



Merchant Navy Seaman Christopher Tulitt

Chris Tulitt was born in January 1925 and he was attending Bournemouth School at the outbreak of war. In 1940 he joined the Auxiliary Fire Service as a messenger and recalls French troops being billeted at his school for a short time, following the evacuation from Dunkirk. Chris' education had already been affected by the sharing of the school premises with another school, Tauntons, which had been evacuated from Southampton. The following year Chris went to Warrington to stay with his eldest brother Mike and family while he was waiting to join the Ellermans Hall Line as a Cadet. His job would be to learn all aspects of the role of a Deck Officer, including celestial and coastal navigation, keeping the Ship's Log, seamanship and cargo handling. Chris wanted to go to sea like his grandfather and chose the Merchant Navy as he was able to join earlier, at the age of 16. On arrival he was very apprehensive; the ship seemed chaotic, extremely noisy and presented an alien environment to Chris, at least to begin with!



Bull Howerd and me, from the
City of Athens

On 17th December Mike and Eileen drove me up to Liverpool with my tin trunk and we drew up alongside the *City of Athens* and I said goodbye. I met the other cadet who was a big Yorkshire lad called Bull Howerd. He had done the previous twelve months trip on the ship. He and I had a slap-up dinner with a bottle of Chablis at Reeces restaurant on the night of the 18th. We sailed on the morning of the 19th bound for St. John, New Brunswick, in a convoy of some sixty ships. It was a rough trip as we were in ballast and I was seasick for about 24 hours, but after that could not get enough to eat! We were Commodore ship with an RN Commodore on board with his signal staff so we were in the centre of the leading line of nine columns of ships. Our speed was very slow at about 7 to 8 knots with an escort of at most five warships and very little air cover. However we had no great alarms and arrived safely in Canada after a fourteen day voyage - with Christmas Day spent halfway across the Western Ocean.

We spent three very snowy weeks in St. John loading our mixed cargo of crated motor car parts, aluminium ingots, rolls of newspaper print, etc for ports in Australia. I spent my 17th birthday there on January 3rd and sent a cable home by Western Union to say I was safe and sound!

Having discharged the cargo, the crew took on board 5000 tons of lead ingots and 5000 tons of bagged brown sugar, before sailing to New York and finally home to the UK.



So ended Voyage Number One. 'Home is the Hero, Home from the Sea!' I think I must have been very cocky and insufferable to all my friends who were still at school and just beginning to think about being called up into the forces at age eighteen. However mum and dad were glad to see me home safe, as Tony was a Prisoner of War and Mike had now been called up into the Royal Engineers and was commissioned.



'Quartermaster teaching me how to do Turks Head' on board the *City of Athens*

After a short leave Chris rejoined the *City of Athens* which sailed to the West African Gold Coast.

At 3.30pm on the 8th October I was having my afternoon cup of tea in the saloon when there was a tremendous explosion which was quickly followed by the ringing of the emergency bells. After collecting my life jacket I went to my emergency station on the bridge. The ship had been hit amidships by a torpedo and had begun to settle and lose way in the water, which was essential, before any lifeboats could be launched. Fortunately the sea was very calm. The ship was obviously sinking and The Captain gave orders to abandon ship.

The six lifeboats were launched without trouble. I assisted in throwing the confidential code books weighted-box over the side before climbing down into the lifeboat on the port side of the bridge. As we were moving away from the ship we spotted the periscope of the U-boat crossing ahead of the ship from starboard to port. As we moved away aft towards the other lifeboats there was another violent explosion as a second explosion hit the ship amidships in the engine room on the port side. We were glad the ship was not hit in one of the holds where all the ammunition was stowed. We watched the ship settle and eventually go down quite gracefully by the head. When we rowed back through the wreckage we found the ship's cat clinging onto some timber. She was glad to be taken into the lifeboat.



City of Athens, my lifeboat still alongside portside under wing of Bridge. We sighted U-boat periscope ahead of ship. The Third Mate had a camera to record the sinking.



Ship settles down, going, going ...

We were some 180 miles north west of Cape Town and the six lifeboats set course accordingly. Our Radio Officer had got off an SSS signal before the ship sank so we were not surprised to see a warship appear about 7.00pm just as the light was fading. We went alongside *HMS Active* and climbed aboard via scrambling nets put down over the side. The destroyer was in company with *HMS Arrow* and *HMS Antelope* and what we didn't know at the time was that twelve ships had been sunk in two days around the Cape Town area, including the Orient liner *Arcades*, so the Navy was very much on the alert.

