



## Merchant Navy Seaman David Wilson

At the outbreak of war, David Wilson was at boarding school in Dorset where he joined the Officers' Training Corps. In 1940 he left school hoping to join the RAF but was classed as unfit due to suffering ill health as a child. Instead David joined the Merchant Navy on his 17th birthday despite the reservations of two doctors who considered he would not survive the hardship of life at sea. Watts, Watts and Company of London employed David as a cadet, or apprentice deck officer. David's mother was worried for his safety and bought him the best possible lifejacket which was in the form of a coat, and very warm to wear.



David Wilson photographed in 1947

On 15 April 1941 David was instructed to join the *SS Willesden* at North Shields and was cheered on his way by 27 officers and men of the King's Own Scottish Borderers who were billeted at his home. There were three other apprentices on board, Derek Bawden (known as George), Jimmy Harland and Arthur Joyce.



George (Derek) Bawden



Jimmy Harland - the background shows twisted rails where tanks had rolled over the side during a gale.

The morning after his arrival David was awoken by the bo'sun:

We were told to go down into the hold and sweep up the coal dust which had been left when they had discharged to coal ballast. . . When I peered over the side of the hold I was aghast at the huge depth and when I thought of that 45 foot vertical steel ladder I



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would have to climb down, my legs turned to water. I was told not to grip the rungs, in case one springs out, always grip the sides of the ladder. There was no rung at the top of the ladder, just smooth steel, that was the scariest part of it. I climbed down, trying not to look as if I was scared stiff and, as I stepped off the ladder at the bottom of the hold, the sailors already down there grabbed my new cap and new working jacket and kicked them round the hold. They didn't stay looking new for long! When it was time to go up to the top again, I found it more of an ordeal.

Having taken on coal in Newcastle, *SS Willesden* took up position with a coastal convoy for her journey around Scotland to Loch Ewe. During the onward voyage to Baltimore, David was 'initiated' by being covered in 7lb of raspberry jam! This treatment did not help his feelings of homesickness but David was cheered up by his fellow cadet Jimmy. This trip was memorable for the seasickness which afflicted him and the tremendous gale which put the steering gear out of action. A 'wolf-pack' also attacked the convoy with the loss of one ship. In May *SS Willesden* returned home as part of a large convoy escorted by *HMS Ramillies* and carrying a cargo of grain. David was not allowed ashore as this had been his first trip, but George and Jimmy covered for him so that he could spend a precious day with his parents.

In June the *SS Willesden* headed for Montreal and during the Atlantic crossing the convoy came under attack on two occasions, losing five ships. Once again David and the other apprentices were required to sweep out the holds:

We worked in clouds of coal dust and, as we were streaming with sweat the whole time, we were soon as black as coal miners! Each morning we would take it in turns to go ashore and fill a suitcase with bottles of Coca Cola to keep us going through the day. Each evening, before being allowed ashore, the beams over the holds had to be swept down and the hatch covers put over the holds. This entailed sitting astride one of the narrow steel beams 45 feet above the vast hold, with nothing to hold onto except the beam and brushing the coal dust off whilst inching along. I just could not face it and left it for the others to do, as they were used to it. That evening I searched high and low for my shore-going shoes and someone suggested looking for them on deck - there they were, sitting in the middle of one of the beams! I had to retrieve them or stay aboard that evening. I screwed up my courage and worked my way across to the cheers of the others. I never found it daunting again.



David, George, Jimmy and Lofty after sweeping out the holds.

