

# CREW'S ORDEAL OF AIR ATTACKS.

LEIGH CAPTAIN'S STORY  
OF AMAZING ESCAPES.

BOMBED WHILE  
DISCHARGING OIL.

How the crew had remarkable escapes when his ship, the *Stanbridge*, was bombed at Gijon last month was told by the skipper, Captain Thomas Beddoes Greenhalgh, of Windyridge, Tattersall Gardens, Leigh, when interviewed by a *Southend Standard* representative this week. The ship, which is an oil tanker, was attacked while discharging cargo and was extensively damaged by bombs and flying shrapnel, but only one of the crew was wounded. Captain Greenhalgh, who described the incidents as "the most terrifying of his life" arrived back at Falmouth on Friday.

In the course of the interview, he said: "We left England on August 21st, and four days later were stopped by the British control vessel *Fearless*, which was on non-intervention patrol off the coast of North Spain. We were given the official warning not to enter territorial waters, but proceeded to Gijon. After leaving the *Fearless* and until we went alongside



Captain T. B. Greenhalgh.

the harbour at Gijon later the same day we experienced no incidents whatsoever. The next day we started to discharge the cargo, but our operations were soon interrupted by the first air bombardment.

"A number of the crew were on board at the time, and, although the ship was not hit on this occasion, shrapnel was flying all over the place and one of the men was wounded while going ashore. It appeared as though the aeroplane was attacking the ship, but although I stood on

deck and watched the first bomb fall, I was unable to distinguish the nationality of the aeroplane.

“After the man had been hit, one of the officers, Chief Officer T. S. Ridley, volunteered to go ashore and bandage him. It was a very dangerous and courageous action, for shrapnel was still flying all about while he knelt beside the wounded man on the harbour and bandaged him. It is difficult to say how long this first raid lasted, but at least, one hundred bombs were dropped.

“When the raid first began I called to a number of men forward and told them to get ashore and seek shelter. In my own case, I stood on the bridge at first, but, realizing the foolishness of this action, went down to my cabin. Being naturally very anxious for the ship, I left the door of the cabin open, but the concussions became so terrific inside I was forced to close it against the possibility of its blowing to pieces. Many of the other officers and crew were in the saloon. The noise caused by the concussions was terrific and can best be described as if a hundred men were striking the steel sides with battering rams.

“After this first raid three other British ships left the harbour before they had discharged all their cargo. My intentions at first were to do the same thing, but the circumstances were against me, and the next day the Government said they had means of reducing the intensive attacks on the ship. So we stopped in an endeavour to discharge the rest of our cargo. In normal circumstances we would have been finished in two days, but, owing to the subsequent constant interruptions, we were seventeen

**CREW'S ORDEAL OF AIR ATTACKS.**  
**LEIGH CAPTAIN'S STORY OF AMAZING ESCAPES.**  
**BOMBED WHILE DISCHARGING OIL.**

How the crew had remarkable escapes when his ship, the Standard, was bombed at Guern last month was told by the skipper, Captain Thomas Medcoe Greenhagh, of Windybridge, Tattersall Gardens, Leigh, when interviewed by a Southend Standard representative this week. The ship, which is an oil tanker, was attacked while discharging cargo and was extensively damaged by bombs and flying shrapnel, but only one of the crew was wounded. Captain Greenhagh, who described the incidents as "the most terrifying of his life," arrived back at Falmouth on Friday.

