

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH DAVID YOUNG

I started my sea career in 1940 at HMS Conway in Liverpool. I was ranked RNR - that was a two year course to get your qualification and then when you left there you had one year's sea-time.

During that time it was quite exciting – it started off with a whale factory ship going into the side of us and knocked all the life-boats off one side, and then, after that, in the Spring it was the Liverpool bombings – which were very heavy – and a landmine landed ahead of the ship. It was a wooden ship of the line – Nelson's ships of the line – and so we abandoned ship at 1 o'clock in the morning!

Nothing had happened to the ship, we abandoned ship for safety there were 220 boys. And 220 prospective seafarers was not a very good thing to be all killed in one go. And anyway we abandoned and everything was alright. We went back the next afternoon to collect our hammocks and everything and then there was a ship called the Tacoma City * sunk within swinging distance from us!

She went down with only one loss of life because she had turned off the generators and the de-gaussing gear had stopped operating, just for those few seconds – which would have been enough to have blown the ship up. From there, I came away, and luckily I was given my leaving certificate from the training ship – a bit early – because I had to go onto a ship.

Empire Hope sailed out of Avonmouth, but before we sailed my father, who lived in Gloucestershire, took me down there to the ship and we could see as we went on board (my father didn't come on board) the name of the cargo – which was bound for Malta. So anybody could see that, and we eventually sailed via Glasgow where we stayed for two days and we did some gunnery practise in the Irish Sea and then we set forth.

We went through the Straits of Gibraltar with Lord Haw Haw announcing exactly where we were all the time, and of course, my father having seen the ship then realised what the cargo was. Then first of all HMS Eagle, an aircraft carrier, was sunk on the 10th or 11th, then we were sunk on the 12th. What happened was we had one bomb, as far as I know, which went into Number 4 hatch, which started a terrific fire. At the same time, another bomb went into the port-side of the bridge and blew a hole in the side of the ship, way above the water-line. Nobody was killed, but it stopped all the generators etc and everything packed up. We couldn't steer and were just stopped in the water. The Captain, who I think got the DFC afterwards, decided to abandon ship because the liability of the crew being killed with the ship stopped, and the bombing continuing, meant that we couldn't get away other than by abandoning the ship.

Some crew jumped into the water, some went in life-boats. This particular bomb that I was talking about just now, blew the gun crew off the port-side of the ship and my colleague, another apprentice, came back from the centre of the wheel to see what damage the terrific bang and flash had made. He found no-one there, and they were actually all picked up alive some one and half hours later, 3 miles astern of the ship which was drifting on with the tide.

They immediately went straight back to Gibraltar. In the meantime we were picked up by HMS Penn, a destroyer, and went alongside the tanker Ohio, which looked as though she would sink very quickly – she had only a freeboard of about 6ft at that time and it got a lot less by the time we got to Malta. But we made fast to her, and there was another destroyer on the other side and a destroyer 'head' to steer her, no sorry it was on the stern, steering her, for she had no steering due to a bomb down the funnel and had lost some cargo which was heavy oil and kerosene which luckily the bomb didn't hit. The heavy oil was pretty safe. And they do say in the Service today that we have just had, that it was actually on the 15th which was the day of Santa Maria, and she was got in and discharged about 80% of the cargo which virtually saved Malta.

This particular convey had 15 ships altogether, of which 4 got in, and 9 or 10 ships were lost. And some ships had a great loss of life, but fortunately we had no loss of life. It was a miracle I am sure because we were carrying aviation spirit in cases and so there wasn't much hope for survival if a bomb had hit that lot. Our ship went up after we had abandoned ship. The Captain was quite right, because we didn't know anything about it, but there was nothing to put the fires out – no water – nothing! We had used all our fighting equipment – extinguisher cylinders, incendiary bombs – they had all been used. We had a small amount of water left but no pumps to pump it.

Half an hour after we had abandoned ship there was one almighty bang and the ship went up. In my opinion the Captain saved our lives by getting us off. We could do no more. We got into Malta and I stayed there for 5 or 6 days, and then went back to Gibraltar and stayed there for about 2 weeks and got a trooper back to Glasgow. The apprentice I was with said goodbye, and I didn't see him again for 60 years when we met in Malta in 2002 at a reunion for the merchant service and the Navy.

There were about 100 of us in Malta, at the courtesy of the Maltese Government, their Tourist Association.