The following trip was to New York and on the return journey from Quonset Point the ship was loaded with army stores, including 5 tons of nitro glycerine and 40 large oil tanks which required securing with heavy chains. A succession of gales on the return journey, with seas measuring 40 feet, resulted in the chains working their way loose and several of the oil tanks began to roll into the sea, damaging lifeboats as they went overboard. The rest of the convoy carried on, leaving the crew of *SS Willesden* to try and secure the remaining tanks in the



heavy seas. It took three days to rejoin the convoy and in the meantime two other vessels had been torpedoed. The following convoy in January 1942, again to New York, followed a similar pattern with a 'wolf-pack' battle lasting three days:

One such attack started when a submerged U-boat was right alongside of us and the first we knew of it was when a destroyer raced through the convoy and dropped a pattern of depth charges 25 yards from us which nearly buckled the side of the ship. When depth charges are dropped near you it sounds as if a giant is hitting the sides with a hammer. Must be terrible in a U-boat when these things are being dropped. The most spectacular attacks were at night when the U-boats would surface and attack with shellfire and torpedoes. The escorts would fire star shells which would light up the scene with a brilliant white light. To add to the din and confusion, ships in the convoy who spotted a U-boat would open up with their 4 inch gun and any other gun which would bear. Shells would ricochet over the water and there was always the danger of hitting another ship. Gaps in the columns would tell you the next morning how many ships were lost. Several days later the ship ahead of us was sunk and we passed one man clinging to a hatch cover as we passed. All we could do was to shout encouragement to him and hope he would be picked up by the rescue ship at the rear of the convoy.

Having left New York, the *SS Willesden* steamed to St Thomas in the West Indies to load up with coal before heading for the South Atlantic. On 1 April 1942 a plane with US Navy markings carried away the main aerial by trailing a large hook from its tail. This meant that the effective range for any SOS signals was only around 40 miles. The Army gunners managed to hit the plane, which had come from a German commerce raider, and the crew discovered later that the observer had been hit in the arm. Shortly after, the raider fired salvos of shells at the *Willesden* and ordered the crew to abandon ship or she would be sunk. The crew retaliated by returning fire with a few shots from the antiquated 4 inch gun on the poop:

We fired 6 shots at the raider without result but the raider was keeping up a rapid fire of three guns and circling us in ever decreasing circles at 23 knots. In no time shells were ripping into the ship and the high octane fuel on the foredeck was soon a mass of flames. The shocking thought that flashed through my mind was, unlike being attacked in convoy when you had ships all around, we were alone in an almost empty ocean being attacked by this monster hurling shells at us alone. It was absolutely terrifying, especially as we could not do anything.



After deck of *SS Willesden*.

Having been ordered to abandon ship, David leapt into the port lifeboat and put the plug in before swinging himself back on deck and helping to lower the boat into the water. In the queue for the ladder his life was saved by a young sailor, John McMillan, who waited to



allow David to go down first but who was hit by a shell splinter and died of his injuries. The casualties stayed in the boat while others, David included, hung on to safety ropes:

For the first time I was able to try out my wonderful life-jacket coat but unfortunately, I had not done the buttons up before getting into the water and the buoyancy was so great, I could not force the coat down enough to do the buttons up, I did however have my arms in the sleeves, so the coat acted like a life buoy. At least I had the comfortable feeling that the coat would support me for 24 hours if need be.

The survivors were taken aboard the raider, the wounded were taken to the sick bay and the others shown to their quarters, an 18ft by 12 ft room, already occupied by the crew of *SS Wellpark* which had been sunk 2 days earlier on the same route. The crew was quite well fed and the men were permitted to go up on deck for an hour each day, the rest of the time was spent playing cards and reading books. The *Thor* was a successful raider and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April a further ship was attacked, a Norwegian merchant ship, the *Aust*. The crew joined those already captured. On the 10<sup>th</sup> the *Kirkpool* was sunk and the remaining crew of twenty was picked up.

On 4<sup>th</sup> May we were told that we would be transferred to a supply ship in the Indian Ocean. On being allowed on deck that evening, we could just make out the lines of the supply ship hove to about a mile away. She turned out to be the *Regensburg* of about 8,000 tons. We collected what gear we had, (in my case none) and clambered down the rope ladders into the launches. Sailors lined the rails on the raider and waved goodbye to us and, of course, we responded. It was hard to realise that they had sunk our ship and nearly killed us a short while back but, strange to say we were a little sad at leaving them.