In the course of the interview, he said: "We left Falmouth on August 21st, and four days later were stopped by the British aircraft carrier Force H. We were then ordered to discontinue our discharge of oil and to return to Falmouth. We were given the signal to return to Falmouth by a searchlight beam from the carrier. We were then ordered to discharge our cargo, but were again bombed. After being hit by a bomb and seeing we were about to be hit by another, I left the ship and went to the deck. The ship was then bombed again. The next day we started to discharge the cargo, but our operations were again interrupted by the ship's bombardment. A number of the crew were hit, but all the ship's deck crew were saved. I was hit in the leg and arm, but I was not seriously injured. The ship was then bombed again. I was then ordered to stop discharging. It appeared as though the aeroplane was attacking the ship, but although I stood on deck and watched the first bomb fall, I was unable to distinguish the nationality of the aeroplane. After the man had been hit, one of the officers, Chief Officer T. S. Ridley, volunteered to go ashore and bandage him. It was a very dangerous and courageous action, for shrapnel was still flying all about while he knelt beside the wounded man on the harbour and bandaged him. It is difficult to say how long this first raid lasted, but at least, one hundred bombs were dropped. In my own case, I stood on the bridge at first, but, realizing the foolishness of this action, went down to my cabin. Being naturally very anxious for the ship, I left the door of the cabin open, but the concussions became so terrific inside I was forced to close it against the possibility of its blowing to pieces. Many of the other officers and crew were in the saloon. The noise caused by the concussions was terrific and can best be described as if a hundred men were striking the steel sides with battering rams. After this first raid three other British ships left the harbour before they had discharged all their cargo. My intentions at first were to do the same thing, but the circumstances were against me, and the next day the Government said they had means of reducing the intensive attacks on the ship. So we stopped in an endeavour to discharge the rest of our cargo. In normal circumstances we would have been finished in two days, but, owing to the subsequent constant interruptions, we were seventeen

days discharging the cargo. It was after the first raid that we found out that there was an air raid shelter within two hundred yards of the ship. This was a natural tunnel in the face of the cliff, and each end was built up with sand-bags and stones. Other tunnels in the vicinity, which were used for sheltering during an air raid, included railway tunnels and natural tunnels.

“Warning of an air raid is given by one blast on a siren and when the planes arrive two blasts, to denote the danger signal, are given. When it is all clear again there are three blasts. It was not long after the first raid that we experienced a second, and on this occasion the ship was hit but fortunately no one was hurt, as we were able to gain shelter in the tunnel. When the warning signal was given, the steam was shut down for safety and we made for one of the tunnels. By a stroke of luck, however, the bomb that fell on the ship struck the only tank aboard which was empty. All the rest were still full of cargo. If the bomb had dropped into one of these full tanks the vessel would have been destroyed.

“On numerous occasions after this our work was constantly interrupted by air raids, and for some days we were unable to discharge because a bomb had smashed the steam pipes and discharging apparatus. Engineers had to be sent for from ashore to put temporary pipes in. We were subjected to constant air alarms during the day, but never at night.

“After we had been there a few days a very concentrated attack took place, and at least two bombs fell on the decks of the ship and wrecked the midship section and blew the port fore-castle to pieces. The pipes in the engine room were also fractured, and there was about eight feet of water in both this



section of the ship and the stokehold. We had to get steam from the shore to pump the hundreds of tons of water out, and our work was again delayed. Another bomb fell between the ship and the stone pier and blew a hole in her side. It also struck a tank, which fortunately only had 30 or 40 tons of oil in it and this ran into the sea. The ship was, in fact, riddled with pieces of bursting bombs, and the lifeboats were turned into colanders. Locks were blown off the doors; doors were blown away. There were inches deep of broken glass lying on the deck and the main mast was scorched by the flames from one of the many small fires which sprang up on board. The engine room was riddled with shrapnel. The damage was, in fact, so extensive that the officers' quarters and all the cabins resembled one huge stable.

“We had passably good warning of an air raid, and sometimes the danger signal was given first instead of the usual warning; Eventually we got the cargo discharged, much to the relief of not only my own men, but the inhabitants of Gijon. The Spaniards were obviously very eager to get the oil. I told them, however, that I would not stop and be subjected to such danger, and a Fascist boat with about five hundred prisoners, mostly women, aboard, was moored alongside our ship. The enemy was then informed of the position, but air raids were continued in spite of this. I, personally, could not say what nationality the aeroplanes were, for I was quite unable to distinguish the type of 'plane.

