

On the *Water*

Stories from Maritime America

Spud Campbell

Spud Campbell describes the sinking of the Liberty ship SS Henry Bacon by German aircraft on February 23, 1945. Sixteen merchant mariners and twelve members of the Navy Armed Guard were killed in this attack.

Clues about the mission

So I traveled back to my next ship,

which was in Boston, and was the
SS Henry Bacon.

And when I first saw the ship,
I took note of the fact that it was battle-weary
looking, like I was, really.

It had been through a lot.
It had been in dry dock, and I noticed
that they had added reinforcing along
the sides of the ship.

And they had also added a lot
of new radiators for heat.

And when I went aboard and met
Captain Carini—Captain Alfred Carini—
who was to be my captain and my
very good friend.

He had been at sea a long time,
and he knew where we were going.

And he didn't tell me. He just said, when
I brought up the fact that it seemed to have
Arctic-type gear aboard,



he said, “Well, you can just draw your own conclusions about where we were going.”

So I did. I knew at that time that we had to be the dreaded Murmansk run, because

I knew, I’d heard a lot about it. I read about it, where many, many ships, sometimes almost all of a convoy

had been destroyed by the German Navy,

which had been stationed along the coast of Norway after they had invaded and occupied Norway.

But I did, after second thoughts,

I did decide to stay aboard and to make that trip, because I was curious.

Arriving in Murmansk

We managed to get around Norway, and over to Murmansk, which is well up above the Arctic Circle.

It’s like almost to the North Pole, you might say.

And it’s only navigable in the winter like that, because of the Gulf Stream effect,

which warms the water to some degree, so you don’t have icebergs,

you don’t have frozen water there, although the temperature is below freezing.

And we finally got to, after about ten days of travel,

we arrived at the little city of Murmansk.

But we did see the city, and we picked up souvenirs, and that sort of thing,

what little there was available.

And we unloaded our cargo, which was
mostly war materials and
food-stuffs, but we had locomotives and tanks
and guns and that sort of thing on deck
as deck cargo.

And at that point, as usual, I had
no duties to speak of in port.

And they were very strict about
sealing the radio room
because they didn't really trust us, even though
we were friends, and we were helping,
and we were in a joint effort.

Norwegian refugees

Well, later, as we were anchored out
in the harbor,
preparing to leave,
we noticed a British destroyer came alongside,
and they deposited nineteen
people aboard our ship,
and we learned that they were
Norwegian refugees who had been picked up
off the coast of Norway by the British Navy,
and brought to Murmansk,
along with about five hundred people
who had been chased out
of their homes by the Nazis



and they had lived in caves,
if you can believe it,

in the Arctic, in the winter.

And—so they were

they were put aboard our ship. We had no
facilities—we did make room for them,

gave 'em places to sleep,
and we gave 'em a chance to

take a bath. Because some of them,
they had lice and all sorts of problems.

And so we took these people aboard,

as passengers,
on a ship not equipped for passengers,

but we had enough food for them,
and what-not.

Aircraft attacks

And we headed back out to sea,
and immediately, we were attacked.

and a couple of ships were sunk
right outside the harbor.

And they picked up the
survivors from those ships.

And then we headed on out to sea
around northern Norway, and
we were attacked by aircraft.

And, the—our gunners were able to hold
them off the first time.

And the weather suddenly began to—
we came in to, we had

a—gale force winds,



which broke up the convoy;
we couldn't stay together.

Our rudder was damaged.

And this lasted for two or three days.

And it was so rough, that we
were not able to even sleep on the ship.

You couldn't even stay on bed—
you'd roll right out of the bed if
you tried to sleep.

But we had our duties, also.

I had to stay on duty
because of the attack by the aircraft.

And after three days of this,

and being oscillated, our ship had strayed
back behind the convoy—

we had no escort at that time, so the

planes came in again,

and someone counted twenty-three torpedo
bombers heading toward our ship.

Our one little ship with a cargo of humanity.

And they attacked us. And our gunners,
who were very, very

proficient in their activities—
they downed five of their,

of the Nazi planes before they
finally hit us with a torpedo.

And we realized that the ship was doomed.

The captain gave me a message, I sent out

a distress message that we had
been attacked, and gave our position.

And I got an answer from Scotland.
The convoy up ahead

did not acknowledge it, but they heard it.
They didn't break radio silence,

which would have given
away their position.

Torpedo hits

So, at that point, the ship was, well,

fatal—mortally wounded,
you might say.

And the captain realized that.

And he started giving orders about
launching lifeboats.

They found two of our lifeboats of the four—
we had four lifeboats—

and two of them had been so damaged in
the storm that they were not usable.

And we had two left. So the captain,
on the first boat,

he put all the Norwegians, the
nineteen Norwegians,

who consisted of young babies,
little children,

up to old men and women.

And he put them aboard one lifeboat,
and he assigned me,

with my little lifeboat transmitter,
to go aboard with them,

along with six young seamen who
would handle the lifeboat.

So we were launched into that,
and we pushed away from the ship safely,

even though the water was still very rough.

And I was able to erect
two masts together and

get the antenna erected,
and to get my little black box

to working so it could send out
a signal that could be used for

beaming in to pick us up.

With all the work I had to do,
I became sea-sick.

Witnessing loss and survival

And after hanging over the side for
a few minutes, I was back to work again.

And we saw the ship as it slid into the water,

the captain still aboard. Twenty-six of
our crew—about half of our crew

who had to go into the water
were drowned and frozen.

Some— a few that went into the water, survived,
and were picked up later by the British

destroyers that came back from the convoy.
It took about three hours for them to get back,

and they, and they came alongside us,
and we, we had to—

first, we had to get all the young
ones onto the destroyer by,

well, with the condition that the water was,

at one instant, you'd be thirty feet below the deck of the destroyer, and the next instant, you're level with it.

And each time we were level with it, we would hand a baby, or a woman, or some old person

to the crew on the destroyer.

And this was the *SS Opportune*—
HMS Opportune.

And we finally got everybody aboard,
and then I scrambled aboard, and

passed out. I didn't remember a thing
after that until the next morning.

And I was woken—awake, and realized
that I was in about two feet of space

from my bunk to the one above me,

in an area of the bow of this destroyer.

And I was alive. That was the best news.

And after cleaning up all the stink and
vomit stench of my condition,

I was able to, to
maybe have a shot of brandy,

which is the British Navy's
way of treating people.

And we spent a week on that ship,
and we came to Scotland.

We were met by the Crown Prince Olaf
of Norway, who was in England at that time.

The royal family had escaped and came
to England during the war.

And he met us and was very
grateful to the fact that we were able

to save those nineteen people.

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