

Convoy OS 44

Foreword

I had never set out intentionally to write about convoy OS 44. To be honest, I had never heard of it until fairly recently.

During World War II, there were many convoys, probably hundreds, sailed around the world's oceans. They were Britain's life blood, bringing in raw materials, fuel, troops and food while at the same time maintaining the export trade and delivering arms, troops and other war materials to theatres of war around the globe.

Convoy OS 44 was just another such convoy.

Every convoy was given a name and number and these were related to the direction of the convoy (to UK or from UK), the destination of the convoy and the speed. So, OS 44 was the 44th in a series of convoys sailing from Britain to Freetown.

My father, John, died more than 20 years ago and some years after his death I found myself wondering about his time in the Royal Navy. During his lifetime, he didn't talk a lot about which ships he served on but he did tell me a few stories about some of his exploits; usually amusing tales, never tales of derring-do.

While talking with my father's brother, Wynn, about what he knew of my father's time in the Royal navy during World War 2, Wynn mentioned that he was sent out to Africa on a ship that formed part of a convoy in Liverpool. At the same time, Dad was on board a Royal Navy vessel anchored in the River Mersey, also waiting to go to Africa. This rang a bell as I remembered Dad mentioning this and a tale he told me about something that happened in Freetown.

Wynn then mentioned that his convoy arrived in Freetown one morning and Dad arrived with a later, faster convoy the same evening. They had hoped to get together some time later for a beer and a chin wag as they hadn't seen much of each other at all for quite some time with Dad being away with the Navy and Wynn having been at Cambridge. Before they had the chance to meet, Dad's ship was sent out into the Atlantic, on its way to Capetown & Durban, while chasing German submarines, Wynn continued his journey and the two didn't meet again until after the war had ended.

I thought that, if I could trace the convoy that Wynn had sailed with, I may be able to tie up the link between the arrival of the two brothers in Freetown.

While talking with Wynn about the events of that time, he recalled he had sailed on a Belgian ship but couldn't remember the name of it.

I searched the archives and discovered a convoy, OS 43, of about the right time frame and with a collection of 6 ships carrying passengers and cargo to Freetown.

Of these, only 2 were to go on from Freetown to Takoradi and one of these was a Belgian vessel called the Mokambo.

At the time, I decided this was possibly Wynn's convoy and did some research on it. While carrying out that research, I noticed another, later, convoy by the name of OS 44. I looked at some of the details of this convoy but was only mildly interested as I had decided that convoy OS 43 was the one I was looking for.

In my notes from that time at Kew and an email I had sent to Wynn, I see I mentioned that "This convoy (OS 44) was less fortunate than yours; it was attacked en route". Eventually, from my research into documents from Bletchley Park, I found that Wynn left Bletchley Park for Africa in late February or early March 1943. Added to a conversation with Wynn in which he thought he remembered the name of his ship as Copacabana, I was able to deduce that convoy OS 43 was not the one Wynn sailed in but was probably the "less fortunate" OS 44.

I looked again at the list of ships in convoy OS 44 and there it was!

That was how I discovered the convoy labelled "OS 44".

Wynn probably would not have known the convoy designator as these were usually issued after the convoy had sailed.

The Tale of Two Brothers

Wynn and John (Dad to me) were the two children of Mary and Douglas Davies and were brought up in the little Cheshire village of Willaston, Wynn being the eldest. Both went to the same school, Willaston C of E Primary (which I too attended for a while as a child). Wynn won a scholarship to the local grammar school, Wirral Grammar School for Boys in Bebington (yet another school that I went to).

When Dad came to school leaving age, he decided that having two boys at grammar school may have been too much for their parents as school in those days was neither free nor cheap. He went off to do his own thing, starting out as a gardener at age 13, then moving on to work on the railways, following his father.

Wynn did well enough at grammar school to win himself a scholarship which took him on to Cambridge university where he read Classics.

At about this time, Dad tried to join the Royal Navy but was discovered to have not told the truth about his age (he was 14, pretending to be 16) and was sent home with a flea in his ear. He had a friend who had gone to school with him and they had both tried to join up together; Dad was found out but his friend wasn't and went to sea as a Boy Seaman.

His friend was sadly to lose his life in the South China Sea on HMS Repulse.

Eventually, Dad got his way and enlisted in the Royal Navy as a boy seaman.

Here is an interesting anecdote that I think Wynn's immediate family will not be aware of;

Next door to Wynn and his parents lived a chap I knew as Walter. I remember him from my younger days and he never seemed to have a surname! Walter was employed by the railways as a plate layer, a hard manual job which meant he was no softy.

Anyway, one day Wynn was back in the village during a break from university when he met Walter in the lane where they lived.

Walter said to Wynn "Why is it your younger brother John is away fighting for his country and you are just having a nice time at school?"

Wynn's response was to say nothing (characteristic).

Instead, he punched Walter on the nose and left him in a heap in the hedgerow! (most uncharacteristic!)

I know this to be true; it was told to my younger brother by none other than Walter himself when the pair were working together some years later.

Wynn's Initiation Into Japanese Codes

In the meantime, Wynn was doing rather well at Cambridge and was approached by his tutor who had been asked to pick out some likely candidates for training as Japanese linguists. Colonel John Tiltman, who was head of the military section at Bletchley Park, had been advised by his code breaking colleagues that he should try to recruit young men who were studying Greek & Latin as this would prove a useful background for the work of breaking and translating Japanese Naval codes.

I don't think Wynn was aware of what his work would entail; he only knew that the War Office had a requirement for some young people who could learn Japanese quickly.

He went for an interview in Whitehall where the interview panel consisted of Col Tiltman and a Captain Tuck. At the end of the interview he was told only that he would hear further from that office in due course.

The first hurdle he faced in his quest was the training in Japanese. The much respected School of Oriental and African Studies had assured the powers that be that to "properly" train Japanese linguists would take 5 years and the very minimum to get someone to a useful standard would take 2 years at best.

A rather eccentric old retired Royal Navy Captain by the name of Tuck declared that he could have good students speaking Japanese within 6 months. Luckily, he was given a chance to prove this and Wynn, along with 20 or so other youths were sent over to Bedford where a school had been set up above the gas showrooms.

Captain Tuck set about training his new pupils and was remarkably successful, much to the embarrassment of the SOAS who were regarded as the experts in these things. After some months, they were told that they were to stop the Japanese language training and to go off elsewhere for more, different training.

Wynn, and his new friends and colleagues, found themselves at Bletchley, known then only as an important railway town.

Here they were told they were to study the art of cryptography, a subject which Wynn found fascinating.

The records from Bletchley Park show that Wynn and his new found colleague Jon Cohen arrived for training on 20th August 1942, followed over the next couple of days by others. The records also show that Wynn and his fellow trainees were assigned to Naval Section, sub-section IIJ. Wynn and two others, Jon Cohen and Denham were put to studying Japanese naval code J4.

I have found, in the National Archives, references to Wynn's time at Bletchley.

Among other items lodged there, I came across a signal from the commander of HMS Anderson.

HMS Anderson was the name for the naval base in Kenya and later in Ceylon which was running the Japanese radio intercept and decryption work for that part of the world.

In this message, the commander said the following:

“Your Bedford trained translators most highly esteemed here, and would like as many as we may have. We can never have enough”.

And, in an another message, I saw this:

“Herewith notes on ex-ISSIS students who have worked in NS (Naval Section).

Opinion is that their standard is higher than many of SOOS students”.

Another note defines a translator as “One who can read Japanese but not speak it”.

Following a few months there, Wynn and two of his colleagues were told they were going to be sent to Mombasa and were to report to Liverpool to join the MV Copacabana which would carry them to West Africa.

As was usual with these things, the convoy they were to join was still being formed up and so they found themselves sitting on board this ship in the River Mersey for some days, going nowhere.

Ironically, although they had not seen much of each other over the last year or two, Wynn and Dad were both sitting in passenger ships in the River Mersey within a mile or two of each other but were unable to communicate. Dad too was preparing to go somewhere (he had no idea at the time, all he knew was that he was off to join “Force H”) but in a different convoy. I remember Dad telling me a tale (one also told by my grand parents) of how his mother and father sailed past his ship in the Mersey while crossing to Liverpool on the ferry and how he was unable to acknowledge them when they waved as that could have been construed as communicating with them when they were under strict orders to keep quiet about where they were going.

It was at this point, I suppose, where my quest for information on Dad’s time in the navy coincided with Wynn’s trip. Now I had a double interest in convoy OS 44, as it seemed that discovering the details of one would lead to discovering the other.

MV Copacabana

The MV Copacabana was a Belgian ship which had been employed carrying passengers and a small amount of cargo between Europe and South America. On this trip, in addition to passengers she was carrying “General Cargo”, which could include absolutely anything, and “Aeroplanes” according to the official records. Her Captain was a Belgian, Capt. R. E. Delree. Capt. Delree and the Copacabana had previously been known to the British authorities

In 1939, the MV Copacabana had been seized In the English Channel by a patrol of the Contraband Control section and had been “taken as prize” to Weymouth.

In the National Archives is a High Court writ issued by the "Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division" and headed "In Prize". The writ was issued at the request of the Ministry of Economic Warfare and essentially said to the owners of the Copacabana “We have your ship, you can come to the High Court to fight us for it’s return”.

This states that the ship was carrying a cargo of “cotton goods, greasy wool and Quebracho extract”. Quebracho extract appears to be a tanning agent, taken from the Quebracho trees of South America.