“After the cargo had been discharged the Government were very keen for me to carry some refugees out, but I pointed out that my ship was only an oil tanker and they would be unable to get accommodation below. She was also in a badly damaged condition. Eventually I prevailed on to take one thousand of the refugees, mostly women and children, to La Pallice, France. We left Gijon at 1 a.m. on September 10th, and about 10 p.m. the same day a Spanish ship with refugees aboard was captured just outside the harbour. So once again good



fortune was on my side, and I reached La Pallice on September 12th, without farther incident. The refugees were people of all classes, and the Government had provided barrels of water and food for them. They were unable to get below, but some of them were put into certain other compartments and cabins while the midship section, which had previously been hit, was now a clear space. In my own cabin there were women three deep. The lock on the door had been blown off, but I could not have kept them out if I had wanted to.

“The weather was very bad from Gijon to La Pallice, and most of them were seasick. At La Pallice they all expressed the deepest gratitude for being taken away, but they had no conception of the risks we had taken in doing so. After discharging the refugees, we made straight for Falmouth, arriving there last Friday, when we were detained for examination and repairs.”

Captain Greenhalgh pointed out that if the ship had been captured with the refugees aboard he considered they would only have been treated as prisoners of war.

“A good deal of my work in connection with the ship is carried out ashore,” continued Captain Greenhalgh. “While at Gijon I had to journey to the Government House nearly every day to discuss business with the authorities. If an air raid should take place while I was ashore I immediately made for the first floor of the heaviest house I could see. If you happened to be on the road between the Government House and the harbour, however, the car was stopped, and, in fact, every kind of vehicle and work was stopped; until the danger was over. People generally took cover under the hedges. On one occasion I was caught out on the road and had to take cover under a hedge. The aeroplanes sprayed the field with machine gun bullets and, although they dropped all around me, I was not hit.”

The tanker Stanbridge had a cargo of 9,500 tons. Eight thousand tons were half oil fuel and half gas oil, and there were numerous barrels of lubricating oil. Including the skipper, there was a crew of thirty-eight, and an observation officer of the Non-intervention Patrol Board.

Captain Greenhalgh, who is 44, has been living in Leigh for thirty years and was educated at Leigh Hall College. He served as a commissioned officer in the R.N. Reserves during the war and saw active service abroad for three years. He has been at sea for nearly

thirty years and a master for twelve years. He took over the Stanbridge on September 16th. Captain Greenhalgh said he was torpedoed on a hospital ship during the war and had many other exciting adventures but his most recent experiences were the most terrifying.



**Profound thanks from the Republic.**



**Consejo de Asturias y León**  
**CONSEJERIA DE MARINA CIVIL**  
**GIJON**

Gijón, 9 de Septiembre de 1937.

Sr. Capitan del vapor "STANBRIDGE". -Musel-

Teniendo en cuenta las circunstancias desfavorables en que se efectuó la descarga del buque de su mando y vistas la facilidades aportadas por Vd. y la tripulación de su buque, nos complacemos en hacerle presente nuestro profundo agradecimiento por el interés de mostrado por Vd. y dotación en todo momento.

Salud y Republica,  
El Consejero de la Marina Civil

## ... and the company

Dear Captain Greenhalgh,

I just want to write you personally to thank you very much indeed for the splendid way in which you have handled the difficult position this voyage, and to say how thankful we are to you for having been able to bring the vessel away back to the United Kingdom.

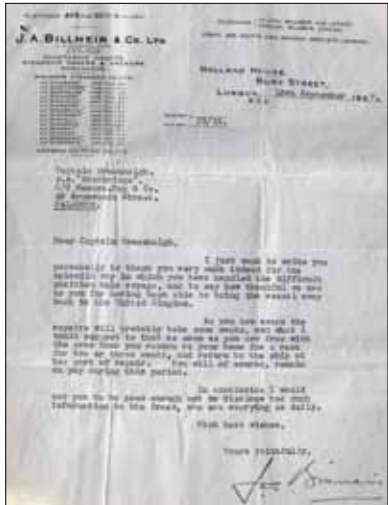
As you are aware the repairs will probably take some weeks, and what I would suggest is that as soon as you are free with the crew that you return to your home for a rest for two or three weeks, and return to the ship at her port of repair. You will of course, remain on pay during this period.