We were entertained in the ship's wardroom and made ourselves comfortable. Around midnight a gun on the destroyer opened up and we could feel the ship was working up to full speed. We went up on to the afterdeck in time to see depth charges being dropped over the stern to be followed by great underwater explosions. The *Active* steamed over the area and the smell of diesel oil was very strong. It transpired that the U-boat had been surprised recharging her batteries on the surface and *Active* had opened fire and then attempted to ram. The U-boat crash dived but the depth charge attack was successful and the sinking was subsequently confirmed as the U179 commanded by Captain Sobe. We were all elated and a very happy crew of survivors plus cat landed from *Active* in Cape Town the following day.

Chris and the crew returned to Liverpool on November and he waited at home until April 1943 before joining the *City of Canton* at Birkenhead. The previous month the family had suffered the loss of Chris' cousin Gordon, a Midshipman in the Royal Navy, when his ship, *HMS Harvester* as part of a North Atlantic convoy, rammed a U-boat and was then torpedoed. Having arrived in South Africa, Chris' eventful Merchant Navy career was about to take another dramatic turn:



We left Beira bound north for Mombassa with a few potatoes as cargo. At 1.00am on the 16th July I was turned in when there was a great explosion which shot me out of my bunk and onto the deck. I grabbed my life jacket and made for my boat station below the bridge on the starboard side. The moon was out and the sea was rough. The torpedo had hit the engine room stockhole and the ship was obviously going to sink.



We waited for the ship to lose way in the water and then started to abandon ship. We lowered our lifeboat into the water but when I got down into it I realised the bung had not been shipped and the lifeboat was rapidly filling with water. I managed to find the bung and ship it but just then a second torpedo hit the ship on the port side and our lifeboat surged forward to a point under one of the life rafts secured to the foremast shrouds. The torpedo explosion must have loosened the raft as it came crashing down on to our lifeboat and I took one look at the life raft on its way down and dived over the side. I swam away from the ship and watched fascinated in the moonlight as the ship broke her back. The stem and the stern met in mid-air and she slipped quietly under the waves. I swam around for a little while in the relatively warm water until I was found by the Second Mate's motor lifeboat and hauled out of the sea by the seat of my pyjama trousers, which disappeared in the process. It later transpired that the Captain and the Storekeeper climbed from the damaged lifeboat on to the life raft and were to drift for six days before being picked up by the French Cruiser *Suffren*. They were in poor condition having had very little water or food on the raft although were recovering well when we went to see them later in hospital in Durban. Meanwhile the lifeboats were attempting to sort themselves out and pick up those of us who had abandoned the damaged lifeboat. Inevitably the lifeboats got separated in the rough sea.

Transcript of Audio Clip

The sinking of the *City of Canton* in the Mozambique Channel in July 1943

Well I was turned in, because the torpedo struck about, it must have been about, 1 o'clock in the morning I suppose and I was shot out of my bunk and grabbed my lifejacket and went straight to my boat station, and again we had to wait for the way, to get off the ship. It was a fairly rough sea running at the time, and that's when I went down one of the ropes, we got the life boat down into the water OK and I went down one of the ropes, shinned down one of the ropes and found somebody hadn't put the plug in, the bung in and so I scabbled round in the bottom and shoved the plug in and just as that happened the second torpedo hit the ship. It was bright moonlight by the way, it was a lovely night but it was rough and we had drifted a little bit forward under



one of the life-rafts and the next thing I saw was this life-raft coming down after the second torpedo hit, whether somebody had fiddled about with it or whether the second torpedo . . . but I didn't wait to see. I went straight over the side and swam around and in fact watched the ship break in two, it was when the bow and stern meet in mid-air and she slid gracefully below, so I swam round for a while and was picked up by one of the other lifeboats. I got dragged out by the seat of, I only had a pair of pyjama trousers on but they didn't last long, so I was dragged out into the lifeboat and it was the Second Mate's lifeboat, he'd been on watch and he'd got his uniform on and then in no time at all, out of the moonlight came the U-boat on the surface.