The Bradford Textile Manufacturers Association had alleged that the Quebracho extract was destined to be illegally trans-shipped at Antwerp for onward shipment to Germany where it would be used in some part of the motor manufacturing industry. This would mean the cargo would be classed in Britain as contraband and the High Court wanted the Belgian owners to come to court to explain why the British authorities should release it.

By the time the court case dragged around, the idea of sailing a ship into Antwerp had become academic as the Germans had occupied that port and the ship languished for a while in England, having been pressed into service with the Merchant Navy and flying a red ensign.

The Copacabana being a mixed passenger/cargo carrying ship, was fitted with a variety of accommodation, including a nice selection of first class cabins.

Because Wynn was neither fish nor fowl when it came to the services (he had been intended for Royal Navy service, had spent some time as a soldier in the Home Guard while at Bletchley), he travelled as a Foreign Office employee. This entitled him to one of these first class cabins.

That must have seemed a totally different world to this young village boy of 19 years of age!

The Copacabana was a large ship in terms of shipping in that era at 7,340 tons and was the third largest ship in the convoy.

A reasonably fast ship, capable of 14 knots, she was going to have to learn how to dawdle on her journey to Africa as the convoy would only travel at the speed of the slowest ship. There were two or three ships in the convoy that were capable of only 8.5 knots so that was going to be the maximum speed of the convoy.

Try to imagine that, in today’s world of 100mph cars and 600mph aeroplanes; travelling all the way to the west coast of Africa at less than 10mph!

For the purposes of the war, she had been fitted with a 4 inch gun, 2 Bofors guns and some machine guns.

The guns were manned by a mix of Belgian and British gunners. The 6 Belgians were from the Belgian Navy, while the British contingent were 2 Maritime Royal Artillery gunners.

In addition to the cargo and Wynn's party, this ship was carrying some minor royalty. One of the passengers was "Le Prince de Merode". I believe Merode was a title used by some of the Belgian Royal family, there being literally dozens of members of the Belgian aristocracy with this title, even now. This Prince was travelling to the Congo to take up a post as the governor of that colony.

The Convoy

Finally, after some time waiting in the Mersey, the convoy now consisted of some 17 ships, plus escorts.

The ships forming the Liverpool part of the convoy were:

Ship	Cargo	Destination
AFRICAN PRINCE	Stores	Walvis Bay/Capetown/Alexandria
ASPHALION	Gov.Stores	Walvis Bay/Durban/Adelaide/Hobart
CITY OF LANCASTER	Copper Sulphate	Lisbon
CITY OF WORCESTER	Planes/Gov.Stores	Walvis Bay/Capetown/Alexandria/Haifa
CLAN ALPINE	Gen.	Walvis Bay/Durban/Aden/Pt.Sudan
COPACABANA (Bel)	Gen./Planes	Freetown/Takoradi/Matadi
DEIDO	Expl./Gen.	Freetown/Dakar/Lagos
DJAMBI (Du)	Stores	St.Helena/Capetown/E.London/Beira
DORDRECHT (Du)(T)	Ballast	Matadi
EMPIRE GLADE	M.T./Steel	Walvis Bay/Capetown/Alexandria
ISIPINGO	Gen.	Freetown/Takoradi/Lagos
MARWARRI	Gov.Stores	Walvis Bay/Durban/Karachi/Bombay
MATADIAN (T)	Ballast	Opobo, Nigeria
MENELAUS	Gov.Stores	Capetown/Cochin/Colombo
OPORTO	Gen.	Seville
SANSU	Gen.	Freetown/Takoradi/Lagos
SILVERBEECH	Gov.Stores/Planes	Freetown/Takoradi/Lagos

It is interesting to look at the cargoes these ships were carrying and the destinations they were bound for.

I can understand that some ships would be in ballast as Britain was probably not a major exporter of anything in those days and there was probably no need to send arms or ammunition to places such as Nigeria. The Dutch ship Dordrecht was a tanker and would too be expected to sail empty.

The cargo lists are probably more interesting; why on earth would Britain have been exporting steel to Alexandria? I thought the need for steel was so great in Britain that the trade in that metal would be all imports. Perhaps this was the stuff that would be needed to repair damaged ships etc in that theatre.

I can understand the export of copper sulphate to Lisbon as I have seen documents elsewhere that refer to the need to keep up exports to neutral countries in order to maintain friendly relations with those countries. One example was an urgent discussion about including ships in a Mediterranean bound convoy carrying coal to Spain. Although the ships were needed elsewhere, it was decided that the political benefits of honouring coal export contracts with Spain were worth the cost in shipping terms.

But, look at the amount of "Government Stores" that were being sent to Africa and India! I wonder how many reams of useless government forms, bottles of official Indian ink and paper clips were being transported at such great risk across thousands of miles of ocean?

Once the convoy had finished forming up in the Mersey, it sailed over the Bar and entered the Irish Sea, they all turned right (or North in sailors' terms!).

They seem to have left bright and early as the records show the convoy passed Rock Light at 08:45 on the 6th March. This refers to the lighthouse on the end of Perch Rock at New Brighton.

Some 2 hours or so later, they were off the River Clyde where they met up with other ships which joined the convoy, bringing the total number of merchant ships to 46; quite a large convoy.

Some of the ships joining the convoy had come up from Milford Haven, others had set out from Belfast, Glasgow and even a tiny port called Aultbea which is more or less in the middle of nowhere on the west coast of Scotland.

One fact about this convoy that was known only to their Lordships at the Admiralty was that this was the first convoy for some time to travel to West Africa via the direct route. Until now, convoys had tended to get to Africa via the long way by crossing the Atlantic and sailing south down the western side of the Atlantic, then making a sharp turn to the left somewhere off Brazil.

I have recently discovered documents that show that this came as a surprise not only to the members of the convoy but to the Germans as well.

However, this was not yet known to Wynn and his travelling companions; they knew they were going to Africa but had no idea of an itinerary.

In due course, Convoy OS 44 set out from the Clyde area and headed north along the Scottish coast, eventually turning to the north west and rounding the northern coast of Ulster.

The convoy must have made an impressive sight to anyone watching from the shore as these 46 ships steamed along in a block that was 11 ships abreast and up to 5 ships deep (the last row comprised 4 ships and other rows had gaps as some ships did not sail).

According to the records, the ships were spaced 2 cables apart (approx 400 yards) and were to maintain 8 knots or approximately 10mph. The records also give the height of the mast of the Copacabana as 113 feet. It was important for all ships to know the mast height of all the other ships as this was how they maintained their distance from the ships in front of them. In today's world of high definition radar and GPS etc, keeping station would be relatively easy. In 1943 things were rather different and the only accurate method of keeping station was to measure the angle from your deck to the top of the preceding ship's mast and using trigonometry to calculate the distance.

In addition to the merchant ships, there were the Royal Navy escorts.

These were;

Sloops:

HMS Rochester; L32: Shoreham Class

HMS Scarborough; L25: Bridgewater Class

HMS Fleetwood; L47: Grimsby Class

Corvettes: All Flower Class

HMS Coltsfoot: K140

HMS Spirea K67

HMS Mignonette K38

HMS Balsam K72

HMS Azalea K25

HMS Cowslip K196

As far as I can tell, things went quietly for the first few days, with Wynn and his companions enjoying their new found luxury in the first class cabins to which they had been assigned.

A Quiet Cruise Interrupted

Looking through some Admiralty signals that I discovered in the National Archive at Kew, the first sign of any trouble appears to have been a signal to HMS Cowslip. This corvette was ordered to detach from the convoy and proceed to a point some 510 miles SW of Bantry Bay and 670 miles NW of La Coruna, Spain. In other words, a long way out into the Atlantic. The signal ordered HMS Cowslip to head to this point to search for a “*lifeboat containing 20 live persons*”. I don’t know if the search for survivors of whatever misfortune had caused a lifeboat to be wallowing in the ocean with 20 survivors on board was successful or not.

The next signals came from the convoy on March 12th at 12:15 BST and read: “Emergency; Aircraft shadowing”.

You can see from the chart I have made up that the position of the convoy when the shadowing aircraft was spotted was approximately 240 miles NW of Cape Finisterre. Perhaps more significantly, this position was less than 400 miles from the German submarine base at Brest and any submarines leaving or returning to the base from the South Atlantic would be expected to transit this area.

One of the escorting sloops, HMS Rochester, exchanged signals with HQ at Liverpool regarding the Focke Wolfe that had been spotted astern of the convoy at 11:35.

The Focke kept about 7 miles distance and then began circling the convoy at that distance and at a height of only 50 feet above the sea.

According to the ship’s log: “Escorts fired occasional shots; none hit”.

At 11:30, the Focke Wolfe left the area only to be replaced by yet another plus a Dornier bomber. The escorts fired a few 4 inch rounds but to no effect. HMS Rochester’s log notes that the weather was now becoming cloudy with 9/10ths cloud cover between 2,000 to 3,000 feet. The German aircraft were cleverly using this cloud cover to alternately hide then re-appear somewhere else. No doubt they were reporting the convoy’s details such as number of ships, escorts, position, direction and speed etc.

It is interesting to note the comments from Admiral Doenitz in his war diary;

On 12th March, his “War Log” shows the following entries:

II. Air Reconnaissance: Gibraltar convoys in the area west of Portugal.

III. Reports on the Enemy:

b) The aerial reconnaissance sighted a northward bound convoy in CG 1276, and a convoy consisting of 47 ships and 6 escort vessels on a course of 180^o, medium speed, in BE 9284.

c)..2) “The convoy intercept by a/c refers apparently to a convoy using a cover name used earlier presumably OS 44. The previous OS convoy was intercepted on 25.2, so that the time interval amounts to 3 weeks according to reckoning.”

