ship Conway rides
No more she fights the enemy
No more she takes the tides,
But dear as of old to our heart is she,
For she caught and taught us to sail oo'er the waters,
So we love her none other, our old wooden mother,
0 the Conway's the one ship for you and for me.

Carry on, carry on till the last day's gone,
And the old ship knows you no more.
0 East and West and North and South,
From Rio Bay to Mersey Mouth,
From every distant sea and shore
You'll hear the cry "Ship Ahoy! Ship Ahoy!
And You'll find on the bridge a Conway boy,
So for the love of the ship that sent us forth,
From East and West and South and North,
Till the last tide turns and the last day's gone
Carry On! Carry On!

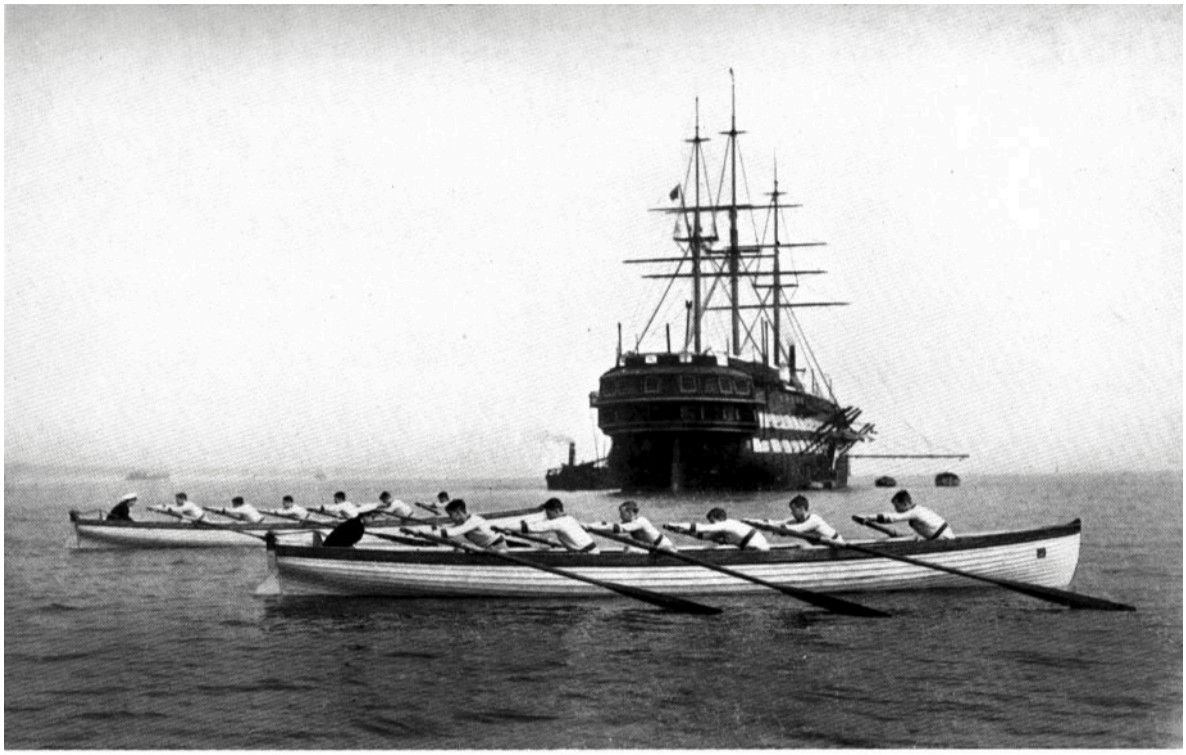
When I came to her I was four foot three,
My heart was beating fast, I saw her quite tearfully,
But kept them down at last,
But soon I was settled and sang with glee,
To bewail her, no sailor would dare so to fail her,
We find later, we rate her, a splendid old mater,
0 The Conway's the one ship for you and for me!

When I left at last and went to sea,
A lump was in my throat, I watched her fade all mistily,
God bless the dear old boat,
And dear to the hearts of her sons is she,
For she made us, displayed us, on fighters and traders,
Every rover all over, from Chile to Dover,
Sings "The Conway's the one ship for you and for me."

The next morning I was awoken by the sound of a bugle and a mad rush of boys to the wash-basins at the unearthly hour of 6.30 and attempted to lash up and stow my hammock. One of the Warrant Officers, Jumper Collins, then showed me how to do it properly and showed how in future it would be tested to ensure that it was lashed properly and woe- betide if when it was doubled over any bedding emerged outside the canvas.

CLEANING BRIGHT WORK ON LOWER DECK

FIRE DRILL, "HEAVE ROUND, AFTER DOWNTON"

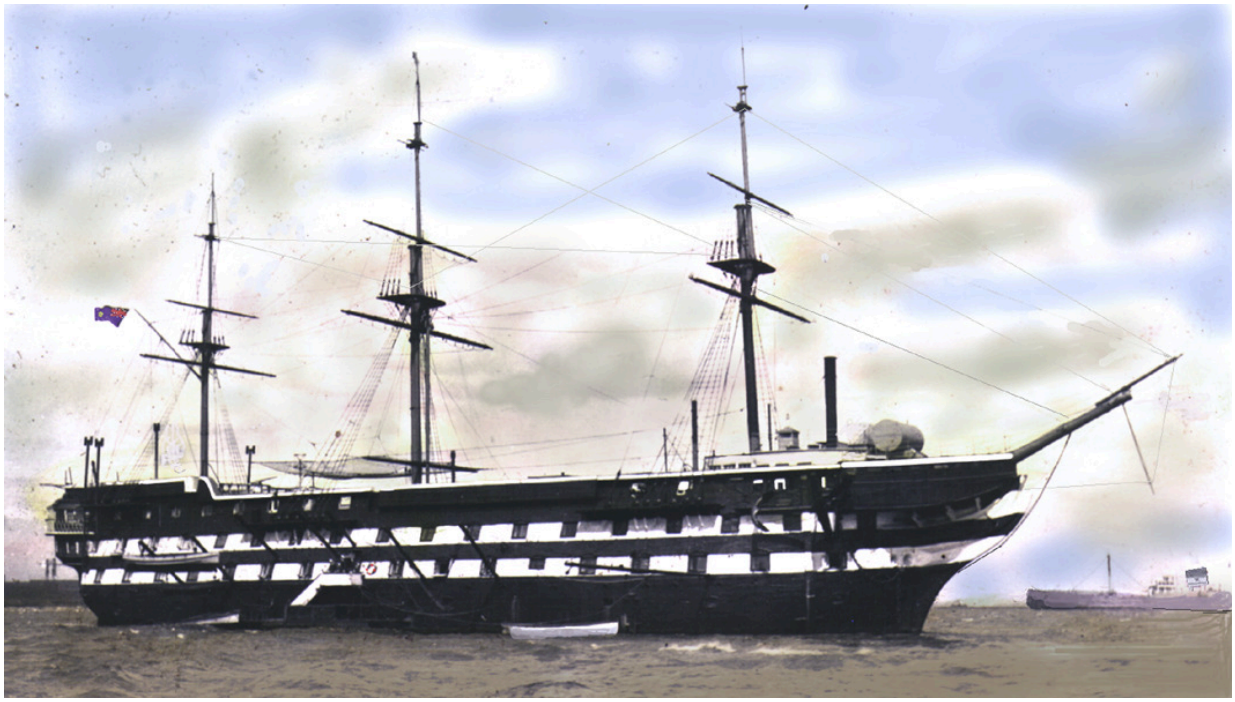


GIG'S CREWS

MORNING WASH

Liberty Boats

That day was absolute confusion as the other new chums joined and we were sorted into tops (parts of ships), medically examined, and issued with the necessities of life, etc. The only glimmer of hope I could see for the future was the fact that we were given a fortnight grace to learn to do things properly, after which we would be held responsible for all our actions. Even so, we were hastened on our way to various tasks with the assistance of fairly heavily wielded rope's end (known either as a stonikee or teaser) with promises of much swifter retribution at the end of the period of grace.



