

An Encounter with a German Submarine, 1941 ★

by SAP2553

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People in story: Norman WJ Henney

Location of story: Off Bermuda

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During 1941 my father joined the Merchant Navy as a junior engineer. The company was the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company (later to become Shell Tankers).

They had loaded 9,000 tons of aviation spirit from an oil refinery in Curacao in the Dutch West Indies, and were en route to Iceland unaccompanied.

My father was on the 4-8 watch, and during the afternoon was catching up on his sleep. The ship was passing just off Bermuda, when the ship's alarm bells sounded. My father looked out of the porthole and there, lo and behold, approximately 400-500 yards away, was a German U-boat! The crew of my father's ship was Chinese, and there was a 4.7in gun mounted on a platform at the aft end of the vessel. My father was a member of the gun crew.

They opened fire on the U-boat, who returned the fire from a gun mounted on their foredeck. You can imagine my father's feelings at sitting on top of 9,000 tons of aviation fuel, and involved in a serious conflict with a German U-boat.

My father's ship was hit once on the foredeck, but luckily the deck was not punctured, and there was only superficial damage to the steam and vent pipes.

The fight continued until nightfall, when my father's ship was out of ammunition and still had not hit the target! They slid away from the danger in the darkness, and made Iceland in due course.

The explanation by Naval Intelligence was that the submarine was out of torpedoes, food and fuel and was due to rendezvous with a supply ship. A case of mistaken identity!!