

On the *Water*

Stories from Maritime America

Alan Harvie and John “Sarge” Ransome

Alan Harvie and “Sarge” Ransome describe the sinking of the *SS Honomu* by a German U-boat in the North Atlantic on July 5, 1942. Twelve members of the crew and a British gunner were killed.

Convoy formed

We were in Iceland almost a month,

and, uh, finally, around
the latter part of June,

we got the word that we might
start forming up the convoy.

And this was going to be the
biggest escorted convoy yet.

There was the battleship *Washington*,
the American Navy.

There were several English
heavy cruisers, and so on.

One of them called the HMS
Courageous; I’ll never forget that.

They had at least one escort vessel
for each of the merchant ships.

Mine-sweepers, corvettes,
things of that sort.

They even had two anti-aircraft ships

that were ex-United Fruit



banana carriers

and they'd fixed them up with huge
broadships of these pom-pom guns

and they were,
they were very impressive.

Anyway, off we went, once we
got the convoy organized,

it was a multi-national group.
Everything from a Russian tanker

to Dutch, couple of Norwegians
that somehow had been overseas,

they were in the convoy.
It was quite a group.

PQ-17 was the number
of the convoy.

And out of, I think, thirty-four ships, I think
there was only about seven survived.

I think about twenty-seven ships were sunk.

Ordered to scatter

So anyway, on the fifth, I believe,

the captain called all of the
officers who were off watch

into the mess room and said, "We
have an order to disperse the convoy."

Well, immediate disbelief,

because here we
had the strongest assortment

of protective ships
up to that time.

It was on the night of July the fourth,
it was on or about maybe ten or
eleven o'clock at night,
but broad daylight.

We were ordered "to proceed to
our nearest Russian destination."

And that was about the
gist of the message.

That order means that the convoy
is scattered.

It disintegrated the convoy, this order.

And every ship just took off
from every direction; the closest
they could to get away from other ships.

The merchant ships were abandoned,
we kind of had a bit of resentment
particularly after the big build-up
that we'd received about this
magnificent escort that we had.

We weren't more than twelve,
fourteen hours later
we were torpedoed.

Torpedo attack

The thought that if anything happened,
we had to have some sort of a routine
to prepare the ship for abandoning.
So I figured out, well, okay, the first



thing you do, shut the engine off.

Then you have to secure the main circulator,

because if you have the main circulator going,

all that water going over the side,

you have a boat coming down, and, uh,
for launching.

And if that stream of water hits it,
it'll drag it way, way away from the ship,

and there's no way the
people can get into the boat.

So that's a must.

The main circulator and the engine.

Then you have to secure the
fires to the boilers,

because with nobody watching the
water level, you possibly could have

a low water situation. Explode the boilers.

And in a Scotch boiler, that's pretty, uh,
pretty drastic.

So those three things were paramount:

secure the engine, shut off the
main circulator, shut off the fires,

and get the hell out.

I was on the 12:00 to 4:00 watch,

and all I was looking for was 4 o'clock.

(laughs)

We had that, uh,
it was apprehension. It wasn't fright.

It was just apprehension.

When the torpedo hit, it was about, uh—

just after my two o'clock round.

I had to feel the engine
myself, once an hour,

just to check and make sure that everything
was going the way it should be.

And I was sitting on the work-bench,
and this horrible noise—

Actually, I don't remember a noise.
I just remembered this

huge shock.

Your ears sort of came in and came out,

and I thought, "Oh my, we've been hit!"

And then a feeling of great relief,

"I'm not dead!"

Yeah, I, when the torpedo hit,

it threw me out of my bunk, on the deck.

And, I, uh, slipped on my shoes, and I
didn't lace 'em or anything.

I just ran mid-ships.

The port boat was the only boat left.

The starboard boat was blown off
the ship by the torpedo.

So I, right quick, I lowered the boat in the water.

And we didn't have far to lower it,
'cause you only had about three feet freeboard

from the main deck to the water.
She was goin' down.

And, in fact, she went down in six minutes.