Lieutenant Commander Lane and Bossy Phelps were to be the two barriers that older boys had to overcome to torment us, and at night the two Warrant Officer's cabins were adjacent to our hammock billets, but this seemed to add to the sport and our hammocks were let down, our pillows stolen, our gear hidden and of course we were at the end of every line for the canteen, for food, or any other more pleasant task, but at the forefront for the more menial tasks such as the nightly task of pumping bilges with the hand pumps, with the hoisting of boats or swabbing decks, the most unpleasant being the rinsing out of mops at the bottom of the gangway on a bitterly cold winter's night.

The ship was allegedly heated and steam pipes encircled both the main and orlop decks, but these were seldom more than warm. The food was appallingly bad and we always seemed hungry. However with the amount of physical exercise we all put on weight even during the first two weeks. Two boys left because they couldn't stand the pace and I must confess, several times I felt like doing likewise, particularly when the first Sunday I was called on to sing the *Conway* song solo, and every time I faltered, I received encouragement with the teaser. Hopelessly out of tune and stumbling on the final verse, it was then decreed that I be immersed in an offal (yak) tub full of galley garbage and cold greasy water. It took me hours to clean up, but I had apparently passed, or my rendition was so awful, that unlike many of the new chums who were harried for months I was never sent for again, at least not to sing.

These initiations were the order of the day, after the fourteen day period of grace, and apart from the more gullible being sent on useless errands, such as being sent to one of the Warrant Officers for "the key to the starboard watch" or to the store for "red oil for the port light " the main requirement was to sing solo and depending on the rendition one suffered whatever indignity our tormentors devised. Boot blacking of the body was the worst indignity, because of the lack of showers and the difficulty of removing boot polish by other means, but those of us who accepted initiation in a reasonable spirit, were quickly ignored for those who had the "nerve" to question tradition. A new chum displaying "nerve" was quickly taken down a peg or two. Neither initiations nor the use of the teaser (unless witnessed by the Duty Officer) was sanctioned by the officers and they did their best to stamp out these practices and bullying, but with only mixed success.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to keep out of trouble in those first weeks, Foolishly I bumped into G.R.Mortimer-Booth our most exalted Chief Cadet-Captain when running up a ladder and he said "I will see you tonight" a comment without meaning to me then. However at "lights out" I was hauled out of my hammock onto the main deck, where in front of the Duty Officer, I was required to bend over and touch my toes and received six of the best from Mortimer-Booth with his ropes-end (teaser) and a black mark. It should have been six, but was seven because I moved after the second stroke, a deadly offence. One had to shake hands with the administerer of the punishment immediately afterwards. Failure to do so resulted in extra punishment, a sufficient inducement to comply. We learnt quickly to keep out of the way of our Seniors.

We learnt quickly other things too, and became adept at pulling on the oar and handling boats in a tidal stream that left no margin for error often running at four knots. In retrospect, it never ceases to amaze me, that the boats were not required to carry lifejackets or other emergency gear, yet we never had a major accident with any of the boats. Time passed very quickly, from 06.30 in the morning, to breakfast, to rigging the main deck for school, school, dinner, seamanship training, more school, evening meal, study period, pumping bilges and at 22.00 (10 PM) Lights out, Pipe down.

Our sea chests were packed with more clothes than I had ever before owned and almost a library of school books and books on every nautical subject, from Nicholls Seamanship to Nories Nautical tables and even books on the subject of Marine Engineering and Ship Construction. No space was wasted and everything had to be neatly folded to fit into our chests and the books just fitted into the chest tray with no room to spare The number of books needed for morning and afternoon school periods varied, but their weight in the early days seemed enormous, and struggling up and down steep ladders with an armful of books was an exercise in itself.

Our classrooms were on the main deck and divided by portable partitions, which had to be rigged for school and then unrigged for meals. The same stools and tables being used for both purposes in a different layout. In those early days I could hardly lift the partitions or stools or tables that were designed to sit twelve to a table. The whole routine was conducted to bugle calls and on the run. No time was wasted and meals were gulped. In the early days it seemed to be a life of constant chaos, but I soon settled into the routine, which in fact had been devised over many years to maximise our potential or lack thereof, and keep us out of mischief. I found that one of my favourite subjects became Marine Engineering and Ship Construction and that I had a talent for technical drawing, but on the other hand struggled with advanced maths and differential calculus, so clearly was not destined to become a Marine Engineer.

On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons we landed for compulsory sport, Saturday mornings we cleaned ship for Sunday rounds and on Sunday we had divisions, Church and the Captain's inspection followed by dinner, which was always marginally better than on other days and in the afternoon we had a compulsory letter writing period and a couple of hours to ourselves, providing one could escape the attention of those senior boys always willing to torment us. We suffered several epidemics that winter, first with flu and then with measles that in the crowded mess decks spread like wildfire and at one stage more than half of us were down with measles and sent ashore to "Conway House" sick quarters.

Hoppy Lee our seamanship instructor was an old sailing master and a wonderful teacher of sail making and fancy knots but could be easily distracted to yarn about his sailing ship days . Lieutenant Lawrence taught us signals and was one of the kindest of the officers always with an encouraging word. Lieutenant Commander Sarky Couch was the Executive Officer and had a mean way of sneaking round the ship that we all hated. Lieutenant Commander (Loopy) Lane was the Senior Watch keeper and seemed to coach us in all sports, although his particular interest was tennis. Of the Two Warrant Officers, Jumper Collins was our Physical Training Instructor and ran compulsory boxing, which we all hated, and Bossy Phelps, who was kindness himself, was our rowing instructor and a great teacher.

Captain Goddard was the Captain and we saw little of him, except on Sundays when he examined us at divisions with a critical eye, and woe-betide the unfortunate boy who was picked up by him. The Masters were an indifferent lot in personality but dedicated to teaching. They were given a hard time by the boys, but when we got out of hand, retribution was swift with extra work in hauling coal or working in the coal hole, pumping bilges and the nightly wielding of the teaser at lights out. When I joined, the heads (toilets) were primitive stalls open to the wind and river, and perishing cold in winter, when the wind whistled from beneath. Apart from the communal bath at the playing fields, we were only allowed one bath per week in tepid water, having to use the wash basins for all our other washing. Saturday of course we used to manage to get ourselves scrubbed down in summer when scrubbing decks, but fresh water was a scarce commodity. The heads and bathrooms were greatly improved during a refit one year after I joined and a new boiler ensured that we had really hot water for baths. The nightly task of hoisting all the boats by hand was an exhausting task and during the two epidemics there were barely enough boys to heave to and boat hoisting extended into a two hour exercise.