The reference to the southbound convoy spotted in square BE 9284 was undoubtedly OS 44; square BE 9284 refers to a point north west of Cape Finisterre.

The reference to the convoy by name in para. c) seems to show that Doentiz’s intelligence people were very quick to put the name to the convoy. This is a good example of a fact that many people, both during and after the war, chose to ignore: The German Navy had

been reading many of the Royal Navy's codes since before the outbreak of war. The Admiralty had been warned of this and chose not to change most of the codes then in use. It is sad to reflect on how we have been told umpteen times over about the Enigma machines and the efforts that went into cracking German codes at Bletchley Park while this unforgivable head in the sand attitude of their Lordships has gone largely unremarked. How many allied men, women and children went to their death as a result of this, I wonder?

Later in the same day's log there is this entry:

IV. Current Operations:

b) 3) U 445, 610 and 107 are operating on the southbound convoy reported by a/c in BE 9284. So, the radio waves had been busy. As far as the Germans were concerned, the game was on.

Very soon after the German aircraft reported the convoy back to HQ in Germany, 3 U boats had been ordered into action against the convoy and were probably busy plotting the best course to intercept OS 44.

U 107 was, on March 12th, some miles south west of Vigo, Portugal and the convoy was approximately 215 miles to the north of the U boat.

The convoy was heading south at a sedate 8 knots while the U boat was heading north at probably twice that speed. This would bring them into contact with each other within 9 hours or so.

The log of HMS Rochester over the next hour shows how confusing a war can be.

The Focke and the Dornier were reported to be ducking in and out of the clouds at 13:40

At 13:45, the log notes "Sunderland escort arrived"

13:50 "Liberator escort arrived and was almost shot down by the convoy as he passed over them"

13:55 "Convoy ordered to PACK to 10 cables as enemy aircraft were still circling

14:10 "Enemy aircraft left"

14:35 "Bomb splashes between Djambi & Marcella. Ship No 43 opened fire"

So, 5 minutes after the two German aircraft arrived to circle the convoy, a Royal Air Force Sunderland flying boat arrived to help out, followed 5 minutes later by a Liberator bomber.

And yet, despite this allied aircraft presence, the Germans appear to have just hung around, sending back their radio reports.

20 minutes after the arrival of the allied air escorts, HMS Rochester reports that they now seem to have left the area. In other words, the Germans were able to carry on observing and reporting the convoy unmolested for over half an hour.

Then, 25 minutes after they had been reported as having left the area, bombs mysteriously were dropped in among the ships of the convoy.

Had the German aircraft sneaked back, or was it a case of the US pilot of the Liberator getting his own back for having been fired upon earlier?

The "Ship No 43" referred to in Rochester's log was the Uranienborg which was carrying mail and coal for Freetown. Fortunately for the pilot of the bomber, this ship was equipped

only with 3 Bofors and 2 machine guns. For these to do any serious damage to an aircraft, they have to actually hit the plane. The 4 inch and 4.7 inch guns used by the escorts and virtually every other ship in the convoy throw up a shell as heavy as a bag of coal and only need to explode in close proximity to the aircraft to cause very serious damage.

However, I think the captain of HMS Rochester may have got it wrong.

The Copacabana was ship number 62 in this convoy and the vessel astern, or ship number 63, was the Djambi, a Dutch ship almost the same size as the Copacabana. This ship was to feature again later in the journey.

In the log of Wynn's ship, MV Copacabana, the master made this entry:

"Aircraft appeared 12 March @100 miles NNW Cape Ortegale; the aircraft flew out of the clouds, very low over Commodore ship Sansu, No 61

Crew opened fire with Oerlikons and Marlins (types of heavy anti-aircraft machine gun).

Used 40 rounds of Oerlikon and 1 full belt of Marlin ammunition.

Plane was large with 4 engines and twin rudders."

There are records at Kew of some rather terse words being exchanged between various sections of the war effort, regarding the difference between a 4 engined Ju17 bomber and a Liberator. Both have a similar twin rudder arrangement.

However, no ship in the convoy recorded having seen a Ju17 in the area.

Later in his log, the master records that "The 2 Maritime gunners (British members of the Maritime section of the Royal Artillery) carried out their duties very well as did my officers and crew but nobody was outstanding".

The bomb attack was also recorded in the Copacabana's log:

"At 14:30 hours I was standing on the bridge with the Chief Officer. I heard the whistle of a bomb and turned to see a column of water between our vessel and the vessel astern but much closer to ship number 63".

At around the same time as the Rochester was reporting the arrival of the Sunderland escort, a signal was received from Liverpool saying "You were probably reported by aircraft at 12:30".

I think the captain of HMS Rochester was probably smart enough to have figured that out for himself!

A short time after this signal, another was sent out from the Admiralty ordering HMS Uganda, HMS Kenya and HMS Carlisle to take up a patrol position to give cover to convoys OS 44 and MKS 9 (slow convoy heading back to Britain from Gibraltar).

Following the aircraft activity, at 14:50 that afternoon, another signal was sent from the convoy back to the Admiralty in Liverpool. This one said;

"Emergency; 2 shadowing aircraft bearing 45 degrees, height 2,000 feet MANGLE position (I don't know if MANGLE was a code for a pre-determined position or perhaps the code name for this convoy).

Later that day, HMS Rochester reported that U boat radio transmissions had been detected somewhere to the north west of the convoy. These transmissions had been picked up using

what was then a fairly new tool; HF/DF. Commonly known then, and even when I worked with it in Simonstown in the 1970s, as “Huff Duff”, HF/DF is an acronym for High Frequency Direction Finding. All that means is a way of listening in to radio traffic and, using a couple of electronic tricks, determining which direction it came from. The U boat signals were reported as being “Strength 5”. That is as strong as it gets in radio terms, so the submarines must have been reasonably close. If more of the escorting warships had been fitted with HF/DF, it would have taken just a few minutes to determine exactly where on the ocean they were.

Following a discussion with the Convoy Commodore, a plan of action was agreed upon, involving a change of course later that evening. However, a new signal was received from the Commander in Chief Western Approaches in Liverpool;

“Alter course at daylight Saturday to position ‘S’ then position ‘T’.

Before sailing, the Commodore would have been given a set of written instructions containing code words, radio frequencies, contingency plans etc and fixed positions or rendezvous points with a code name or letter for each position along the route.

For convoy OS 44, position ‘S’ was at 40° 01’ N: 11° 30’ W

Position ‘T’ was at 34° 02’ N: 10° 01’ W

As can be seen from the chart, Position ‘S’ was about 122 miles due west of Figueira da Foz in Portugal and Position ‘T’ was about 122 miles north west of Casablanca (off the bottom of the chart).

The signal having been de-ciphered and the instructions to change course for positions ‘S’ and ‘T’ were passed to the convoy commodore and adopted.

At around 16:30, one of the smaller ships, SS Tordene, reported boiler problems and she began to lose speed and drop behind the convoy. A small ship, loaded at Milford Haven with coal for delivery to Buenos Aires, she was only capable of 8.5 knots (about 10mph) at best. (How ironic; a ship carrying Welsh coal to Argentina. Now, 60 years after the war, some power stations in UK are using Argentinean coal for fuel!)

At 19:30 a Flying Fortress escort arrived and flew over the convoy and was promptly fired upon by some ships of the convoy! The log of HMS Rochester doesn’t specify which ships opened fire; there is merely a remark that “Tracer used by convoy must have been visible for 8 miles or more”.

At 20:32 another U boat radio transmission was picked up by HF/DF. This time, the escorts must have been using their equipment in concert with each other. The report said that “HF/DF of U boat transmission places U boat 15 miles on starboard quarter”.

The starboard quarter is behind and to the right of the ship as you look forward.

Saturday 13th March

At 00:30 13th March, HMS Rochester noted in her log that they had lost radar contact with Tordene. This was due to the widening gap between the ship and the convoy, rather than enemy action.

It is difficult to imagine how the crew of this unfortunate ship must have felt as they watched the convoy and the all important escorts slowly drawing away from them, leaving them all alone on a vast ocean; virtually defenceless and easy prey for a marauding German U boat or aircraft.

The next entry in the log of HMS Rochester was some time before dawn:

04:40 "Underwater explosion; one SNOWFLAKE fired and convoy ordered to carry out operation HALF RASPBERRY". Apparently, "Operation Half Raspberry" was a pre-determined manoeuvre widely used throughout the convoy system in which some of the escorts hold their position as the convoy screen and fire starshell rockets to illuminate the area, while other ships dash off on a triangular course, also firing starshell illuminations. Presumably, this will hopefully illuminate any surfaced submarine between the escorts and the convoy.

Also at this time, HMS Rochester sent the following signal to Liverpool:

"Convoy attacked position 42deg 46min N/13deg 33min W."

04:42 "An enormous explosion observed which lit up the sky with flames and smoke to a height of 300 feet or more"

04:43 "Second ship in convoy blew up in same manner as previous".

So, it would appear that 3 ships had been torpedoed within the space of 3 minutes or less.

The master of Copacabana made this entry in his log:

"I had turned in and at 04:20 the U boat attacked. I heard three explosions but, by the time I was on deck it was all over. The sky was lit up by munitions ship #64".

