

Jack Burgess' Long Journey by threecountiesaction

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People in story: Jack Burgess and John Willy Cameron

Location of story: Atlantic and the Mediterranean

Background to story: Civilian Force

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"At the start of the war I was an Engineering Apprentice — I was in a reserved occupation. I was over half way through my apprenticeship. I was talking to the chief designer John Willy Cameron and he suggested that I write to a company we supplied. I was currently working for Hayward Tyler and Co in Luton, an Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company; it was the shipping company for Shell. I wrote to them for a job as a marine engineer to get good experience. They were willing to accept me but I had to get permission from the national service officer at Luton town hall. I tackled him every lunchtime for weeks. I eventually wore him down and he was glad to see the back of me. I was 19 at the time in 1939 and I was working in a machine shop. My left lung collapsed spontaneously and I ended up in Luton hospital for six weeks or more. The doctor I saw said if you really want to go to sea then it's ok.

I joined the first ship of the Anglo-Saxon petroleum company in October 1942 and sailed towards America. It was a big convoy. When we arrived in New York, there were German U Boats silhouetted against the American shoreline. We had a US coastguard escort us down to Galena Park Oil Refinery, Houston, US. We left British cargo there, Oil was referred to as Benzine. They had a British Merchant Navy Club at Houston. I couldn't get ashore so I was sent a crate of goodies from the Americans at the Club. We sailed from there on our own through the Panama Canal to the Pacific — a single ship spent Christmas going around Cape Horn.

We went across the South Atlantic to Durban in South Africa, up the Mozambique Channel to Suez through the Canal to Alexandria. We arrived there on May 18th 1943. From there Haifa then back to Alexandria again. Then to Port Said. I was keeping watch on the main engine for four hours in every eight-hour watch. It was diesel.

My ship was called the Delphinula; it was one of the main ships of the Anglo-Saxon company. All ships were named after rare shells. Delphinula was a beautiful ship much better than a passenger liner; we had shells on the bed covers. We ran aground near Alexandria; the pilot came aboard and said we were on the beach. We were there for several days. It was very stormy; we used a salvage tug to pull it out. They pressurised the tanks to get us off the bottom. One morning at 6am the third mate said 'get on the fore deck the afternoon pump room had gone up'. One of the tugs had open fires and the vapour around the ship had caught fire. We lived mid deck and I could hear people screaming and dieing it was awful. I got out and looked out the whole lot was alight — it was pretty high. I got out on the fore deck eventually. I ran up there and jumped off my hair was alight and my ears were burning as the vapour had blown across that way. I was a fairly good swimmer and started going for it. All our crew were Chinese and the Salvage Captain pointed out a man who was drowning, so I went back and got him. Our ship was completely destroyed.

By now the tank lids — inch thick with wing nuts and swing bolts holding them tight — were blowing off, falling into the sea like playing cards. I towed the man to a minesweeper from Rasez tin naval base. We ended up in Windsor Hotel on the sea front in Alexandria. When top brass from Anglo-Saxon came out we had to move to the hotel Leroy in Ruestanboul. We went back to Alexandria after being fitted with a barrage balloon. We joined a fleet of ships in Alexandria preparing for the invasion of Sicily. I joined the motor vessel Crista. Crista was a happy ship; I enjoyed a fair bit of gin and iced water.

We arrived at Malta a few days after the invasion of Sicily; we anchored at 28,000

fathoms of water in the bay. Every evening all the ships in the bay travelled around the island Lampedusa in a convoy at night to avoid being bombed. A different ship would lead the convoy and we would return the next morning. Each night the Germans would bomb the empty anchor.

On 7 December 1943 in Bari in the Adriatic 200 ships were caught at night by bombers — we saw a German spotter plane making a recce of the ship at Midday. An American ship carrying TNT/ Ammo and mustard gas blew up apparently they had orders to scuttle ship. This caused a lot of casualties; there were over 500 casualties on the floor, lots of Chinese with puss and burns. I was still in bed and started shaking, I still see it blowing up.”

Recorded by Karl Mansfield