The crew was treated well on board the *Regensburg* and had the same food as the ship's company. However on 7 July 1942 the ship arrived in Yokohama Harbour and dropped anchor. The crew transferred to the *Ramses* before being handed over to the Japanese on 25 August.

Before disembarking, the German sailors gave us two sacks of food, one contained black bread, the other tins of salmon. They told us to be sparing with it as it would be the last good food we would have for a very long time. . . Presently we were herded into trucks, 25 prisoners to a truck and two guards and taken on a tour of Yokohama, Kawasaki and surrounding districts for two hours, all the time being pelted with rotten fruit, lumps of horse dung and anything else to hand. The population had been told that we were coming and, as they had not seen any European prisoners before, they all turned out to watch. At first, before the barrage, we thought they were cheering us as all we could hear was 'hurio, hurio' which we discovered afterwards was an insulting name for POW and that was our name from then on. As we were packed into the trucks so tightly and all standing up, we could not duck out of the way, and nor could the guards, and soon we were all covered in this filth.

David and the other prisoners were taken to their prison camp, Kawasaki POW Camp 1:



The bunks were full of big red bed bugs which would come out at night in droves. We would be covered in bites every night and when you squashed one it gave off a sickly smell. After a time we got used to them and did not take much notice of the bites. We were issued with two thin blankets each and a canvas pillow filled with straw. . Whenever we passed one of the guards, we were required to bow low to him. This took us a bit of time to remember to do but, as we got beaten around the head every time we forgot, we soon got the hang of it. . It was about 2 miles to Mitsui Docks and we were put to work in the holds of old British ships which had been sold for scrap to Japan before the war but used by them to bring supplies in. Our job was to shovel coal into slings to be hoisted out of the holds. . . We were allowed up on deck at midday to eat our meagre meal and have a few minutes to relax. It was horrible to see the brass plate at the foot of the bridge and see where the ship was built, shipyards on the Tyne, the Clyde or Belfast made me terribly homesick, even though the actual shipyards were strange places for me. As we did not have any nourishing food, it was not long before people started going down with various illnesses. Dysentery was common which would start as diarrhoea and end up with passing blood and losing weight rapidly. . . Another distressing illness was Beriberi, wet or dry. . . We all got depressed and some men said we would never be free again, so why go on with this miserable life. They just lost the will to live and faded away. . . I am sure I owe my life to Tom Gordy a US Marine from Texas. I had been ill for about ten days and could not eat the pink rice served up. One morning Tom cooked me an egg on a piece of tin in the boiler room and brought it to me before going to work, he stood over me and made me eat it, it tasted delicious. The night before he had wormed his way across the yard, past the guard room and into the chicken run which was kept by the guards for fresh meat and eggs. He silently stole an egg without disturbing the birds and, of course had to worm his way back without breaking the egg. What a wonderfully unselfish act, we never had any meat or eggs in our diet. From that day I started to get better.



Kawasaki Camp

During 1943 David was allowed to send a card home, the first since his capture twenty months previously. At last his parents knew he was alive:



Letter to David's parents  
advising he was still classed as  
missing.

Everyone, except for my mother had given up any hope of seeing me again. The card arrived on Christmas Day 1943, in wartime there was a post every day, and my father was walking along towards the church to get ready for the service when he was astonished to see the postmistress riding up the hill towards him shouting - 'he's alive!' Peldon being a small village, everyone knew about me and she wanted as many people as possible to hear the good news. My mother



played the organ that morning with so much gusto that the poor boy pumping the bellows wet himself with the effort!

About this time the camp began to be plagued by rats who ate the prisoners' soap, gnawed holes in their clothes and bit them during the night. In August 1943, David and four others were taken to a 'hospital' camp as suspected diphtheria cases, where they endured reduced rations as there were no working parties going out from this camp.