This is a reference to the Marcella which was sailing 2 ships astern of the Copacabana and in the same row as the Clan Alpine.

And all this was going on in total darkness. Again, it is hard to imagine what must have been going through the minds of the people involved. As far as they were aware, 3 ships seemed to have been blown up by an invisible enemy.

At 04:47 HMS Rochester obtained an ASDIC contact and closed to attack. When about 300 feet from the source of the ASDIC contact, there was a series of underwater explosions ahead of the ship. A calcium flare was dropped into the water to mark the spot and a pattern of depth charges was dropped. Having passed over the site to drop the depth charges, HMS Rochester turned round to return to the site. Again, ASDIC echoes were returned but the captain noticed that the echoes were in exactly the same position as before and realised they had depth charged the wreck of the Oporto, the first ship of the convoy to have been hit a few minutes earlier and which was now sinking.

This ship wasn't carrying anything particularly dangerous; the cargo was listed as being 1,500 tons of copper sulphate, 413 tons of potatoes (which were destined for Seville, Spain) and mail.

Of the 41 on board, only 4 survived. They were picked up by HMS Spirea, transferred later to another ship, HMS Gentian, which had come out from Gibraltar to assist and were landed in Gibraltar a few days later. Of those who lost their lives on this ship, it is worth noting that 9 of them were under the age of 21. One was only 16 years old and two were 17. At this time, my father was only 18 himself, a couple of months short of his 19th birthday.

Of the other ships lost, the Clan Alpine, which was carrying a cargo of explosives, was crippled and it was decided that she would have to be sunk. Most of the crew (68) were taken off but 28 Lascar seamen were lost.

A signal in the convoy records at Kew shows the following:

05:50 From: Ship number 84 (which turns out to be the Clan Alpine)

Message: ssSS Torpedoed.

Short, sharp and stark!

From later reports, inquiries etc., we know that the master of the Clan Alpine reported that there had been a huge explosion which caused his ship to shudder violently. He was puzzled as he had seen no flash or a water spout so he didn't understand at first just what had gone wrong.

It was then discovered that a large portion of his stern was missing. This had caused the propeller shaft tunnel to flood but, to the relief of the captain, the watertight doors had prevented the engine room from flooding.

His relief was short lived as it soon became apparent that hold number 5 had flooded and the ship was obviously going to sink.

He organised the evacuation of his crew and sent off the signal I have quoted above.

While in their lifeboat, awaiting rescue, they came across another man in the water and hauled him aboard their boat. This man turned out to be the 4th engineer of the Sembilangan which was one of the other ships to have been struck in this attack.

Having been rescued, the master of the Clan Alpine realised he had forgotten to destroy his confidential papers so a boarding party was sent from HMS Rochester to recover these. During this operation a Focke Wolfe aircraft appeared and attacked but was scared off by some accurate 4 inch anti-aircraft fire.

Once the papers had been recovered, it was decided that the best way to sink the ship would be through the use of depth charges.

HMS Rochester sailed past the crippled hulk and threw 2 depth charges which landed on the deck of the freighter. The depth charges having duly exploded, the ship sank within 6 minutes.

The Dutch ship Sembilangan, referred to above, was also lost in this attack.

This ship had joined the convoy from Belfast and was carrying "planes & general cargo". When she was hit, the "general cargo" she was carrying turned out to have included ammunition and the ship blew up. The 4th engineer was thrown overboard and survived. All the other 86 crew members died.

A fourth ship, the Marcella, was also lost with all hands in the attack, a total of 35 deaths. The ship exploded and was gone in an instant; one ship and 35 just disappeared off the earth, literally in a flash.

One of those who died on this ship may well have been known to Wynn, although they would not have been aware of each other's presence. There is a commemorative plaque at Tower Hill and, on panel 68 there is this entry:

BRUCKSHAW, Ordinary Seaman, JACK, S.S. Marcella (London). Merchant Navy. 13th March 1943. Age 38. Husband of Edith Bruckshaw, of Willaston, Cheshire.

I wonder ...

Of course, the Willaston referred to could easily be the one near Crewe.

At the time, officers in the convoy were puzzled as to what had caused 2 ships to explode and sink so suddenly and violently. As far as they were aware, there were no explosives on board these ships.

In truth, both ships were indeed carrying explosives. The ships' owners had declared these as part of the cargo prior to joining the convoy but, for reasons unknown, this declaration had been dropped by the time the final paperwork was submitted at the time the ships joined the convoy. As far as the convoy commodore and the naval escorts were aware, the cataclysmic end of these 2 ships was a complete mystery. There was speculation among the escort's officers at the time about what had happened and one theory became popular. According to this theory, the Germans had developed a new form of propulsion for their submarines. This involved a mystery substance known as "gaseous diesel" which the experts all agreed would be a very dangerous substance and would account for the huge explosions. Of course, there was no such thing as "gaseous diesel"; it was all a product of a febrile war-time rumour mill.

Remember the note in the Copacabana's log about a bomb dropping near to the ship astern of her? That ship was the Djambi and the bomb had dropped only 100 feet from her. 20 minutes after the submarine attack, her master decided he would be better off somewhere else and left the convoy without authorisation. After 2 hours steaming a zigzag course ahead of the convoy, the captain thought better of it and decided to regain his place in the convoy.

Instead of merely slowing down and allowing the convoy to catch up with him, he turned the ship around and steamed back along a reciprocal course. This move was not only stupid, it was fatal. He came across the convoy and, while trying to manoeuvre into his allotted position, collided with the freighter Silverbeech which was ship number 81 and therefore in the front rank of the convoy.

The collision tore a huge gash in the side of the Djambi and she immediately began to sink. The master and crew, along with 3 passengers were taken off by the escort sloop HMS Fleetwood.

The Silverbeech was still afloat but so badly damaged she was forced to leave the convoy and head for Gibraltar for repairs. Following repairs, she joined a later convoy and was torpedoed and sunk some 70 miles off the coast of Western Sahara. Two crew and six gunners were rescued by a British tug but the master, along with 50 crew, 5 gunners and some passengers were lost.

The Silverbeech actually provides a “what if?” to this story.

According to Wynn, there had been a possibility that he would have sailed on the Silverbeech. Like the Copacabana, the Silverbeech was a good sized ship which carried passengers as well as cargo and was also bound for Takoradi and then Lagos, Wynn’s ultimate destination on the West African coast. When Wynn and I were discussing this ship, he surmised that, if he had travelled on the Silverbeech, he would have missed his flight from Lagos which had been specially booked for his party.

At the time, neither of us knew the ultimate fate of this ship as I had not yet discovered it. The truth is, had he been travelling on the Silverbeech, he may not have survived the war at all, let alone make it to Lagos in time for his flight.

What About the Submarines?

As can be seen from the foregoing, a lot of what had really happened was not at all clear to the ships in the convoy. For some time, it was not understood which ships had been attacked and lost or what had caused the losses.

It transpires that they were not the only ones to be confused; Doenitz's war log for that day shows, under "Report of Success" that U 107 had sunk 2 freighters with a total tonnage of 12,000 grt.

The German submarine U 107 was not operating alone. Records show that two other boats, U 410 and U 445 were also in the area and ordered to join in.

U 410 and U 445, along with U 107 and U 103, formed part of a U boat pack known as "Group Robbe" and had been patrolling the Gulf of Cadiz for 10 days, watching and waiting for convoys plying between the United Kingdom and Gibraltar.

Doenitz's war log showed on 9th March that this group were having some difficulty operating in that area as a result of intensive allied air activity and they were therefore ordered to withdraw to the west. Doenitz further noted that these boats, with the exception of U 103, were very low on fuel and would not be able to take part in any large operations.

On 12th March the boats began to draw together in a region about 50 miles square, to the South West of the convoy. That was the day the shadowing Focke reported the position of the convoy which, at that time, was about 200 miles to the north of their position and heading straight for the submarines.

Presumably the captains of the U boats would have been told of the convoy's whereabouts, speed and direction and they would immediately have plotted a course and speed that would bring them and the convoy together sometime during the hours of darkness.

To be fair to them, they did that job well and found the convoy, as we have seen, in the early hours of the following morning.

For some reason, neither U 410 nor U 445 mounted an attack on the convoy.

From the chart, it can be seen that both of these boats were in the right area at the right time. If you draw a line between each of the respective boat's reporting points, it appears that they spent their time motoring up and down the Atlantic, hoping to spot something. Despite being part of a single group, they appear to have been operating somewhat independently.

Following the attack, U 107 and U 410 set off at high speed in the same direction as the convoy, hoping to place themselves ahead of the convoy and in position to attack again the next night. For some reason, U 445 chose to set off in the opposite direction, toward the north west.

At 12:00 on the 14th, U 107 once again intercepted the convoy but was repeatedly forced to submerge as a result of intervention by allied aircraft.

Once again, there is no reference to U 410 taking part in any attack. The German High Command signalled the 3 U boats to return to the former attack area and to wait for any passing trade as they were low on fuel.

Nothing more was heard of any activity from this group of submarines until the 18th March when an American freighter reported having been attacked by an aircraft in an area to the north west of where convoy OS 44 had first been spotted by the Luftwaffe on March 12th and again later that day in more or less the same area as OS 44's brush with the German aircraft.

The group of 3 submarines were accordingly tasked with going back to that area to see if they could attack the ship.

The following day, they were ordered to return to port as they were running very low on fuel.

U 107 entered Lorient on 25th March, followed by U 410 on 27th March while U 445 arrived in St Nazaire the same day.