The Canteen supplemented our very plain diet for those who could afford to buy, but it was a constant toss up with the limited amount we were allowed two shillings per week, whether to save some for the tuck shop enroute to the playing fields, or blow it all in the Canteen. Stamps and notepaper, toothpaste and soap also had to come out of this allowance. One of the great joys in summer was to go aloft, over the futtocks (never through the lubber's hole) and commune with the birds. In winter however going aloft was absolute purgatory. We also learnt a whole new language, some of which would have horrified our parents, and by the end of the first term regarded civilians as a race apart.

At the end of first term, I was still the youngest boy in the ship and was put in Starboard mizzentop. There was a fair amount of bullying from the Senior boys, but one managed to survive by keeping out of the way of the more notorious of them. Also being fleet of foot I could race almost anyone aloft and because of my light weight was like a monkey in the rigging. If chased for sport on a Sunday afternoon this was my

best means of escape, as a ducking usually ensued if caught. Several boys couldn't take the heat and left, while one poor kid committed suicide by hanging himself from a yardarm. One quickly learnt to look after oneself, and we became a united top, proud of our division, our part of ship, our boat work and sport. There were periods of abject misery, but also periods of a great sense of achievement and being proud to be a *"Conway".*

Jumper Collins, the Warrant Officer responsible, was prone to mismatch opponents "to make a man of you" and I came too on a number of occasions in a cold bath. No-one complained, because if they did they would get a bigger beating. It frequently was a disgusting blood-bath between boys skilled and unskilled and I have hated boxing ever since. But there were pleasant interludes, the summer evenings spent away off Ellesmere Port, and Port Sunlight, in the sailing dinghies, with a good stiff breeze to put your gunwale under. The nice clean smell of the ship at lunchtime on Saturdays after "clean ship", the hot communal bath after a game of Rugby, the Mess Treats we enjoyed as a winning boat's crew (soft drinks, ice cream and cakes); the New Ferry open-air baths in summer and Cinema nights in the main hold.

It was a rough and tough life and sometimes even tiresome, it was not a life that would appeal to many, but it bonded us into a close and proud ship's company, although few of us would have admitted it, and above all moulded us into first class seaman.I will always be grateful to Lieutenant Commander Lane for his guidance and encouragement and have continued to correspond with him ever since I left the ship. He was a first class officer and teacher and really cared about his charges.

HMS Conway 1938-1940 (James aged 14-16)

I think the somewhat harsh discipline did none of us any harm and no boy left the *Conway* as a 'spiv'; even if bad he was at least a man. Hoppy Lee was a marvellous teacher in practical seamanship, small boat handling and sail making and could impart a tremendous amount of knowledge to those who wanted to learn; however, in marking some boys used the work of others and his marks would significantly differ in direct a ratio to his likes or dislikes of the boy.

The loss of the submarine *Thetis* during trials off the Liverpool Bar with the tragic loss of life as attempts were made to rescue the crew had a major impact on us and brought home the need to strictly observe safety precautions.

On 20th July the ship went into the Victoria Dock in Birkenhead for refit and repair, in which much recaulking was done. All yards and spars were struck, all rigging was stripped, tested and made good. Sixteen new oak dead-eyes were needed; some new davits, and three new topgallant masts. The old small topgallant forecastle over the heads was removed and the original design of the forward upper deck laid bare in all its grandeur, in its place a much larger forecastle deck was laid, over new and improved heads; with a big new water tank over all. A new boiler was also fitted. We rejoined the ship in Victoria Dock and at 0230 (2.30am) Sunday 11th September the ship berthed on Liverpool landing stage, bows south. We were the first line-of-battle ship to lie alongside the stage. At 1030, at ceremonial divisions, the new figurehead was unveiled. It had been carved from a four ton block of teak, and represented Nelson in Admiral’s uniform. After unveiling, all hands marched to a special service at Liverpool cathedral, the ship then returned to moorings at the Sloyne.

The most significant change that occurred as a result of this refit, with the modernisation of the galley, was a new catering system. We were surprised next

morning to find eggs grilled bacon and tomato, fresh breakfast rolls and mess appointments that would have done justice to any wardroom, but the derogatory names remained; sodduk for bread, grease for butter (or was it margarine?); Dead Man's Toe for a roly poly pudding and a number of unpublishable but highly descriptive names for some of the other offerings. Other meals showed a similar improvement in quality and quantity. It was rumoured that these improvements were the result of the coronial inquiry into the boy who suicided. Certainly, the health of all significantly improved under this new dietary regime.

Meanwhile the clouds of war were looming and Prime Minister Chamberlain came back from his meeting with Hitler at Bad Godesberg (22-24 September) impressed by Hitler's meaningless gesture to postpone the invasion of Czechoslovakia until 1 October. On 28th September the Prime Minister reluctantly agreed to Fleet Mobilisation and we were to lose, albeit temporarily, some of our officers. However, within forty-eight hours of mobilisation the crisis was dramatically dispelled by the agreement of Britain and France to Hitler's demands at Munich. The end of this crisis was acclaimed by the media as "Peace in our time" But there was no euphoria amongst our officers, who believed that it was only putting off the evil day.

On 15 March 1939 Germany occupied the defenceless core of the Czech lands and proclaimed an "independent" Slovakia. Six days later Germany annexed Memel and began the now-familiar round of hectoring demands on Hitler's intended next victim: Poland. Then, on 22nd May, came the signing of a new German-Italian military alliance. This was the "Pact of Steel", in which the two Axis countries pledged each other immediate military support in the event of either "becoming involved in war-like complications with another Power or Powers". Four days later the Admiralty sent the orders for 15,000 officers and men to be called up to man the Reserve Fleet which was to be brought forward to readiness by 15th June. Once again we saw changes with our officers.

In March 1939 our Rugby XV and some of our athletes visited Gordonstoun School at Elgin to compete with the school in Rugby and other sports. We were no match for Gordonstoun at athletics, and I was no match for them in either the mile or half mile. They had many eighteen years old boys and the Scottish school weight-putting champion, and another who could run a mile in four minutes thirty-seven seconds but despite having one of our team injured and out of the game we trounced them at Rugby fifteen points to six.

On June 28th 1939 the 100th anniversary of her launching, the ship was open to visitors, there were divisions and Captain Goddard made a speech about the launching. We had 180 boys onboard. We also visited France's two most modem battle cruisers the *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* that were paying a courtesy visit to Liverpool. We were surprised at the lack of cleanliness in the mess-decks and thought them a pretty poor and scruffy lot. We were proud that the Frenchmen returning the visit complimented us on the spotless state of our ship.

On 22nd August we were stunned to hear that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression Pact robbing Poland of any prospect of prompt military aid. War appeared inevitable. On 3rd September Prime Minister Chamberlain sadly informed the British people that they were at war with Germany and the Second World War began. Our white gunstrakes were blacked out, the upper deck was painted grey, concrete bomb protections were fitted to all hatches, skylights and orlop deck ports, against incendiary bombs and blast and the upper deck was sandbagged. Blackout was fitted to all ports and we were issued with gas masks and carried out gas drills

and abandon ship. There was no way of making any part of the ship into a gas citadel. The ventilation in the ship blacked out was totally inadequate and there was a bad flu epidemic. Sister Parry, the ship's nurse tended to all our ills and always provided a sympathetic ear.

