

Don Sutherland Survives a Moment in History

Don describes being torpedoed on the North Atlantic in 1942 while on his way home to foreign service leave. Coming home on FSL was glamour enough, but to be successfully torpedoed in the process...apart from Jim Gregory who was with him...can anyone top that?

“On August 27, I wrote to Commander Price in charge of Officer Appointments at the Canadian Naval Mission in London, requesting Foreign Service Leave upon eligibility in mid-September. By the end of August I was already organizing my Departure. Books were posted to Canada, woollens given away. It was arranged that I would bear greeting to the mayor of Dartmouth N.S. from the mayoress of Dartmouth, Devon. Departure was scheduled for mid-October, arrival in Toronto expected to be October 31. I advised my friend Bill Buyers in Toronto of these dates but to avoid giving anxiety to my parents, withheld this information from them. In mid-September I was appointed to HMCS Stadacona for Foreign Service Leave.

The College cadets were due back from their summer vacation on Monday 14 September. On the previous Friday, September 11, Dartmouth was the target of a daylight hit and run raid. Three Fock-Wolfe 190s roared in at sea level, under the protective radar screen. They bombed the shipyard across the Dart from the College. Noss Yard was building wooden minesweepers for clearing magnetic mines. Heavy damage and loss of life resulted. The aircraft then bombed the College from which mercifully, the cadets were absent. A wren was the sole naval casualty. The noise of the attack was deafening. After the initial shock I walked up the hill to the college through the clouds of dust that were beginning to settle. Going to the library, I found the clocks stopped at 11:21, the moment of the bomb burst. From the debris on the floor, I picked up a book. To my surprise, it was a book for which I had long searched, a volume of short stories by Walter de la Mare entitled The Lost Fish.

When James George, discovered that our homeward passage had been booked on the SS Queen Elizabeth, he said “this will never do. This would get me home two weeks before my wedding. I want that two weeks to be after my wedding”. He was engaged to Carol Parfitt, the marriage to take place in Toronto on November 7. His request that I should be his groomsman I had accepted. James arranged for the cancellation of our passage and, instead, we were booked on a passenger carrying freighter, the SS Winnipeg II, scheduled to sail from Liverpool on October 15 in a slow convoy for Halifax. This would get us to Canada at about the end of the month.

Having said goodbye to my Dartmouth friends I went up to London on October 9. We went up to Liverpool on October 14 and embarked in Winnipeg II. We were surprised to find evacuees, mostly elderly women but one mother with an infant of 10 months. We sailed the following day. We were travelling in civvies and had packed our uniforms with the exception of our greatcoats that might be needed upon arrival in Canada. James had put an oiled cloth envelope with all Carols letter to him in his. In mine that was a pusser’s dirk and a flask of brandy for emergency purposes. Into the sleeves we had poked our white rollneck sweaters.

The weather was reasonable, shipboard routine leisurely. We had brought our Dolmetsch Recorders with us and practised duets in our cabin. James was not drinking but this did not inhibit me from going to the bar each evening for a pink gin.

On a barstool was where I happened to be at six o’clock on Thursday, October 22 when the Winnipeg II got the hammer, as the seamen say. There was no doubt in my mind that in that moment of the day when dusk becomes dark we had been torpedoed aft. Realizing that it

would be folly to try to reach our cabin two decks below, I waited for what seemed an eternity for James to appear. I considered it possible that the ship might be struck by a second torpedo, twisting bulkheads and wedging doors shut. Secondly, in attempting to get to our cabin I would have been going against the traffic of passengers trying to get to the main deck. James appeared shortly with my greatcoat!