The next thing we knew in the Second Mate's lifeboat was the ghostly appearance of the U-boat (U178) in the moonlight and a demand from the conning tower to come alongside. This we eventually did with difficulty as we were still under oars, not having as yet got the lifeboats engine going, and we were criticised by the German giving the orders to the effect that 'You English could never row'. We could hardly argue as there was a chap manning a machine gun on the aft end of the conning tower. I was sitting on the lifeboat thwart next to the Second Mate who was fully dressed in tropical whites as he had been on watch when the ship was sunk. The German realised that Roberts, the Second Mate, was an Officer and called him aboard the U-boat and it was then that we could see that they already had someone else on board. (The Second Mate was landed in the Andaman Islands and handed over to the Japanese as a Prisoner of War. I never heard if he survived). The 'someone' turned out to be the Chief Steward who had been taken out of one of the other lifeboats but when the Germans realised who they had got aboard they decided they wanted a Navigating Officer instead. The next thing we knew was the Chief Steward being shot down off the U-boat into our lifeboat! The German told him he could go and he told us we were only fifty miles from the nearest land to the West - as if we didn't know! The Germans had asked the Chief Steward why we were late, presumably having been advised of our sailing by the German Embassy in Beira. The U-boat disappeared into the darkness on the surface.

There was no sign of the other lifeboats and having got the engine going we headed west for the coast with the Third Mate in charge. Dawn came and although the sea was rough the sun was out and it was warm. By mid-afternoon the coast was in sight and the problem of making a safe landfall presented itself. At first all we could see were breakers but then we spotted an opening with what appeared to be sheltered water beyond. We were lucky to have found a protected bay with a shelving sandy beach which turned out to be quite deserted with no sign of man or beast - although we learned later that there were plenty of lions in that area. We hauled the lifeboat up onto the beach and settled down for the night having decided to push off the next morning and sail south down the coast. This we did at first light and around noon came to Baixe Pinda lighthouse, where we landed, to be greeted by the Portuguese Lighthouse Keeper and his family. In my state of undress in just my pyjama trousers with the seat



torn out the Keeper was good enough to give me one of his buff and purple striped 'Palm Beach' suits which since he was a big chap hung on me like a tent! It certainly covered me. The Keeper and his wife fed and watered us and we enjoyed a good goat stew.

During a tape-recorded interview with the Director of the Centre, [Dr Peter Liddle](#) in May 2001, Chris recalled gorging himself on tins of condensed milk, which had been sewn up in canvas, while he was in the lifeboat. In this sinking some men were lost who had been in the engine room at the time of the torpedo attack. Chris also advised Dr Liddle of the items usually to be found in a lifeboat's lockers, including charts, Horlicks tablets, biscuits, a bottle of Brandy and flares. The five charts he collected from the lockers of the *City of Canton* lifeboat lockers stayed with Chris through the rest of the war and are now proudly held with his papers at the Second World War Experience Centre.

Inventory of the Donation

- substantial collection of photographs
- three books on Seamanship and Nautical Tables
- National Service Certificate
- Navigators and Engineer Officers' Union Membership book
- two books of calculations showing the working out of the ship's position
- five charts collected from the lockers of the *City of Canton* lifeboat
- tape-recorded

Chris returned home on board the *Highland Chieftain* and had a month's survivors' leave before joining the *City of Adelaide* in November 1943.

On meeting the Mate, Lambert, his first words to me were to the effect that he had been right through the war so far and seen nothing, so if there was any trouble on this trip it would be all my fault. Another chap joining the ship was McKay, the Third Engineer from the *City of Canton* who had been an especial friend of mine on that ship. However when he spotted me as he was about to come up the gangway he said "Oh no! I'm not sailing with him again!" He did - but I was beginning to feel like a 'Jonah'.

The ship sailed through the Suez Canal, down the Red Sea and across the Arabian Sea to Bombay and then on to Karachi. Disaster soon struck:



An Emergency Certificate from Ceylon permitting Chris to return to the UK after the sinking of the *City of Adelaide*



We sailed from Karachi in ballast for Freemantle on the West Coast of Australia in the middle of March. Mac, the Third Engineer, and I had decided to build what he called a 'Sharpie' - a type of small sailing boat used around his native island Magee on the east Irish coast near Belfast. Our 'Sharpie' was taking shape in the after-well deck by the 30th March 1944. It was still light when the torpedo hit the ship amidships on the port side and the ship started to sink! 'Sparks' was already sending an SSS signal when the submarine (Japanese submarine I 8) opened fire with its main armament and we could tell from the flashes from the gun that he was forward of the beam and therefore could not be fired on by our 4 inch gun on the stern. The ship was obviously silhouetted against the western sky and when the shells hit, being in ballast, she sounded like an old tin can. So much for our 'Sharpie'! Meanwhile we were all abandoning ship with the shells raining down into a reasonably calm sea and darkness falling fast. We didn't see the ship go down but later in the darkness we could hear a diesel engine as the submarine cruised around the area presumably looking for the lifeboats, although he didn't use a searchlight. We were relieved when the noise of the diesel engine died away. . .