In September 1939, I was moved in part of ship to Starboard Main as one of the senior boys. Because of age I still had two terms to serve before officially being allowed to go to war. The sporting routine was severely curtailed and in early 1940 Liverpool suffered her first major air raids. More emphasis was given to First Aid classes and most of us obtained our St John's Certificates. There was also more time given to improving our signals and survival techniques. There was much concern about mines in the river and mine watches were instituted for us senior boys. Many of the officers and teachers left the ship for active service and were replaced by the elderly or medically unfit, it was a disrupted period and one of considerable tension. Captain Goddard took to teaching navigation after Mr Wood retired due to ill-health after thirty-seven years onboard.

The war quickly came home to us as some who had been shipmates were early war casualties in the *Royal Oak, Courageous Clement, Huntsman, City of Mandalay, Clan Chisholm, Doric Star, Dunbar Castle, Clan Morrison and Counsellor.* Ships were also being mined in the Mersey and the approaches to the Bar and a number of damaged ships were anchored in the Sloyne awaiting a berth at Cammell Lairds shipyard. We became almost immune to the sound of air raid sirens and during the day carried on with normal routine unless local gunfire became heavy.

The Captain dined those of us leaving on our last night on board and wished us well. There were special prayers that night for our safety, followed by the Naval Prayer

"0 Eternal Lord God who alone spreadest out the heavens and rulest the raging the sea; who has compassed the waters with bounds until day and night come to and end; Be pleased to receive into thy Almighty and most gracious protection the persons of us thy servants, and the Fleet in which we serve. Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious Sovereign Lord, King George and his Dominions and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions; that the inhabitants of our Island may in peace and quietness serve thee our God; and that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land, with the fruits of our labours, and with a thankful remembrance of thy mercies to praise and glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Then the service concluded with some 180 boys singing lustily the Hymn "Eternal father strong to save... ... " and ending with the Ship's song. I left the ship in early April, 1940, before my sixteenth birthday with a very thorough professional knowledge, but without any real idea of the perils that lay ahead. Like the nation, we were not well prepared for the years ahead! It was a sad parting and few of my term were to meet

again or survive the war.

The SS Clan Chattan

Returning to Liverpool on 27th May, 1940, I joined the *Clan Chattan* (Captain Lofthouse OBE, DSC) and was placed in the tender care of Midshipman Peter Lawson, who was in his fourth year. *Clan Chattan* was one of the most recent additions to the Clan Line Fleet of sixty ships and the twin cabin Peter and I shared was of a magnificent standard as was all the officer accommodation. After *Conway* and sleeping in a hammock it was luxury indeed. The ship had an unusual twin-screw power plant with reciprocating engines geared to Bowach high pressure exhaust turbines and was capable of burning both oil fuel or coal, and had a maximum speed of 18 knots. In addition, the ship was fitted with 120 ton heavy lift derricks and was one a class that had the capacity to lift the heaviest of British tanks. I was besieged with a barrage of questions of “Can you.. Send and read morse? Send and read semaphore? Station keep? Use a distance meter? Fire a machine gun? The sort of questions I was to discover only changed in content from ship to ship.

Loading was almost completed, except for a deck cargo of carriages for South Africa's new "blue train" and some fine race horses in horse boxes on deck at No 4 hold. The owner promised Peter and me a reward if we supervised the feeding and grooming of the horses on passage. We sailed in convoy from Liverpool in convoy at dusk and were joined by other ships off Belfast and from the Clyde to comprise one of the largest and heaviest protected convoys of troop and supply ships yet to leave the United Kingdom.

In the main threat areas we kept bridge watches, four hours on and four hours off, two officers and a midshipman to each watch, and were required to keep station, act as a signalman, and tend to the zigzag clock. In addition, we were required to work normal working hours during the day when not on watch, plus dawn and dusk stand to action stations. My watch was with the Chief Officer and Third Officer, while Pater kept watch with the second officer and fourth officer. That left me with the task of calling the second officer, a man of uncertain tempter, who when awakened, used to hurl shoes at the unfortunate awakener. Not only did he hurl shoes but he was extraordinarily difficult to waken. I became adept at dodging his shoes.

The first two days out were rough and our escorts were often obscured in the troughs of huge waves and the horses were seasick and miserable. We had visions of losing the offered reward for due care. We all slept fully clothed and balaclavas, scarfs, woollen mittens with duffel coats were essential to combat the penetrating cold. We also carried everywhere a small "panic bag" which contained our survival kit for use in the lifeboats and our more important documents and money. However, the weather steadily improved as we neared Freetown, Sierra Leone on the African Coast, and

apart from a number of what were false contacts by our escorts we arrived safely at Freetown, a miserable bunkering port close to the equator, where the heat was oppressive and malaria endemic. Natives in canoes stood off the ships attempting to sell their wares mostly hands of bananas and monkeys. Andy Mair our third officer bought a monkey that was to be a source of friction with the Captain and his peers for the remainder of the voyage. All Peter and I could afford was a hand of bananas.
We departed from Freetown immediately after bunkering, sailing independently and headed South. Two days out from Freetown, I was summoned from watch on the bridge by the Captain, who passed me into the hands of two villainous looking apparitions whom he informed me were emissaries of King Neptune into whose domain we were due to pass within the hour. Together with others who had not yet "Crossed the line" I found myself under arrest in the vicinity of Number Four hold, where a large canvas bath had been rigged and King Neptune (Our Sergeant of Marines, Bill Ward) was holding Court. First up as the youngest crew member, I was charged with a number of offences "including" escaping from the Nursery and running away from home" and "profane 'language" not appropriate to my tender years. I was sentenced to drink the most horrible concoction, which comprised, I think, of a mixture of Castor Oil, Condensed milk, Rum, Indian Curry powder and fish oil. This concoction, said to be specially brewed by the Doctor, was forced down my throat by the holding down of my lower jaw and holding up and pinching of my nose, so that I was forced to swallow. Then firmly seated with my back to the canvas pool, my hair was roughly clipped to a very close crew cut, and then I was tipped none too gently backwards off the chair on which I had been seated into the canvas pool where I was dunked vigorously by the Bears.