Well, I couldn't—it was all too awkward,
everything was wrong.

So I kicked the raft off on the starboard side,

the bo'sun went forward,

and he turned the painter loose.
He held it until I got in it,

and I held it to the ship's side,

and he turned the painter loose, and I let it
drift back to mid-ships, here.

They were the last crew members,
including the skipper,

that got in the, uh, this raft,

and a couple of guys had to
jump in the water, because they,

we couldn't, we drifted
away from the ship a little bit.

U-boat surfaces

We were all in a state of shock.

I mean, all this racket, and getting in the boat,
and the whole thing—seeing the ship go down.

All you could see were these huge piles
of powdered eggs and, uh,

dehydrated potatoes floating around,

and all the sea birds sitting on top of them,
pecking away.

It was a real feast for them.

So we were just looking around to see
what was going on, and all of a sudden

we were aware there were three submarines
were coming at us. They had surfaced.

We didn't see 'em coming up, because we
were pretty well concerned with our own problems.

We saw one of them go over to the lifeboat.

The chief mate was still wearing his uniform
cap, and he was standing there

with the steering oar, doing his thing.

So we saw the sub come alongside and
apparently they were interrogating him.

And we saw him lift his hand and point at us.
Captain Strand was in my raft,

or I was in Captain Strand's raft, let's put it
that way. So the sub left the boat

and came over to us.

It came alongside, and we hung on.
I can remember feeling how amazed,

what beautiful shape the hull was in.
I held onto one of the limber holes,

and here was a beautiful coat of paint,
and nice clean metal.

It didn't take long for Captain Strand to stand
up, and he went aboard the submarine,

and they told the rest of us that we had all of Europe
below us, all we had do was to head south.

They were kind enough to check our compasses,
make sure that our compasses agreed.

They gave us some supplies of
bread and canned butter

and also some bandages for the
oiler who had been hurt.

The U-boat surfaced and came
over to the raft I was on,

and he says, "Where's your captain?"

But I was sitting there right on side with the
skipper, and I says, "He went down with the ship."

And, uh, so Strand stepped up. He says,
"Right here. I'm the captain."

Well, he couldn't have been identified as the
captain, 'cause he had a coon-skin cap on,

he had a coat with a fur collar. He might have been
recognized as a purser, or something, on a ship,

or a passenger. Anyway, he didn't have
to identify himself,

but he saved his life by doing that, because
if he'd have been in the lifeboat,

he would have been in command of the
lifeboat, he may have lost his life.

There was only four survivors out
of the eighteen men that was in the lifeboat.

Surviving in life rafts

Okay, we're in the life raft. I had a
radioman, and a signalman,

and the deck engineer, and the bo'sun,
and an able-bodied seaman, and myself.

There was six of us, altogether.

And everyone was green about how

to behave in a life raft.

We had a water breaker there,
we took it out of the floor plates,

and we set it up. It was about a five gallon,
I guess, something like that.

The guys put the spigot in, took the
bung out, and put the spigot in

so that we could drink out of it.

But I said we'd ration the water. We had
rations every six hours.

At six o'clock in the morning, twelve noon,
six at night, midnight.

And we did that around the clock
for the thirteen days.

And, as a matter of fact, it was
exactly right, the arithmetic.

The scheduling was exactly right, because
we ran out of water the day we got picked up.

It didn't do any good to row the raft
because we drifted north sixty miles

during the thirteen days we were there.
(laughs)

We did it for exercise, just
to keep the blood going.

But we did freeze our feet. We suffered
"immersion foot" because our feet weren't

active; we weren't standing on them.
If you stood on them, got up near the
sea, it'd toss you into the drink.

I took my partner and I put his feet underneath
my parka—I had a parka

and I put his feet on my chest so that they wouldn't be cold.

And I had mine right close to him, on the side of him, there, so to try to be warm.

It was cold.

It's a mental adjustment. You know that you don't have much of a chance.

You drift into a melancholy attitude. There's no humor involved. Stark reality.