The six lifeboats had managed to keep together and we roped up for the night with the motor lifeboat towing, so come first light when it was pouring with rain at least we were all together. I looked across to Lambert, the Mate, sitting at the tiller of his lifeboat wearing an orange woolly hat and when he looked up at me I made a rude gesture, in view of his remarks on my first joining the ship. It continued to pour with rain on that Friday - through the night - and on through the following day - so at least we were not short of water. The lifeboats sailed in company during the day and roped up at night with the motor lifeboat towing. Palm Sunday dawned brighter and the sun came out and by noon we were sailing WNW towards the Chagos Island some five hundred miles distant, having been sunk in position approximately 12 degrees south - 80 degrees east.

About mid-afternoon a Lascar in our lifeboat said "Sahib - ship!" and sure enough there she was, hull down to us in the lifeboat. I lit a distress flare, which went off okay but showered me with burning particles and burnt holes in both my shirt and myself, although I didn't notice it at the time. Our Captain, Richard James Ross-Ricketts had done a good job in keeping the six lifeboats together and the ship saw our signals and altered course to pick us up. Despite the problems of going alongside a ship in a small boat in a moderate sea we all managed to get ourselves up the scramble net put down over the side of the ship. We now identified the ship as the '*Carole Lombard*' - an American Liberty ship named after the famous film star. The ship was on passage to Colombo from Freemantle and had been on a reciprocal course to ours. When she picked up our SSS signal she had altered course to port for a time before resuming her original course. We had made up that distance in the three days in the lifeboats but were very lucky to have been sighted by the American ship in what was almost the dead centre of the Indian Ocean.



The Second World War Experience Centre
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<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/sea/alliedbrit/tulitt/default.asp>

It was ten weeks before Chris sailed from Bombay, arriving home to hear the sad news that his sister's boyfriend had been killed on D-Day, landing with the 6th Airborne Paratroops.

When I went across to Poole Custom House to collect my compensation for loss of effects again the chap said I was making a habit of this sinking business. A month's survivors leave and mid-August saw me taking the train north to Birkenhead to join the *City of Chester*. Ellermans told me they were putting me on their newest and fastest ship and if I lost this one they would be very displeased!



Certificate of Discharge showing the loss of the three ships at sea.

Fortunately this trip was successful and Chris arrived back in Liverpool on 13th December 1944. Almost as interesting as Chris' time afloat, are the times he spent waiting for transport to return home as well as waiting for the cargo to be loaded or unloaded. For example, off Key West in Florida:

The fishing off the ship was exciting and the engine room turned out large hooks for baiting with lumps of meat. By using wire ropes and deck winches as fishing lines we were able to catch some very large fish for the crew. There were plenty of sharks and large manta rays about so when we went swimming over the side we had someone up in the wing of the bridge with a loaded rifle.

After the sinking of the *City of Adelaide*, Chris had a six-week stay at Pattipola in a hunting lodge belonging to Commander Palliser from the Ellermans shipping agents office in Colombo:

At the entrance the Tamil hammered on a hanging piece of angle-iron, whereupon a female figure with straggling grey hair appeared dressed in blue jodhpurs and checked shirt with a large hunting knife on her belt and a .45 Revolver at her hip. This was the Commander's wife, Mrs Palliser. We found out later that she had had quite an adventurous life being a Rough Rider in an Australian circus. She welcomed us and explained that we were in an unpoliced area and that was why she was armed. . . At 6200 feet we experienced some spectacular thunder and lightning storms accompanied by torrential rain. One day we walked the sixteen miles and back to Nuwara Eliya along the railway line. On another day we hiked up to Horton's Plains Rest House and returned on the railway, on the footplate of an engine, with driver Carson from a Railway Halt some miles from Pattipola. We suffered badly from the attention of leeches that day and spent the time waiting for the train touching their backsides with cigarette ends to make them withdraw their heads from beneath the skin on our feet and legs.



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Chris' next three trips were less eventful although he unfortunately contracted malaria in 1945. In February 1946 Chris was discharged from the Merchant Navy due to this condition. Post-war he trained as an architect.

The Second World War Experience Centre is very grateful to Chris Tulitt for his agreement to reproduce extracts from his recollections.