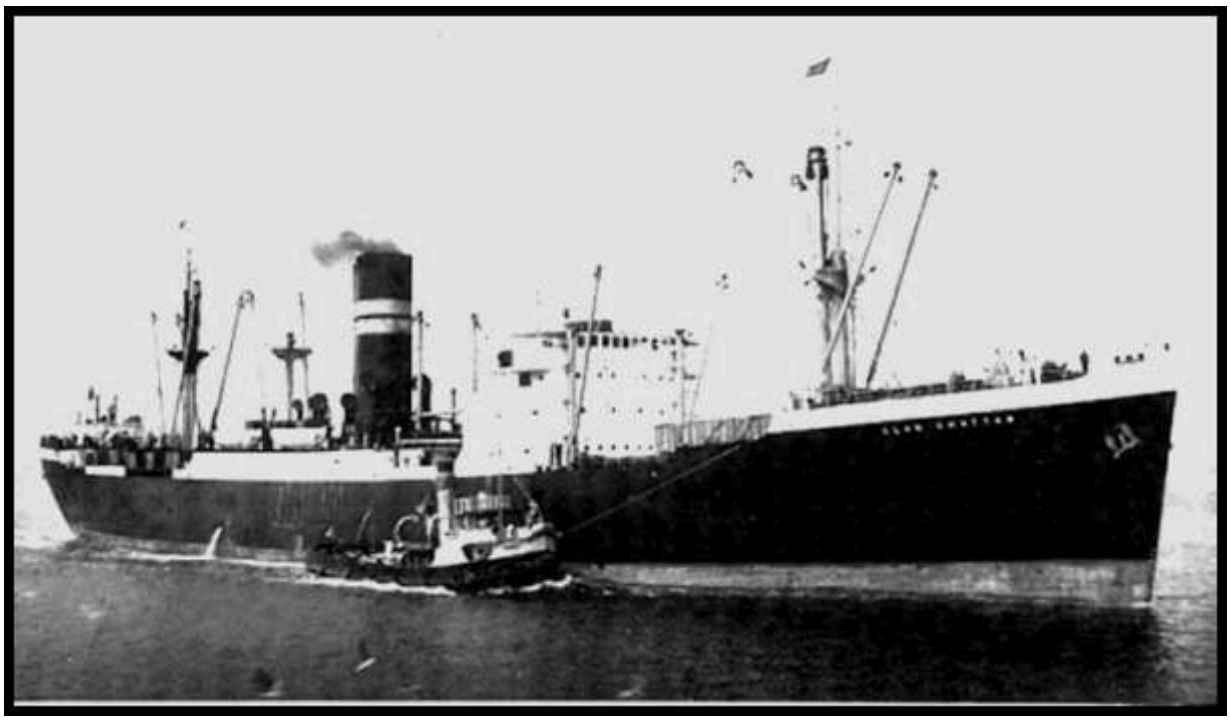
My initiation was quickly followed by others and we soon became a majority in the bath, and retaliated against the Bears. Having changed and returned to my watch on the Bridge, the Captain's only comment (He was a real martinet whom we were all in awe of) was that the "haircut was an improvement" and "in his time Neptune dealt much more severely with longshoremen". The Sergeant of Marines later was to repair some of the damage to my hair and managed to make it look a little better with a fairly professional cut. The concoction forced down my throat however, resulted in severe but not lasting discomfort at my rear end and required some rapid departures from the bridge to the "heads" (Toilets), departures that the Captain sought to delay and seemed to cause him much merriment.
At Capetown we unloaded the deck cargo and horses and Peter and I were invited up to the new owner's property just outside Capetown, where we were treated to a magnificent lunch and generously tipped for the condition of the horses. A tip that we were to share with the Indian crew members who had done the hard work of mucking out. We then went to Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban to discharge part of our cargo before proceeding to Calcutta, where we coaled ship and changed Indian crews before loading part cargo of tobacco and jute.
Sprawling Calcutta was an eye-opener, the comparison between poverty and wealth was appalling, the heat and humidity were oppressive, and coaling ship by women carrying coal up planks in baskets seemed an incredibly inefficient means of loading bunkers, but emphasised the pittance labourers were paid. Coal dust and sweat are not conducive to comfort and the dust permeated everywhere even with everything closed down, which further aggravated our discomfort. Calcutta gave me the opportunity to buy cheap tailor made tropical uniforms and although many said that it was "half cotton half rotten", by providing English cotton for the sewing they provided

excellent wear.
No one was sorry to leave Calcutta for Rangoon where we loaded teak and then to the open anchorages of Vizagapatam, and Masulipatam where we anchored off and loaded bags of ground nuts from barges.

We then sailed for Durban, Capetown and Freetown. At Freetown it was decided that we should sail independently for Liverpool, watches were doubled up and we zig-zagged our way North at sixteen knots. Submarine attacks were concentrated in October 1940 in the Western approaches to the United Kingdom, 16 ships being torpedoed in the area in the period we were on passage from Freetown to Liverpool. We arrived of fthe Mersey Bar at dawn on the 15th and saw some of the devastation that had been wrought by German air raids on the port, particularly by mines that had landed in Birkenhead rather than in the river.

I was sent off on a Gunnery Course, Peter Lawson left the ship to sit for his examinations and the Captain and Chief Officer left to be replaced by Captain Morris Jones and Mr Jenkins and I became the senior Midshipman with Peter Hustwayte joining as a new chum. The ship was also fitted with Degaussing coils for protection against magnetic mines, Parachute and Cable rockets that trailed a piano wire, snowflake rockets for night illumination and with two Holman projectors, a Heath Robinson device, which looked rather like a mortar, but fired grenades with steam pressure and could be aimed in the general direction of an attacking aircraft.

Peter Lawson having successfully passed his exams, went to a tanker. His mother wrote a month later and told me the tanker was torpedoed and he lost his life. It was a very sad blow as we had become firm friends and it was the first of many letters I had to write or respond to grieving kin. A job that could not be shirked, but which I hated and which grew no easier with the rising toll.



The SS Clan Chattan

On our next voyage, we sailed in November in one of most heavily escorted military convoys to depart from, the United Kingdom with reinforcements for the Middle East, comprising the finest troopships of Union Castle, Canadian Pacific, Orient Lines and fast cargo ships from Clan, Blue Star, the New Zealand Shipping Company and the British India Company. Visiting Freetown, Cape Town and Durban to refuel, the convoy was then escorted by the Cruiser HMS *Cornwall* and the Armed Merchant Cruiser, HMS *Kanimbla* from Durban to Aden. *(Kanimbla* was manned by an Australian crew and I was to join her almost exactly two years later.) We then proceeded through the Canal to Alexandria, unloaded cargo and loaded other military cargo for Port Sudan, which was the main supply port for the recently conquered and occupied Italian Somaliland (The Port of Massawa had been blocked with ships scuttled by the Italians).

Having supplied reinforcements to the British Force in the Sudan, we then proceeded to Aden to refuel; thence Colombo and Calcutta to bunker and change Indian crew, load cargo and thence Madras to complete loading general cargo. In Madras I suffered acute toothache and was taken by the Ship's Agent to an Indian Dentist who had an old-fashioned pedal drill and without injection slowly drilled the cavity. The toothache was almost preferable to the agony of that encounter. Completing loading in Madras we then proceeded to Colombo arriving 12th February.
The practice was to change our Indian crews in Calcutta on each voyage. Most of these crews had been in the employ of Clan Line for many years and were very experienced. The new younger crew members were usually related, but it was company practice not to have sons in the same ship as their fathers. All the orders were given to crew members in Hindi and the learning of the language was mandatory.The lascars suffered badly from the cold, and many had inadequate clothing for the North Atlantic until arrival in Britain when the Seamans Missions used to provide them with woollens and an odd assortment of second-hand clothing. The crew were loyal and cheerful and good seaman, but their quarters reeked of ghee, the cooking fat they used as a cooking base and a distinctive odour that permeated all Indian crew ships

Avoiding an Indian Ocean Raider

On 16 February 1941 fully laden, after bunkering with oil fuel, the *Clan Chattan* departed Colombo for Durban. On 20th February the laden tanker *British Advocate,* which was subsequently taken as a prize, reported being attacked by a raider of fthe Seychelles. It was the German "pocket- battleship" *Admiral Scheer,* a "super cruiser" armed with battleship size 11" guns in two triple turrets. They also carried a float plane and the technique was for the aircraft to trail a grapnel and destroy the ship's aerials, so that the raider's position could not be reported. On 21 February, the 7,178 ton merchant ship *Canadian Cruiser* was sunk by the *Admiral Scheer* in Position 06 degrees 36 minutes South, 47 degrees 18 minutes East.