The Convoy Continues

At 07:25 on the 13th, a Catalina flying boat arrived in the area and was ordered to search astern of the convoy for survivors.

I was unable to find any record of survivors being found and have to presume none were.

As far as I can discover, OS 44 carried on steaming toward its West African destination. A note in the log of HMS Rochester notes there were ASDIC reports throughout the night but despite a lot of chasing around, no firm contacts were made.

Also at this time, a Hudson aircraft joined in convoy escort duties; for some reason, the log of HMS Rochester refers to this aircraft as “Hell Cat Harry”.

Luckily for the convoy, the U boat pack that had caused so much damage to the convoy had now been ordered to return to the scene of the original contact with the convoy, thus putting them out of reach.

It almost seems as if the German High Command had lost interest in the convoy as I could not find any reference to orders for submarines off the West Africa coast to join in the hunt.

Eventually, on March 24th, the remnants of convoy OS 44 steamed into the massive natural harbour that is Freetown, where they anchored to await orders for the next move. Ships were re-fuelled here by an American military organisation. (Isn't it funny how loud the Americans used to shout about us having colonies and how quickly they moved into those colonies even before the British had moved out?)

The ships of convoy OS 44 sat out the day in the harbour with nobody having any idea of what, when or where the next move would be.

Later that evening a convoy of large passenger liners and warships arrived in Freetown and anchored across the other side of the harbour.

Wynn recognised one of the ships as being the one my father was on in Liverpool when they were both waiting to sail. This convoy was a faster one than Wynn's, having only large, fast ships and none of the small coal fired slower ships.

Wynn had hoped to try to contact my father on his ship to see if it would be possible to get together.

Before he had the chance to do this, on the following morning, Dad's ships sailed off at high speed out into the Atlantic. And that was that!

It transpired that Dad's ship went from Freetown to Durban and on up the Indian Ocean to Aden and eventually to Egypt.

Wynn's ship left Freetown the following day, alone, and headed for Takoradi.

I need to go to Kew again to review the logs to check the accuracy of the arrival date.

Records show that Bulolo, Ulster Monarch etc arrived Mar 27 and weighed on 30 March.

On From Freetown

4 days after leaving Freetown, MV Copacabana arrived at Takoradi in what was then the Gold Coast but is now known as Ghana. Takoradi is sort of “just around the corner” from Freetown; the “corner” being the countries of Liberia and Ivory Coast.

I need to check the logs of AIR 29/11 which is the records of 38 Embarkation Unit RAF.

Direction of travel			Cruising Order: Convoy OS 44										Direction of travel							
Vessel	Baron Tweedmouth	Baron Ramsay	REAR COMMODORE New Columbia	Corabella	COMODORE Sansu	Isipingo	Marwarri	Silverbeech	Empire Glade	Markhor	Tordene									
Destination	Freetown	Freetown	Bathurst	Freetown for Takoradi	Freetown/Takoradi/Lagos	Freetown/Dakar/Lagos	Walvis Bay/Durban/Karachi/Bombay	Freetown/Takoradi/Matadi	Walvis Bay/CapeTown/Alexandria	Walvis Bay/CapeTown/Alexandria	Buenos Aires									
Pendant #	11	21	31	41	51	61	71	81	91	101	111									
Vessel	Begum	Henri Jaspas	Alphard	Matadian	Deido	Copacabana	City of Worcester	African Prince	Sembilang	Lieut. St. Loubert Ble	Amberton									
Destination	Freetown	Freetown for Takoradi	Did Not Sail	Opobo, Nigeria	Freetown/Dakar/Lagos	Freetown/Takoradi/Matadi	Walvis Bay/CapeTown/Alexandria/Haifa	Walvis Bay/CapeTown/Alexandria	Walvis Bay/Port Said	Capetown/Durban/Mombasa	Montevideo									
Pendant #	12	22	32	42	52	62	72	82	92	102	112									
Vessel	Cap Cantin	Danae II	Celtic Star	Uranienberg	Dordrecht	Djambi	Asphaltion	Menslaus	Sambian	City of Sydney	Hops Ridge									
Destination	Bathurst	Did Not Sail	Freetown/Buenos Aires	Freetown	Matadi	St Helena/CapeTown/East London/Beira	Walvis Bay/Durban/Adelaide/Hobart	Capetown/Cochin/Colombo	Durban/Port Said/Alexandria	Capetown/Bombay	Walvis Bay/ Cape Town/ Middle East									
Pendant #	13	23	33	43	53	63	73	83	93	103	113									
Vessel	Pendeen	Bactria	Empire Sunbeam	Gudrun Maersk	Ronan	Marcella	City of Leicester	Cian Alpine	City of Windsor	Baharistan	Fort Wedderburne									
Destination	Gibraltar	Bathurst	Bougie	Gibraltar/Bougie	Gibraltar	Freetown/ Capetown	Did Not Sail	Walvis Bay/ Durban/ Aden/Port Sudan	Capetown/Beira	Freetown/ Capetown/ Abadan	Walvis Bay for Bombay									
Pendant #	14	24	34	44	54	64	74	84	94	104	114									
Colour Key to Ports of Origin												Ships marked with green background were lost to U 107 on 13 March			Ships marked with yellow did not sail with the convoy			Ships marked with yellow did not sail with the convoy		
Aulbea												Belfast			Clyde			Liverpool		
Milford Haven												Seville			Bosworth			Did Not Sail		

U Boats Involved in the Attack on OS 44

Boat	U 107
Type:	IXB
Commissioned	08 October 1940
Commander (March 1943)	KptLt Harald Gelhaus; Knights Cross
History	During her time in service, this boat made a total of 14 patrols and was considered a successful boat. Throughout her life, she sank a total of 39 ships and damaged 4 more.
Fate	On August 18th 1944, while operating off La Rochelle in the Bay of Biscay, U107 was attacked and sunk by a British Sunderland aircraft with the loss of all 58 crew members
Boat	U 410
Type:	VIIC
Commissioned	23 February 1942
Commander (March 1943)	ObLt Horst-Arno Fenski; Knights Cross
History	U 410 sank 7 merchant ships and 2 warships during her time. She also damaged 1 merchant ship and left another a total loss.
Fate	Almost exactly one year after the attack on OS 44, 11th March 1944, U 410 was sunk by bombs from an American bomber near to Toulon
Boat	U 445
Type:	VIIC
Commissioned	30 May 1942
Commander (March 1943)	ObLt Heinz-Konrad Fenn
History	Unlike U 445's companion boats, U 445 didn't sink or damage any ships during her time in service. Despite having no success against shipping, U 445 shot down a Wellington bomber from 172 Sqn on 14 August 1944
Fate	U445 was depth charged and sunk in the Bay of Biscay, west of St. Nazaire, by the British frigate HMS Louis with the loss of all hands (52 crew).

Footnote:

Copacabana's history

Copacabana was launched on 19th October 1937 and began service in 1938. She survived the war and continued in service with Cie Maritime Belge (Lloyd Royal) until 1958 when she was sold to an East German company and re-named Theodor Korner. In 1962 she made the news as she was one of the ships causing the U S government some nervousness when she was spotted on October 30th leaving the Baltic Sea heading in company with the Russian ships, Atkarsk & Okhotsk for Cuba. On November 12th the U S Navy was tasked with intercepting and trailing these 3 ships. By November 15th, the U S Navy was getting rather nervous as they didn't know where she was. A special aircraft search for the ship was organised and then cancelled. The other 2 ships were being followed by U S warships as part of the U N "quarantine" zone. On November 17th, Theodor Korner/Copacabana was spotted and boarded and found to be carrying 240 tons of steel; no nuclear weapons!

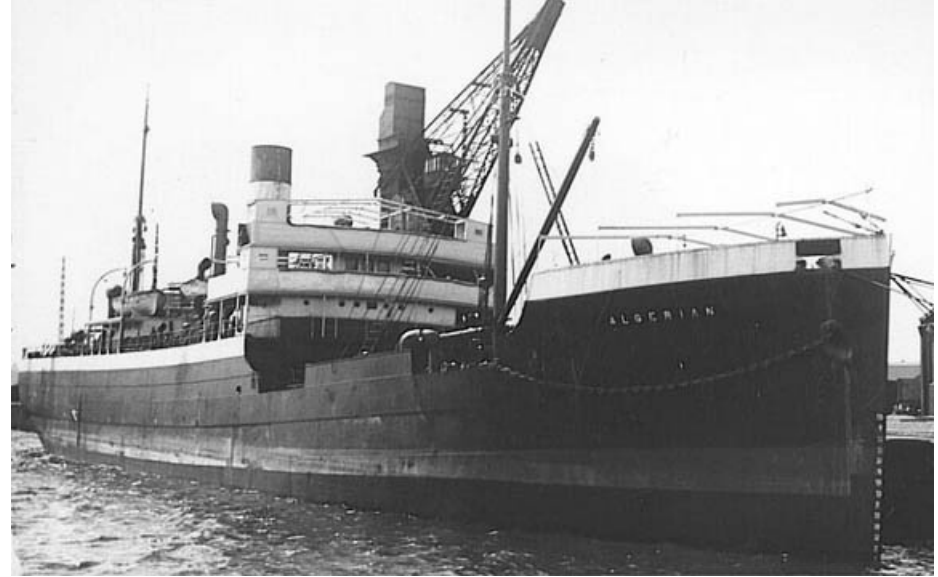
In 1968 she was sold to a Dutch company and re-named Nedi II. She remained in service under this name right up to when she was sold for scrap in 1972 and was broken up in Kaohsiung on December 23rd 1972.