Our hut was next to the cookhouse and, although prisoners worked in there, it was more than their lives were worth to let us have spare food. However, on odd occasions they would throw over a bone which had been stripped of meat and had been in a stew. We would take it in turns to chew on it for five minutes then pass it to the next person. By the time it had been passed round a few times, each end of the bone would have gone and all the marrow. The marrow was delicious but we were careful to make sure everyone had some of it.

David's experiences left him with a life-long dislike of sharing utensils or food with others, an understandable reaction given the conditions under which the prisoners existed. Although it was considered a hospital camp, David never saw any medicines being administered. The camp commandant inflicted a variety of punishments on the inmates, including forcing prisoners to stand in the latrine tank, or stand on a box in the yard all night in freezing conditions. The latter punishment frequently led to pneumonia. Life was made more bearable by the appearance of a brown dog who spent his time between the different huts and was fed by the prisoners from their own meagre food ration.

From 1944, American B29 bombers began raids on Japanese cities. The raids would result in more beatings for the prisoners, cheered on by the local inhabitants. David witnessed the Kamikaze pilots' attacks on American bombers. On 15 April 1945 the air raid sirens sounded at 10.15pm:

A few minutes later we heard a tremendous roar as the first planes swept in and dropped their bombs. The whole camp building shook so much we thought it would collapse, so we went outside. The napalm bombs on impact would send a stream of flaming jelly a hundred yards. In no time at all the whole city was a roaring furnace which, in turn created a fierce wind which blew all before it, roofs, doors, windows and all kinds of debris. Part of the camp fence caught fire and we thought we would be engulfed but we managed to put that fire out and then the wind suddenly changed and the fire moved away. . . The devastation revealed the next morning was unbelievable. For approximately four miles in any direction there was not a house or wall standing, just a blackened desert.



Kawasaki Camp from the air, with David's plea for food on the roof.

On 17 August 1945 the prisoners discovered that the war was over:



The whole camp went wild and several prisoners immediately armed themselves with various sharp instruments and went looking for the guards but they had disappeared. The senior officers in camp managed to convince everybody that it was in our interests to keep calm and we really needed the guards to protect us from the population. The guards did appear later but kept a low profile. The next day Japanese military police came to the camp and took the guards' rifles away but left them with their bayonets, for their protection and, perhaps ours. That evening the livestock kept by the guards, a pig and some chickens, were slaughtered and we all enjoyed a meal of roast pork, chicken and home-made bread - the first decent food we had tasted for three years. It is hard to summarise how our feelings were at that time. We had lived in fear of starvation, disease and bombing for so long. We had been brutally treated, made to work under harsh conditions, got into the state of mind when I thought we would never be free again then, very suddenly the war was over. I think most of us felt stunned.

Having missed the American food drops for two days, David painted 'POW Camp, Drop Food' on the roof and supplies quickly arrived by parachute:

The pilots certainly made up for missing us on previous days. Two of them took their life in their hands and took motion pictures of us. Several emptied their pockets and threw down packets of cigarettes. Others scribbled messages - 'See you in the States in a month', 'Compliments of the Fighting 83<sup>rd</sup> USS Essex' tied them onto their singlets and tossed them to us. One pilot sent down the names and addresses of all the pilots on USS Essex. They all did aerobatics over the camp for about 15 minutes whilst we laughed and cried and cheered them. How wonderful they were to us that day.

David arrived home to a wonderful welcome from his family and the villagers laid on a Welcome Home party, but he found it took some time to settle back into family life. Post war David remained in the Merchant Navy until 1951 and then worked for HM Customs and Excise until retirement. In 1950 he married Ina and they had two children. It was Ina who persuaded her husband that his memoir should reflect his feelings and her advice has resulted in a rich and powerful account of life both in the Merchant Navy and as a Prisoner of War in Japan. The Centre is very grateful to David for allowing us to quote from his recollections, a copy of which is held in the archive.



David photographed in 1999.