In which direction would the *Admiral Scheer* proceed? Would it attempt to intercept shipping in the Mozambique Channel, or with its position disclosed would it move further off the African Coast? We immediately increased to full speed and changed over from burning coal to oil fuel, as this reduced the risk of funnel smoke which could be seen well over the horizon. Watches were doubled up, emergency aerials rigged and our guns manned. The weather helped, there were strong South Easterly trade

winds, heavy cloud and occasional rain squalls that reduced visibility and lessened the chance of detection. We also experienced moderate to rough seas and the sea state may have prevented *Admiral Scheer* from using her aircraft. The nights were moonless or the moon was obscured by cloud and the ship was rolling heavily as we ploughed along at maximum speed.
The tension was high and the lookouts particularly alert. We sighted a ship's mast on the 22nd February and promptly altered away, otherwise we appeared to be in an empty expanse of ocean. It is believed that we passed each other during the night of the 23rd February with *Admiral Scheer* homeward bound via the Kerguelan Islands. We made a record run from Colombo to Durban of **11** days and 3 hours. Such are the fortunes of war!

On arrival in Durban the Captain broke the news to me of the loss of my entire family. I was devastated but the tears would not come and I found work was the only substitute.

(Comment DAH. This text place the date of this loss some time between the 16th and 27th of February, 1941).

From Durban we proceeded to Cape Town and thence across the South Atlantic to Freetown. Ahead of us the German battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisnau* were playing havoc with our convoys. They sighted Convoy HX 106 on 8 February and when they found it was being escorted by the Battleship *Ramillees,* rather than risk one of his ships the German Admiral avoided them setting course for the quieter latitudes of the Tropic of Cancer. Fourteen days later they returned north and in position 47degrees 12 minutes North, 40 degrees 13 minutes West they came across the remnants of convoy OB 283 that had dispersed twenty-fours hours before. They sank five ships before speeding away to the South West and into our path, sinking or capturing a further seventeen ships. It was not until 15th March that they were again detected in the Atlantic 'Black Hole'. Yet the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisnau* arrived safely at Brest on 28th March having avoided all contact with our forces.

Meanwhile, departing independently from Freetown (fast ships were normally routed independently at this stage of the Battle of the Atlantic) we sped at best speed northwards receiving daily reports of intensified submarine and Fucke-Wulf Kondor bombing attacks ahead of us. The weather rapidly deteriorated and in heavy weather, low visibility and gale force winds in position 41 degrees 30 North 42 degrees 20 West at about 0745 in seas of at least thirty feet, we suddenly came upon a submarine *(V-boat)* on the surface close too and sent an alarm. Action stations were sounded and the ship turned away at emergency full speed, but passed the submarine in a trough so deep that we were looking down at the conning tower and their crew members on the conning tower were looking up at us, sufficiently close to see expressions of amazement on their faces.

Our guns crews were unable to depress their guns sufficiently to fire on the submarine, and the sea was so rough that there was no way that the submarine could have manned their gun. Even if the guns crew had been able to depress the gun sufficiently, it is doubtful whether they would have been able to hit the target as the ship was now rolling and pitching wildly as we steamed away, zigzagging and at maximum speed. Our concern was that the enemy were now aware of our position

and that with their recent German change in tactics, in which the German Navy and Airforce were cooperating, we could expect other submarines to be deployed to attach is or be bombed by the German four-engined Focke-Wulf Kondors outside the range of our own air cover. There was also the threat posed by the German battle cruisers Gneisenau and Scharnhorst, who had now remained undetected for seven days in the “black hole” of the North Atlantic that we were transiting. We also thought the sighting of a Spanish Tanker shortly afterwards coincidental as the Spaniards were known to be in sympathy with the Germans, once again we altered away.

For the next four days the weather was appalling as we continued northwards in the teeth of one of the worst storms ever encountered in the Atlantic in March. It was so bad that we had on two occasions to reduce speed and stop zig-zagging. However, visibility was reduced to such an extent that it was unlikely we would be sighted by aircraft. Adding to our disquiet were eighteen reports of ships being attacked and sunk by submarines around us and fifteen reports of ships being bombed and sunk. We thought "poor sods", how little chance the survivors would have in this tempestuous sea. As we sighted the Northern end of the Scottish Island of Lewis the weather abated, and a lone Sunderland flying boat appeared and waggled its wings and then we were within range of our own fighter aircraft as we steamed South down the Minch between the Outer Hebrides and the West Coast of Scotland.

Now the threat was mines, which had accounted for ten ships in the past thirty days off the Scottish West Coast. Despite a number of air raid alarms, we safely negotiated the Minch and berthed with much relief in the safety of the Port of Glasgow….or so we thought. However, the Germans had now resorted to attacking the Ports and there were air-raids every night. Sleep was the most precious commodity, watch and watch at sea (4 hours on and four hours off) meant that it was impossible to get much more than three hours unbroken sleep and in port one looked to getting a good night sleep. The air raids on the ports now made this impossible and we all suffered from a perpetual weariness.

With nowhere to go for leave, I remained onboard with the caretaker officers, who were all into their sixties and had come back from retirement, to allow our own ship's officers as much leave as possible. They were kindness itself and helped ease my personal burdens. Glasgow was a bleak and miserable place to be, with the nightly air raids and the black-out there was nowhere to go and many a night we played bridge underneath the mess table to the sound of falling bombs and anti-aircraft fire. I doubt whether being under the table would have helped if we had been hit, but it was the approved passive protection at that time.

In Glasgow the City virtually shut down with darkness, with a strict blackout it was almost impossible to find ones way around in any case and there was also the hazard of falling shrapnel from our anti-aircraft guns. Gorbals was also a pretty tough district and not a safe place to wander around in the blackout, yet it was through this area one had to pass to get back to the ship. On one of the few occasions I was returning to the ship after dark, it was necessary to seek refuge in an air-raid shelter as shrapnel was raining down. I was promptly propositioned by a buxom Scottish woman of uncertain age, I fled preferring the hazards of shrapnel.

Apart from an occasional afternoon cinema show, the ship seemed the safest place to be. Having completed unloading our cargo, we then moved to Liverpool and from the frying-pan into the fire with Liverpool suffering its heaviest air-raids to date.

CHAPTER FIVE
OPERATION TIGER
Latitude 32 *degrees* 22 *mins North*
Longitude 24 *degrees* 22 *mins East.*

"The only way in which this great purpose can be achieved is by sending the fast mechanical transport ships of the fast section of (Convoy) WS.7 through the Mediterranean. General Wavell's telegram shows that machines, not men are needed. The risk of losing the vehicles, or part of them, must be accepted. Even if half get through the situation would be restored. The 5 M T ships carry 250 tanks. I decided that the fast tank-carrying ships in this convoy should turn off at Gibraltar and take the short cut, thus saving nearly 40 days."
Churchill 2nd World War Vol IIIp 218.

The loading of HMT Clan Chattan in Liverpool coincided with the fitting of anti-aircraft rocket launchers, new degaussing, and an "A' frame and paravanes. There were sporadic raids on the port throughout each night, with extensive damage to the overhead railway and Birkenhead. A number of ships were sunk alongside and the ships both ahead and astern suffered direct hits. In mid-April the ship moved to Glasgow where loading was completed, although night loading was interrupted by air raids.
Meanwhile on 20 April The Chiefs of Staff discussed the Churchill proposal until late into the night and their first reactions to the proposals were unfavourable. The chances of getting the M T Ships through the Central Mediterranean unscathed were not rated very high, since on the day before entering the Narrows and on the morning after passing Malta they would be subjected to dive-bombing attack out of range of our own shore based fighters.