Copacabana under her new name Theodor Korner in the 1960s



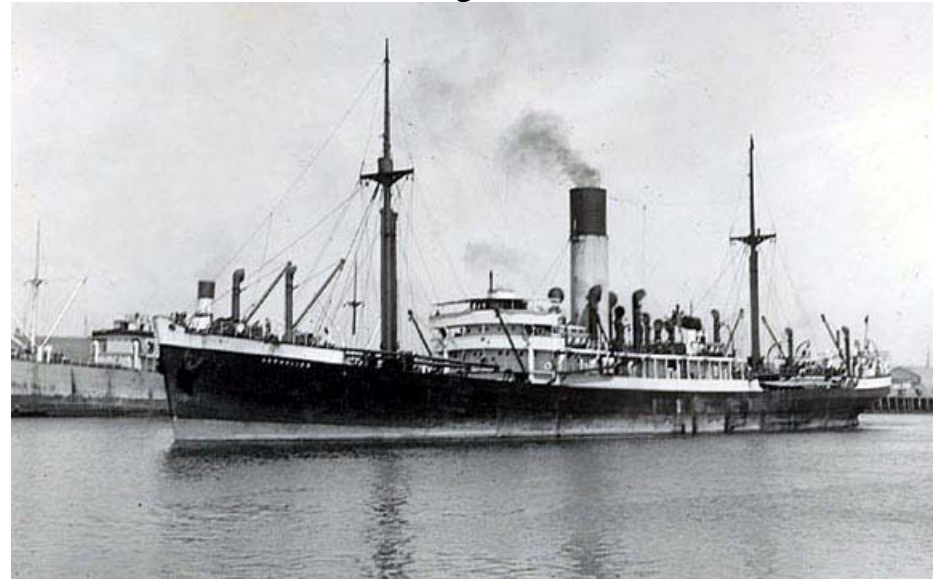
African Prince



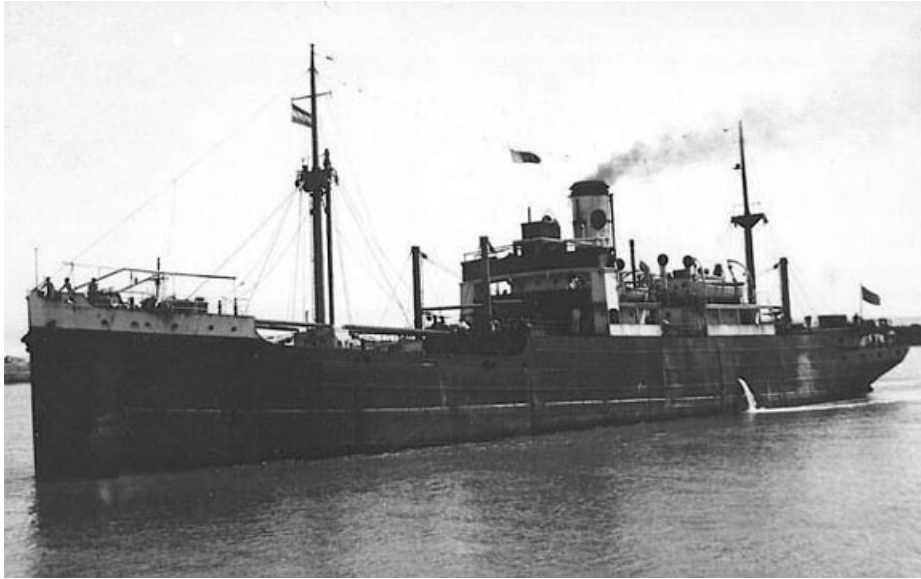
Algerian



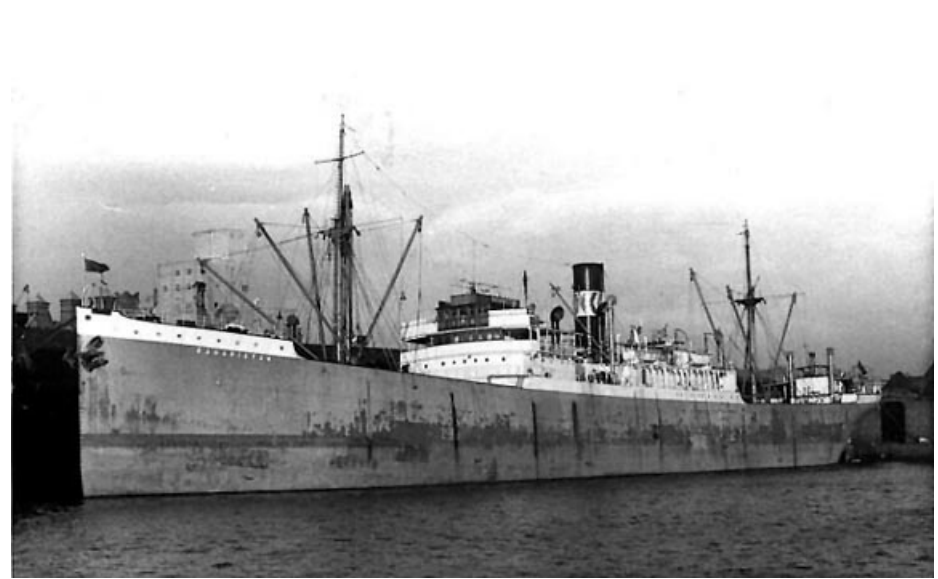
Amberton



Asphalion



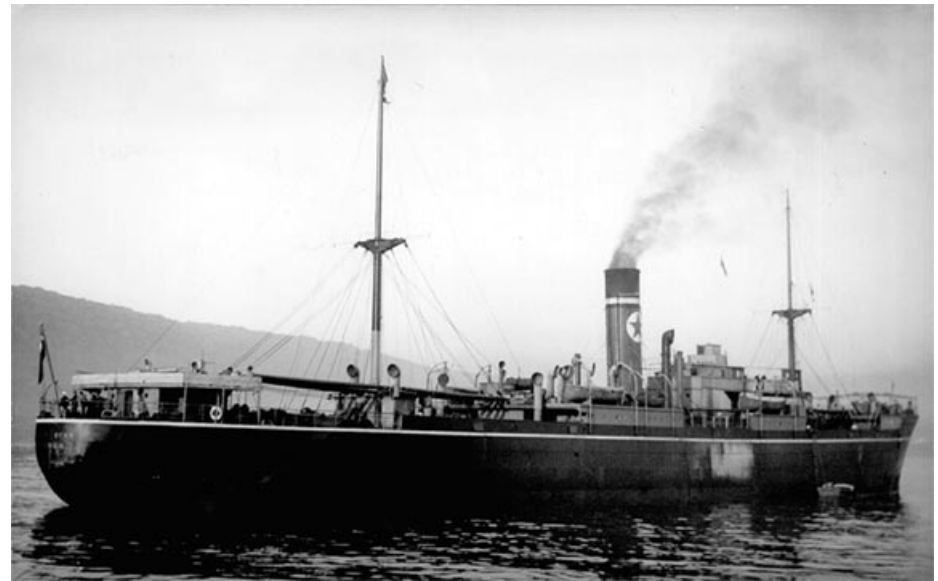
Bactria



Baharistan



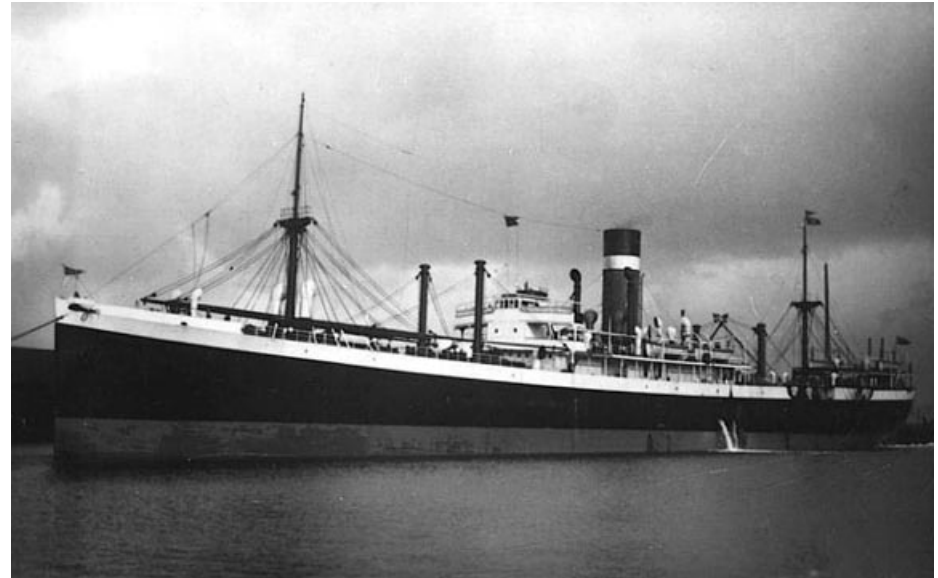
Baron Napier