You don't even drift to the dimension of death, of death. You accept it.

There's not much you can do about it.

There was no drama here.

This was stark, staring despair.

And you accepted it.

It was something that you weren't trying to satisfy or please anyone because of it.

We were very melancholy about our obedience to our obligations.

So we rowed four, and slept four, and it was so cold you couldn't sleep for more than four hours anyway.

And, uh, one of the officers, a second mate,

had, during the depression spent a little time riding the railroad,

and he suggested that we take off our shoes and socks, and rub our feet with this butter that the Germans had given us.

There wasn't too much conversation. As I said,

there were only five of us on each raft.

One had six, I believe. But anyway,

there was no use in speculating,
and the more we talked about it,
we decided the less we could come up with,

what would be would be.
So we just, you know,

if you started thinking about it, you can
talk yourself into a problem.

So we rowed and we slept,
and I think the worst part of the whole thing

was when we had a group of killer whales
decide that we were seals

sitting on an ice-flow. And they came along
underneath us and tried to tip us over.

So we had oars and were beating on them
down through the slats in the raft.

They didn't think that was much fun,
so off they went.

It was constant daylight. It just got dark—
darkish, I should say.

And then the water would condense,
and we had a little bit of condensation

which we licked up, because we were
only having an allowance of

two ounces of water a day.

Rescue

On the ninth day, a plane,
a PBY (seaplane) circled us.

I assumed that it was a Russian PBY.

It was one of ours that we gave them.

He flashed—he dropped us some tobacco, cigarettes or something like that.

And then he flashed to us that he would send help.

Well, on the eleventh day, the lifeboat — we were all tied together, all four rafts and the lifeboat,

were all tied together. We were stretched out maybe five hundred feet.

Roughly. Something like that, so that we'd make a bigger target.

On the eleventh day, the chief mate told us, came up to us and said

he was going to turn us loose, and he was going to make it on his own.

He was going to go southwest. We said, "No, go southeast," because that was Russian territory.

And he said, "I'm going southwest." Well, he went out into nothing but water, you know.

On the eleventh day, he was out there for twelve more days after he left us. And two days later,

we ran out of water. And I don't know what they did. And I don't know just exactly what

they—the quality of the rationing they had aboard the sub [lifeboat].

But with me, I rationed the water and gave everybody two ounces,

and we ran out of water, even though we lost some, you know.

We just had enough luck to run out of water the day we got picked up.

It was just by chance.

And we were suffering from thirst,
from drink to drink.

If you drink less than a pint a day,
you're suffering from thirst.

We drank half a pint.

On the thirteenth day, it was a foggy day,
cloudy and foggy. Dismal.

And right through the fog came these two
sloops, the *Halcyon* and *Salamander*.

They were about a hundred-and-sixty to
two-hundred foot long at the most.

And they did about seventeen, eighteen knots.
They were little wagons.

Anyway, the *Halcyon* picked up the other three
rafts, they were quite a distance from us,

maybe half a mile. And the *Salamander*
came right through the fog on top of us.

And we all six went aboard that.
We had plenty to drink then.

We drank, we were pigs about that.

The town of Archangel was actually the largest
city in the north of Russia,

but to me, it was very grim, gray.

If you went away from the
six-block downtown area,

the sidewalks were made out of wood,
and not too well nailed down, either.

You had to watch yourself,
because if you stepped on a plank,

you had the thing moving in your face.

In the downtown area—I should say,
the business section—they had

you know, big apartment houses,
theaters, and that sort of thing.

People were very—they were stand-offish.
I found out later, of course, that they were

self preservation.
They were not to talk to anybody.

If you want to talk to anyone,
they'd wait until they found somebody else

so they'd have somebody to witness

that there were two people
talking to you, not just one.

Most of our time was
spent exploring and walking.

Because our feet hurt so much
that—the aftereffects of this

thirteen days without moving
them at all, they just hurt.

The best way to get over it and
to make them feel a little better

was to walk.

So we walked from one
end of town to the other,

and out in the countryside,
the best we could.

FINISH