The *Clan Chattan* sailed in Convoy WS7 on 23rd April with 75 tanks, 12 Hurricane Fighter aircraft, 3000 tons of ammunition (both naval and military) and assorted priority military stores. Convoy WS7 in very heavy weather, with gale force winds for the first three days, suffered a number of U boat attacks between Glasgow and the Straits of Gibraltar but no ships were sunk and on the night of 3rd of May in mid-Atlantic parted company with the main troopship portion of convoy WS7 for the dash to the Straits. Poor visibility and heavy weather helped cover this movement. The Convoy consisting of *Clan Campbell, Clan Chattan, Clan Lamont, Empire Song* and *New Zealand Star* passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on May 6th escorted by Admiral Somerville's Force H (The battleships *Renown,* and *Malaya,* The aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* and cruiser *Sheffield* together with the battleship *Queen Elizabeth,* and the cruisers *Naiad* and *Fiji* which were reinforcements for the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet. The convoy was subjected to sporadic air attacks on 7th May and heavy air attacks were beaten off on 8th May, seven enemy aircraft being destroyed.

At nightfall, on reaching the entrance to Skerki Channel, Force H broke off and returned to Gibraltar having detached six destroyers and the Cruiser *Gloucester* to reinforce the convoy. During the night of 9th May the convoy streamed paravanes but the *Empire Song* struck two mines with her paravanes which exploded and with a violent explosion the ship sank with the loss of 18 of her crew and 57 tanks, ten Hurricanes and most of the spares for both aircraft and tanks. The *New Zealand Star* was hit by a torpedo but managed to proceed. We in the *Clan Chattan* had a lucky

escape when a mine fouled our starboard paravane but we were able to free it, without it exploding. There were some very tense moments as we juggled to free it. The convoy steamed close to the enemy held Pantelleria Island which was clearly visible against the near full moon. It is possible that E-Boat attacks which were driven off came from this island. The M.T. ships had each been fitted in Glasgow with 4 rocket launchers with VT and photo- sensitive warheads to rockets as additional anti-aircraft weapons systems. These "Heath Robinson" devices that were guided visually and comprised two rails, two electrical contacts, a 12 volt battery and a flash shield caused considerable damage to adjacent ships as the warheads were exploded by funnel smoke and the back-flash caused casualties and severe burns to a number of crew manning the launchers. In response to one firing by us:-

"Clan Lamont to Clan Chattan: Your reaction to my puff of smoke from a near miss was a little drastic! "

After the first series of air attacks they were abandoned for use and subsequently ended up on the Alexandria Harbour breakwater as part of the fixed defences. On May 9th providence worked in our favour with thick low cloud that was most unusual for this time of the year and the convoy now guarded by the three Anti-aircraft cruisers *Carlisle, Coventry, and Calcutta* together with the light 5.25 inch gunned cruisers *Dido, Naiad* and *Phoebe.* We were then unmolested until the night of May 10th when in a flat calm with a full moon, the enemy attacked the convoy in force with high and low flying aircraft but were beaten off. They next attacked the covering fleet but the volume of fire put up by the four battleships and the aircraft carrier *Formidable* was too much for them and the bombing was wild, though some of the destroyers and transports had near misses.

The unloading of the convoy in Alexandria went reasonably well, though as every tank was unloaded from the two *Clans* using their own heavy derricks, they went straight into the adjacent tank repair shop to have sand and dust filters fitted and other odds and ends. The forty-three crated *Hurricane* aircraft suffered a similar fate, but were further delayed after an attempt to send them by canal to a rear aerodrome to have filters fitted failed. The barges could not pass under the canal bridges and the crated aircraft had to be reloaded and shipped to Port Tewfik.

Despite the risks to bring these tanks to the Middle East, most of the 250 tanks and 43 aircraft remained for the best part of a month in Alexandria subject to air attack and because the 5 ships had not been operationally loaded some vital spares for both tanks and aircraft were in the one ship and all these were lost with the *Empire Song* as was a substantial portion of the 5.25" ammunition for the cruisers. The Mediterranean Fleet had expended between one half and one third of its entire stocks of 5.25 inch and 4.5 inch anti-aircraft ammunition and although the three *Clans* and the *New Zealand Star* had some 5000 tons of fleet ammunition this hardly replaced that expended in fighting the convoy through. None of the Tanks or aircraft were operational in time for the Battle for Crete and the loss of the fleet ammunition in the *Empire Song* was to prove a major setback. The Admiralty sent the Commander-in-Chief Eastern Med, Admiral Cunningham, a congratulatory message on the safe arrival of the *Tiger* Convoy, which they regarded as a *"memorable achievement".* Admiral Cunningham did not share their view, being fully aware that the success of the operation could only be ascribed to the thick and cloudy weather on the 8th-9th May,

which, for that time of the year in the Mediterranean, was unprecedented.

Churchill's comment is illuminating. Presumably, he was not informed of the debacle in bringing these highly risked cargoes into action for he commented:-
"Naturally I was eager to repeat the brilliant success of "Tiger". I had not realised what a strain it had been on all concerned, although clearly I had borne the main responsibility. I considered my judgement about the dangers of the Mediterranean passage was at last vindicated. My naval friends, on the other hand, declared we had enjoyed a stroke of good luck and weather which might never recur. The Admiralty certainly did not wish to be led into a succession of these hazardous operations. "
Admiral Cunningham wryly commented:
"Unfortunately the apparent ease with which the convoy was brought through from end to end of the Mediterranean caused many false conclusions to be drawn at home, and I think made some people think we were exaggerating the dangers and difficulties of running convoys and operations of any sort in the face of the vigorous action of the Luftwaffe. Before long the dismal truth was to be painfully brought home to them."
The Captain would not permit us to go ashore in Alexandria and in any case working from daylight until dark supervising the unloading of cargo was a tiring task. To try and prevent pilfering and or sabotage, one officer and two armed soldiers manned each hold when cargo was being worked. The Arab stevedores tried every trick to distract attention while they attempted to broach cargo. They were so degenerate that they exposed themselves and masturbated in an attempt to distract. On one such occasion one of our Polish soldiers on guard duty used the butt of his rifle on the offending member and I doubt whether that Arab would ever father children. We were not allowed in the holds without an armed escort as one young officer had been 'gang raped' only a few months before.
Having completed unloading, we then proceeded through the Suez Canal to Aden for bunkers and without cargo to the Indian Coast. In Calcutta we once again changed crews and loaded a general cargo of jute, tobacco leaf, and ground nuts. We then proceeded to Capetown and across the South Atlantic to the Port of Spain in the West Indies. Because Freetown had become a centre of attack by German U-boats a thousands of miles diversion across the South Atlantic to the American Coast was seen as necessary for the fast independent ships. We then proceeded up the American Coast and close to the Arctic Circle before making passage down the Minch to Glasgow. It was an uneventful passage, made at best speed, zig-zagging continuously, in kindly low visibility. September 1941 was spent in Glasgow and the ship was fitted with ASDIC before once again departing in a sixteen knot Convoy from Liverpool on 19th October, 1941. Three nights out we suffered a number of U-boat attacks and lost three ships. We then had to take into tow an ex-USN four stack destroyer *HMS Stanley* for four days when out of the main threat area for submarines as she had insufficient fuel. Surprisingly the tow made almost no difference to our speed.

