

# 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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