In an orderly fashion we proceeded to our designated lifeboat station. During our seven days at sea there had been enough lifeboat drills to familiarize all passengers with the procedure. When the Captain gave the order to abandon ship, our lifeboat was immediately lowered on its davits to main deck level but hanging outboard. As *Winnipeg II* rolled slowly in the North Atlantic swell, the lifeboat swung out and back. With each swing it left a yawning abyss with a view of the less than welcoming sea thirty feet below. Understandably the constantly swinging lifeboat terrified the old ladies. James and I deciding we would have to act, took up positions facing each other at deck's edge. Each of us, grasping a leg and an arm, we would lift a lady into the lifeboat as the gunwale of the lifeboat swung against the ship's deck. Quickly the lifeboat was filled with evacuees, several of the ship's seamen designated for the boat and ourselves. The order was given to lower away. When we reached the water it was apparent that the lifeboat was still secured to the ship by a long painter. James was in the bow, so I passed him my dirk and with it he cut us adrift. When the dirk was on its way back to me one of the seamen near me opened the knife and cut off the gold lace shoulder boards that identified me as a naval lieutenant. "If the U-boat surfaces" the seaman said, "and they see officers in the lifeboat they will machine gun us all". Having no experience to challenge this assertion, I made no response as I pocketed my dirk. The boat's oars were got out and we began to row away from the freighter.

Winnipeg II showed no signs of sinking yet. The convoy had by now disappeared in the dark distance. After a few hundred yards and what seemed a safe distance from the ship we belayed rowing and simply rode up and down the huge Atlantic swells. It was at this point that one of the elderly ladies raised the quaint and pathetic question "when will we go back for our luggage." Quaint because it was such an ingenuous query and pathetic because these people had abandoned all the material things they required for the new life in Canada. At the time we did not know that *Winnipeg II*, at the tail end of the convoy, had been designated (convoy) rescue ship.

Five hours elapsed before the convoy escort realized that the rescue ship had been torpedoed. An escorting corvette was detailed to search for survivors. Presently a corvette loomed out of the night's darkness and threw us a line. She had to keep way on as no ship dare stop and leave itself vulnerable in U-boat infested waters. Oars were stowed. The moment had come to get the survivors aboard the corvette. Understandably, the ladies were terrified because the lifeboat went up and down past the deck of *HMCS Morden* like an elevator trying to stop at the right floor. On the ups, the lifeboat was catching the protective grill over a porthole on the corvette's starboard quarter threatening to dump us all in the sea over the turning screws of the *Morden*.

James and I decided that we must literally heave the passengers aboard in the same way that we had hoisted them into the lifeboat six hours earlier. First to go was the six month baby wrapped in a blanket and tossed to the sailors aboard *Morden*. As soon as the lifeboat was emptied, James and I scrambled aboard and made our way to the foc'sle. There we relaxed and revived ourselves with another swig of brandy. Later, we went to the seamen's mess deck

where we spent the next three days. Whenever a seaman got out of his hammock to go on watch, one of us would climb in.

There was nowhere to go. *Morden* had a complement of sixty and there were 194 survivors from the *Winnipeg II*; ship's crew of 135; 59 passengers made up of 36 women, 9 men and 14 children including the six month old baby. One female passenger was 83. The old people and the children were put in the wardroom but not all survivors could be below decks. 66 were in the stokers mess, some were in the seamen's mess and the balance spent time in the lee of the funnel taking turns over the engine room grating for warmth. Fortunately, the food supply held out, mainly stew, but by the time the *Morden* docked in St John's, Newfoundland the food supply was down to the last 20 pounds.

Winnipeg II was torpedoed in position 600 miles west of Londonderry and 630 east of St John's and it took *Morden* two nights and three days to make port. There the scene was extraordinary as we came alongside the floodlit jetty. Red Cross ambulances and vehicles were lined up to take away the survivors. The rescue operation had been a great display of seamanship both by the Merchant Navy and the crew of the *Morden*. Her commanding officer was Lieutenant J.J. Hopkinson, RCNR, of Montreal and his Executive officer was Lieutenant G.W. Haslam, RCNVR of St Johns.

James and I were immediately taken in hand by our friend Pat Henry, RCNVR who had been with us at HMS Raleigh and was, at that time, attached to RCN Headquarters in St Johns. Accommodated at the St Johns hotel, we were provided with Red Cross ditty bags containing razor, toothbrush and comb.

The Port-aux-Basques - Sydney Ferry which would have taken us to the mainland had been torpedoed and sunk the previous week. Though impatient to get home, we had to endure a four day wait for seats on an Air Canada flight to Montreal via Fredericton. As we approached Montreal and circled to land, it was a great delight to see the beautiful, sparkling lights like jewelry in the sky. From Montreal, we came to Toronto by the night train on October 31, 1942.