Visiting Freetown, Capetown and Durban we then proceeded independently to Aden and through the Suez Canal to Alexandria, where we unloaded our Military Cargo and loaded a military cargo of tanks and vehicles for Bandarshapur at the head of the Persian Gulf. Bandarshapur had become the railhead for supplies to Russia and had been the scene of fierce fighting against the Iraqis. It was bitterly cold at the head of the Gulf and many ill-clothed Iraqis were dying of exposure each night. British Military Port Security was particularly tight as there was a simmering antagonism by the Iraqis

at the military occupation of their country and the brutal putting down of an Islamic uprising. One could not fail to feel this antagonism even among the Iraqi stevedores working the ship, but the more educated Iraqi's were much more open in displaying their hostility and we had to institute very thorough anti-sabotage patrols and a thorough body search of everyone boarding. We were glad to complete unloading and leave the Port.

The ship then visited Abadan to refuel before proceeding to Aden and back through the Canal to Alexandria, where we saw in the New Year and commenced loading cargo for the besieged garrison at Malta. Security was particularly tight and once again we were not permitted into Alexandria, but we made our fun in the evenings with the Midshipmen from the *Clan Campbell* that was berthed on the other side of the wharf, also loading for the same destination.

Their Midshipmen were two Scottish brothers named Young, one of who played the bagpipes particularly well and on New Year's Eve we had a great Party and piped in the New Year with the hope that now the Americans were in the War we would see a change of fortunes. In addition to the loading of military cargo, eight 40mm Army Bofors anti-aircraft guns and their crews were embarked and these guns were secured to the deck with specially welded fittings as additional armament for the forthcoming passage. Only the Ships' Captains were permitted to leave the wharf area. There was some concern over the mix of case petrol in the same holds as ammunition and the lack of adequate venting for petrol fumes and this led to some heated debate between the Ship and the Army. The ship won and the petrol was restowed in a separate hold. Loading was completed on the 11th February and the ship then loaded additional fuel oil for discharge at our destination. We were a floating bomb, and it was necessary to ban smoking throughout the ship. The crew understood the danger, but it was difficult to convince the embarked troops.

The ship was now greatly overcrowded and there was some concern about access to the converted tween deck accommodation for troops at No 4 hatch and the primitive sanitary arrangements that had to be made. Messing and cooking facilities were at a premium and all the ship could provide for the troops was boiling water for tea. They were to be fed packed rations. Additional Carley Life rafts were also embarked, but the lifesaving arrangements looked most inadequate for the numbers onboard.

Malta Convoy
12TH to 14TH February, 1942

Latitude 35 *degrees 01 mins North*
Longitude 20 degrees 11 *mins East*

"Things were going badly in the Western Desert. Any convoys taking supplies to Malta must now pass through the 200-mile gap between Crete on the North and the bulge of Cyrenaica on the south. Enemy aerodromes thus lined each flank of the convoy route, and the future of Malta looked very black indeed....We were thus faced with a period during which passage of convoys to Malta from the East could only be carried out at very great hazard, as there was a long stretch over which no air cover could be provided. At the same time we could provide no surface force to act as a deterrent to the Italian heavy ships....In all these circumstances I gave it as my opinion that we must take great risks to keep Malta supplied. We must run in a convoy as soon as possible. If we are unlucky we might well lose the whole convoy".
Admiral Cunningham. "A Sailor's Odyssey "p443.

On the afternoon of February 12th, the *Clan Chattan, Clan Campbell,* and *Rowallan Castle,* with the anti-aircraft cruiser *Carlisle* and seven "Hunt" Class destroyers sailed from Alexandria. Rear Admiral Vian with the cruisers *Naiad, Dido Euryalus* and eight destroyers followed in support. The convoy was in two sections, both of which were attacked from the air on Friday 13th. At 17.30 the *Clan Campbell* received a direct hit in her coal bunkers and damage from a near miss and had to be detached to Tobruk escorted by two destroyers.
Shadowing by enemy aircraft continued all the next morning, and the convoy was subjected to high- level and dive bombing attacks. We in the *Clan Chattan* received two direct hits at 1600 that set off a series of explosions in the main cargo of ammunition in Numbers 4 and 5 holds. I was on the bridge at the time and watched the bombs coming towards us. We knew there was no way they were going to miss because we saw them hurtling towards us but could not hear them. We all ducked as they hit. With Mr Jenkins, the Chief Officer, I was sent from the bridge to fight the fire, there was no water mains pressure and we spent the next thirty minutes pulling troops out from No 4 hatch, by which time the fire had such a strong hold that case ammunition was exploding from the heat and the fire was approaching case petrol. I was then sent to tell the Master, (Captain H Jones OBE) that the fire was out of control and there was a likelihood of a major explosion. The explosions had ruptured the propeller tunnels snapped the propeller shafts and destroyed the steering gear, fire mains and sprinkler systems. Without propulsion, steering or the ability to fight the raging fires orders were given to abandon ship. The Hunt Class destroyer *Beaufort* aware that the ship was mortally hit then came alongside to attempt to fight the fire and embark survivors. The decision was a courageous one, but informed by the Captain of the danger of a major explosion (similar to the *Clan Fraser* that exploded with a similar cargo at Piraeus and destroyed 13 ships, 60 lighters and 25 motor sailing ships and caused devastation up to 15 miles away) with the fires spreading towards the aviation fuel and other volatile explosives, *Beaufort* quickly cleared from the ship, having embarked most of the crew. The ship was then finished off by gunfire from *Carlisle* disappearing in one almighty explosion. Indian crew members and troops who were not required in

the attempt to deal with the fire had earlier been ordered to abandon ship in the lifeboats and were picked up by the destroyer *Exmoor.* Of the 75 crew, the Naval Liaison Group, the 200 embarked troops and additional guns' crews few lives were lost although a number of the crew attempting to assess the damage and fight the fires together with troops from the tween deck accommodation suffered 2nd degree burns, including both Mr Jenkins and myself. Thirty minutes later *Rowallan Castle* was neared missed and her engines disabled, taken in tow she also had to be sunk. The attempt to relieve Malta had failed and the surviving forces turned back.

All the crew remained in the destroyers for the return passage first to Tobruk, where the damaged *Clan Campbell* joined the Force and thence to Alexandria with the Malta outbound convoy of empty ships that had been trapped there since September 1941 *(Ajax, Breconshire, City of Calcutta* and *Clan Ferguson).* After 4 days of almost continuous action the three cruisers had expended some 3,700 rounds of 5.25 inch anti-aircraft ammunition. The failure of this convoy to reach Malta produced a very grave situation. Churchill who earlier had constantly chivvied Admiral Cunningham does not appear to have commented on this or the next attempt to relieve Malta. On arrival in Alexandria I was admitted to hospital for treatment of burns to my hands and arms and after ten days was discharged to leave and to join A.S.I.S *Dafila* as Third Officer.

George Cross Commemorative Medal

The President of Malta has been pleased to approve the Republic of Malta Prime Minister's . recommendation that the "Malta George Cross Fiftieth Anniversary Medal be awarded to me for my participation in *this valiant attempt to sustain Malta during Operation MF* 4".

The award was presented by His Excellency the High Commissioner for Malta in Canberra on the 7th April, 1994, after The Governor General (acting for Her Majesty the Queen) through diplomatic channels gave the Government of Malta approval for me to receive and wear the award. The award has been officially Gazetted.