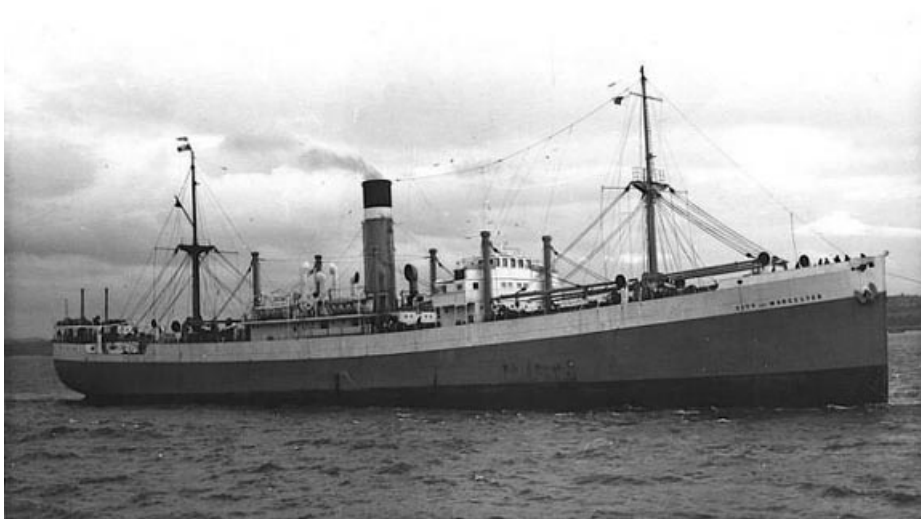
Celtic Star



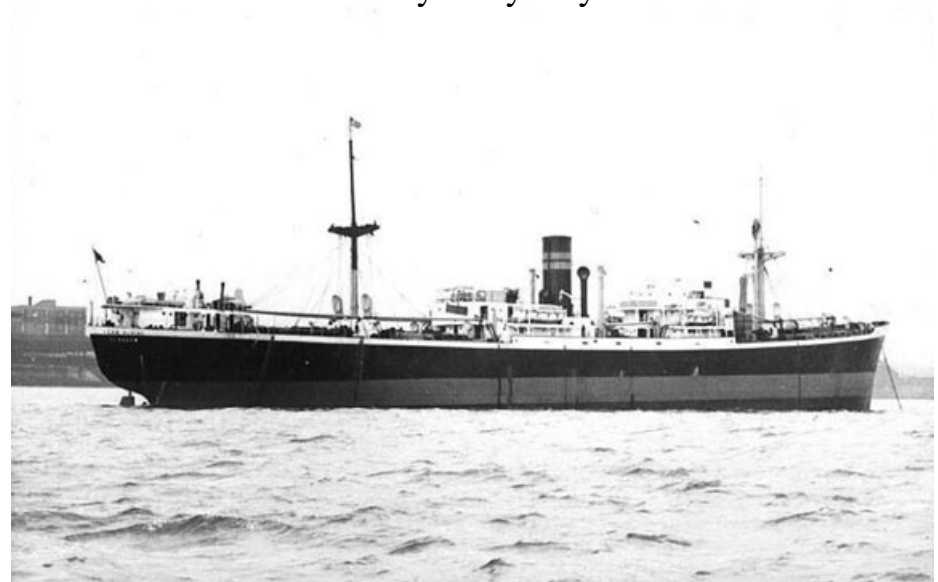
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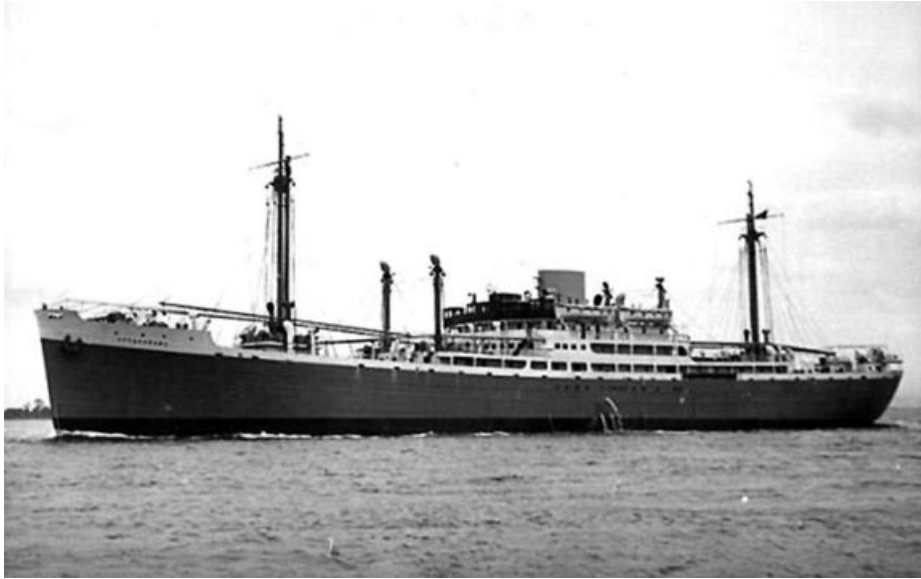
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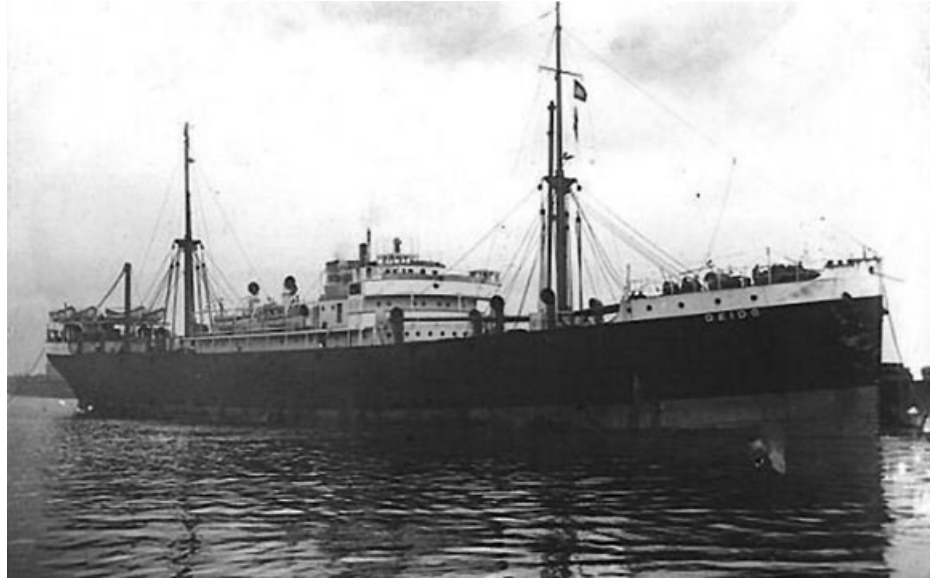
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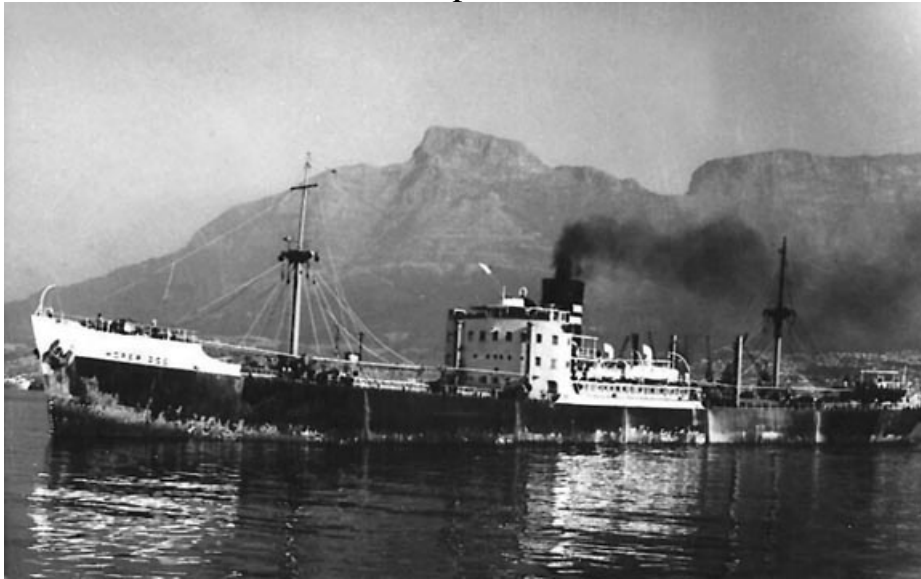
Clan Alpine