In conclusion I would ask you to be good enough not to disclose too much information to the Press, who are worrying us daily.

With best wishes

Your faithfully

J A Billmeir



## Billmeir Line History

J A Billmeir worked in a London shipbroking firm for many years. He sank his savings into four different shipowning ventures, but on each occasion the enterprise failed. Eventually he had a success with Stanhope S S Co Ltd, which he registered in 1934 and purchased two small coasters. Billmeir built up the fleet until by 1939, Stanhope had 20 vessels. A major reason for Billmeir's success was his willingness to risk his ships to supply Spain during the civil war and his good fortune not to suffer loss or damage to his ships engaged in this activity.

During the war 9 ships were built, 11 purchased and 19 lost through enemy action.

In 1952 Stanhope S S Co Ltd was placed in voluntary liquidation. As the company was solvent the winding up process was continued in a very leisurely fashion, with the company continuing to trade up to 1960.

Stanhope was sold to George Nott Industries Ltd. in 1964 – it is not clear if Billmeir was part of this sale. George Nott certainly owned Townshend Thorensen Ferries, which was taken over by P&O following the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster at Zeebrugge.

Info from: [http://www.benjidoog.co.uk/allen/index\\_files/Page1407.htm](http://www.benjidoog.co.uk/allen/index_files/Page1407.htm)

### **J. A. Billmeir / Stanhope Steamship Co.**

Jack Billmeir formed the Stanhope SS Co. in London in 1934. The company started with two small second hand coasters and rapidly expanded. In 1936 the company became heavily involved in carrying cargo to Republican ports during the Spanish Civil War and made huge profits from this enterprise. Ships were also involved in carrying refugees from Spain to France and Morocco. (see <http://www.mariners-1.co.uk/stanbrook.jpg> )

Billmeir was an astute businessman and many of his ships made just the one voyage, generally to Spain and were then sold at a profit. After the end of the war in Spain, Billmeirs' ships were banned from Spanish ports by the Nationalist Government but by the outbreak of WWII, the company owned 16 ships. The smaller ships were engaged in coastal trades and the larger ones mostly to the River Plate. More vessels were acquired during the war, but losses were heavy and 17 ships were sunk. Jack Billmeir died in 1963 and the company was sold.



*The Stanbridge was sold to the Germans in 1938 (to Europlische Tankreederei GMBH and renamed Eurofeld). On November 4, 1939 she was taken over as a unit of the Kriegsmarine and refuelled the Heavy Cruiser 'Admiral Scheer', which, ironically, was in service off Spain during the Civil War.*

### SS Stanbridge: history

From: <http://www.historicalrfa.org/rfa-beechleaf-under-two-flags>

**Builder:** Richardson Duck & Co Ltd, Stockton on Tees

**Yard No:** 649

**Official No:** 139200

**Launched:** 26th October 1916

**Length:** 380 feet

**Beam:** 50.9 feet

**Draught:** 32.4 feet

**Machinery:** Triple expansion engine by Blair and Co Ltd, Stockton on Tees

Acquired on completion in 1917 by the Admiralty as the tanker **RFA Olmos**, she was re-named **Beechleaf** and entered service as Oiler Transport No 154, based at Devonport. The ship was launched on the 26th October 1916 as the **Beechleaf**; in November 1917 the management of this tanker was transferred to Lane and McAndrew, London.

On the 9th February 1918 it was decided that all tankers under commercial management, were to be controlled by the Director of Transports and **Beechleaf** was transferred from the Shipping Controller to this new department.

On the 23rd May 1919 **Beechleaf** was off the Ambrose Light, in tow of the US Army Transport "West Haven", after suffering a catastrophic fire in her engine room, the ship had been on passage from Baton Rouge to Lough Swilly, Ireland with a cargo of fuel oil when the fire broke out.

The crippled ship was towed in to Port by US Army tugs, where the body of one of the firemen, aged 22 years, who was killed in the blaze was removed and the badly burned Third Engineer was removed to hospital.