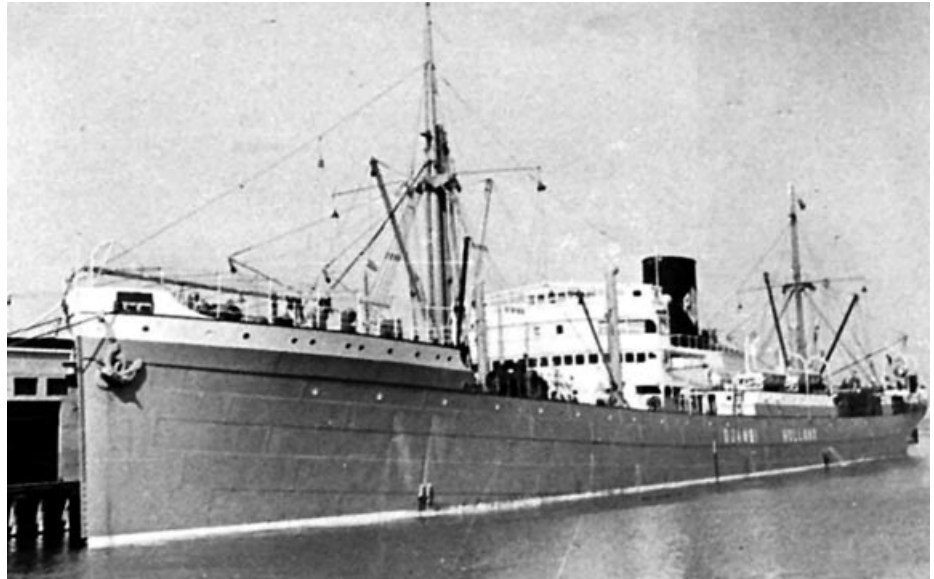
Copacabana



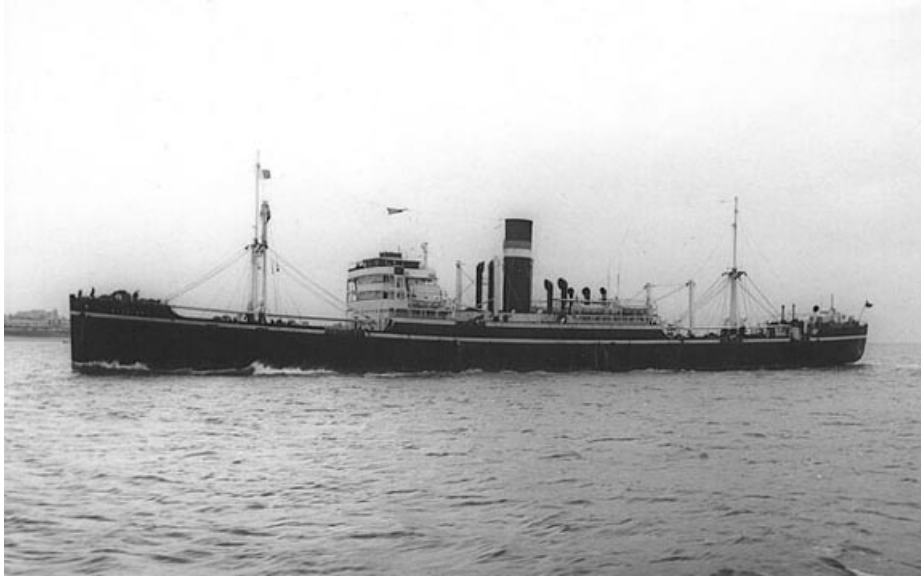
Deido



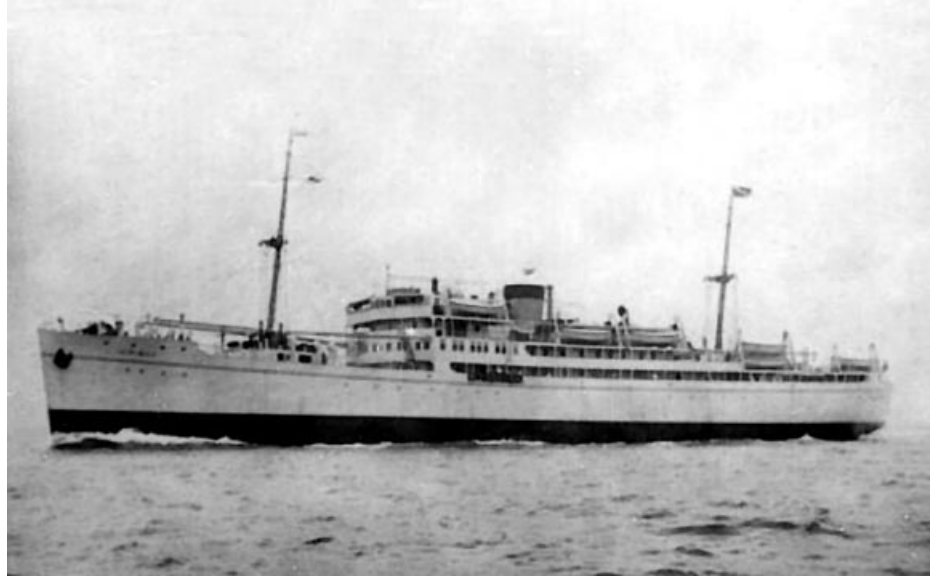
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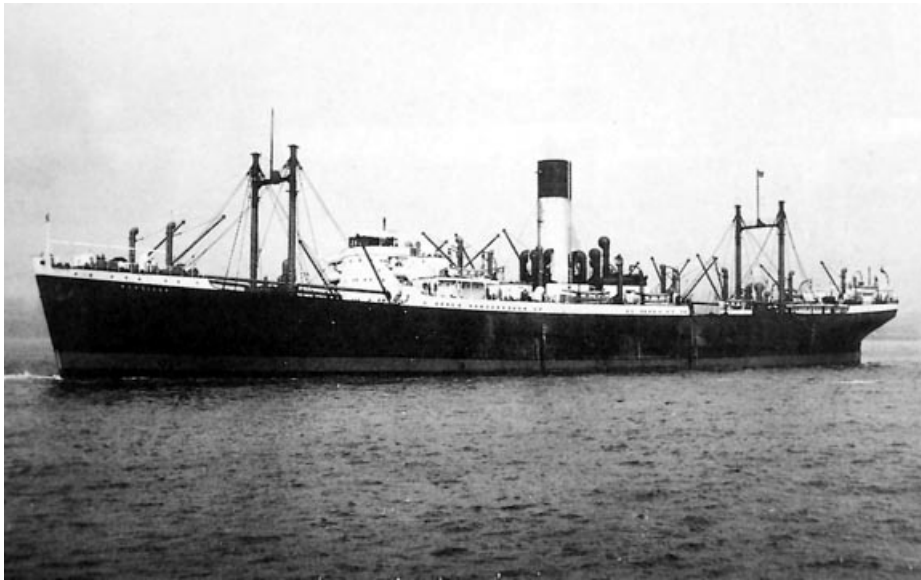
Djambi



Markhorr



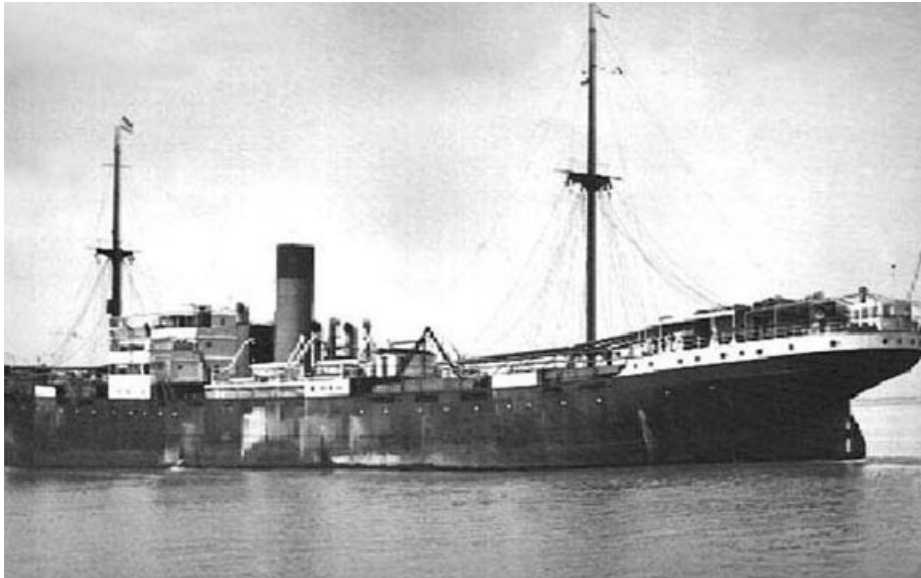
Isipingo



Menelaus



Marwarri



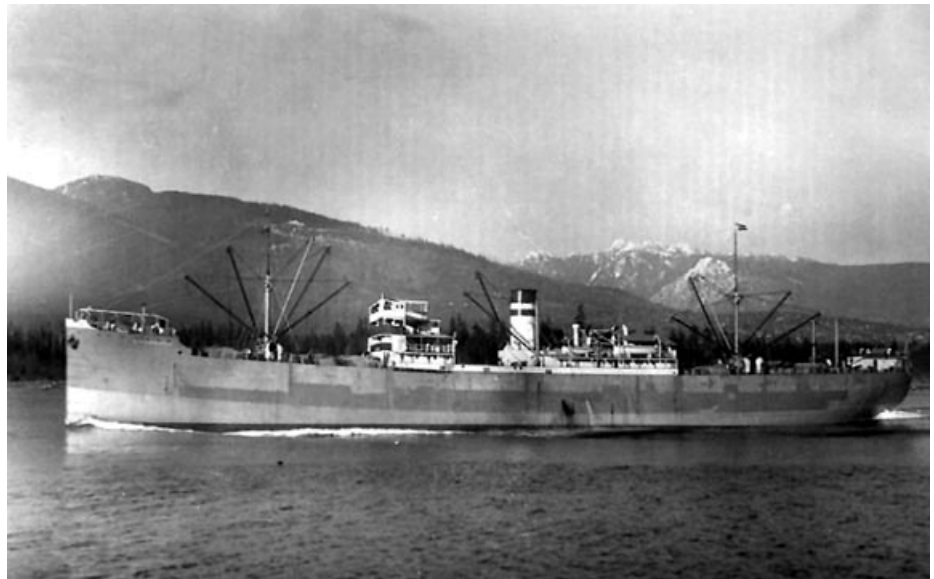
Sembilan



Sansu



Silverbeech



Sembilangan