In 1921 the ship was sold to Anglo Saxon Petroleum Co Ltd, and re-named **Limicana**.

She was sold in 1927 to Naptha Industrie Tankanlagen AG, and renamed again **CH N Katan**.

In 1937 she was sold to Stanhope Steam Ship Co Ltd and re-named **Stanbridge**.

In 1938 she was sold for the last time to Europliche Tankreederei GMBH and renamed **Eurofeld**.

On the 4th November 1939 the **Eurofeld** was taken over as a unit of the Kriegsmarine. With the start of World War 2 the German navy's Heavy Cruiser 'Admiral Scheer' was at Wilhelmshaven under going a major refit after service off Spain, during that country's Civil war. By 1940 the Kriegsmarine were planning more commercial raiders roving the seas sinking or capturing allied merchant vessels and the Admiral Scheer was to play an important part in this strategy. In addition Armed Merchant Raiders prepared for action. These Armed Merchant Raiders changed their names repeatedly to confuse Allied Intelligence. These ships numbers and names used from now on in this story are those they were using on the date they sailed.

On the 11th March 1940 Ship 16 (Atlantis) sailed and on the 7th April of that year Ship 36 (Orion) slipped her ropes and springs and sailed from Germany. They laid low and only revealed themselves in late April and early May in the North and South Atlantic, when they both captured prizes. In May and June, Ship 21 (Widder), Ship 33 (Pinguin), and Ship 10 (Thor) sailed from Germany on raiding cruises. Between them, these five ships claimed nearly 300,000 tons of shipping between June and September, and more importantly, caused the Royal Navy considerable strain as it took extensive countermeasures in every ocean.

On the 3rd September 1940 the **Eurofeld** sailed from Santa Cruz de Tenerife where she had been hiding. On the 16th September she refuelled at sea Ship 21 (Widder).

Admiral Scheer's refit, and post-refit working up period, lasted until September, when the ship was declared ready for service. She sailed to Norway, ready to start a raiding cruise, but whilst still in Norwegian waters her engines developed a minor problem, and the ship returned for repairs. Under the command of Kapitän Theodor Kranke, she finally departed Gotenhafen on the 23rd October 1940, to wage commerce war against the British Empire.

Like before, there were a number of supply ships in the Atlantic to re-supply Admiral Scheer, though thanks to the efforts of the Royal Navy not as many as previously. Scheer hugged the Norwegian coast and then cut across the Arctic, slipping through the Denmark Straits on October 31st without being detected by the British.

After attacking convoy HX. 87 and sinking six ships (including the Armed Merchant Cruiser HMS Jervis Bay), and damaging three, the Admiral Scheer headed South to her chosen hunting grounds along the shipping lanes between the Azores and West Indies, on the 12th November 1940, the Eurofeld rendezvoused with the Admiral Scheer and the German Naval Oiler Nordmark to refuel the naval vessels and undertake some repairs.

Further sinking's followed and on the 26th December 1940 the Scheer met up with the **Eurofeld** again at a rendezvous point codenamed 'Andalusien' located at 15 S 18 W, together with Ship 33 (Pinguin), and Ship 10(Thor) and all three ships were refuelled by the tanker.

**Eurofeld** was by this time running short of fuel, so on the 10th January 1941 she was replenished by the Nordmark. At roughly the same time she started to be used as a prison ship with the crews of the ships sunk by the raiders, who sent the prisoners over to her for accommodation and transportation back to Germany.

By February 1941 the **Eurofeld** was ordered home and set sail for St Nazaire, France where she arrived, without being detected by Allied Forces on the 2nd March.

The ship was scuttled off St Nazaire on the 11th September 1944, by German troops to avoid capture by Allied Forces. She was raised in 1950 and sold for breaking up.

Footnote: whilst in RFA Service this ship was known as Oiler Transport No 154, and her home port was Devonport, even though

she was under commercial management, which enabled her to trade across the Atlantic under the Red Ensign, getting around the American Neutrality Act.

The call sign for this ship, whilst in Admiralty Service was JNVT, her call sign whilst a member of the Kriegsmarine was DKAF.