After that I went back to sea and was mainly on Atlantic conveys, across the Pacific to Australia and New Zealand, where I joined a meat loading ship. We then went to Canada and loaded pork for the UK, and that's just about the end of it because we got back just before D-Day with a lot of pork on board which we had carried across the Atlantic at 40°F so it would be ready for going straight on the butchers shelves in the country. But when we got to Liverpool to discharge

the meat the city was ready for the invasion and we were told to freeze it down. This was impossible in those old fashioned ships and I think it must have frozen to the depth of 12” – 18” and the rest went soft and was completely destroyed! It had to be taken off by grabs out of the holds and put in lighters in the middle of Liverpool Bay to be dumped.

Then we went off all the way to New Zealand to repair the ship because we couldn't carry any more frozen cargo until we got the ship safe for that. We had rotted timbers. And we came back from New Zealand loaded with cargo and then the war sort of went on from there.

You were asking about the decorations I have received – well that was due to my service in the Atlantic, Pacific and Mediterranean and I ended up in the war on a Troop ship between Bombay (when a bomb was dropped) and that was the end of the war.

We then spent the next six months taking prisoners of war back to Australia, back to India and also troops into French-Indo China, Saigon. Then when the war was all over, I left the ship still carrying troops, then the next Spring I joined Tankers and did four years in Tankers.

So that was the war-time thing, and then after being with another Scottish Company – Ben Line Steamers, I went into the pilot service in Malaysia in Penang and spent the next 30 years there, partly piloting, and then went into free-lance pilotage around the China Sea and eventually came back to this country in 1989. Retired to Gloucestershire for a bit and then came down to Devon.

* Editorial Notes

SS Tacoma City was sunk on 13th March 1941 in the Formby Channel, Mersey, UK.



“Abandon Ship! 1941”

The following recollections were written by David Young's commanding officer at the time. Superintendent - Captain Goddard.

In March 1941 the enemy commenced to drop parachute magnetic mines into the Mersey our anxiety increased for one lost accurate positions of them due to the strong tides rolling them along the bottom, and one under ours, in spite of our strong hull would, if it exploded, quickly bring to an end our usefulness to the country, for it well appeared that Conway has no watertight bulkheads. Conway, with her immensely strong timbers, could stand quick near misses from bombs which exploded on contact with the water. She shuddered and quickly settled down again when a stick of three bombs fell close to the starboard side and another occasion, one on the port side. The explosives were quite near enough to have started rivets in a steel ship.

In March 1941, thirteen days after returning to our moorings, two parachute magnetic mines fell into the Mersey, one ahead of the “Tacoma City” which was anchored abreast of us, and the other floating down slowly, its progress retarded by the parachute, just missed the Conway's main trunk and fell into the water about 12 yards abreast of our starboard gangway. The plane which dropped the mines was flying over Rock Ferry towards South Liverpool. This was just after midnight and as there was a strong flood tide running I hoped that the parachute would keep the mine from making the bottom until it was well clear of our stern. I considered the cadets and staff should be got ashore as soon as possible for I realised that if the mine exploded where she dropped or anywhere from there to the stern, the ship would sink in a very few minutes. I therefore gave the order to “abandon ship” and the Instructor called the hands Heave O, Heave O, Heave O, a mine is under the ship and will explode in ten minutes, Heave O, Heave O, Heave O.

The cadets were excellent, and for once were really quiet. They dressed quickly and went to the stations. Within 20 minutes from the time of calling, just over 200 cadets and staff including my wife's Siamese Cat, which made more noise than anyone or everyone, were on the Rock Ferry Pontoon, from where they made their way to Conway House, Royal Rock Hotel and the Royal Mersey Yacht Club House where they were kindly entertained and housed. Number 1 Motor Boat and crew remained alongside the ship.

At about 1.30 pm the “Tacoma City” was changing over her dynamos, little realising that the mine which fell ahead of her had drifted down with the tide and had grounded under her bottom. Unfortunately, she stopped a dynamo before starting up another and so for a moment the degaussing current ceased, but sufficiently long enough for the magnetic mine to explode, sinking the ship in a few minutes but happily with small loss of life. I saw the explosion and sent No. 1 motorboat, with Lt. Brooke Smith in charge, too the scene of the disaster and was able to pick up forty-five members of the crew. The other mine which dropped by the Conway's starboard gangway had drifted approximately under our stern and had grounded about fifty feet under our stern and slightly to port. At daybreak, I had reported the position of the two mines to the Officer commanding mine sweeping flotilla, Liverpool, and was told that a minesweeper would be sent later in the day. At about 3 pm, my wife, against my order, had managed to get a passage off to the ship, and before sending her ashore I was giving her tea in the aft cabin when suddenly through the port after gun port, I saw a minesweeper lowering its wire sweep pass close by our stern from ahead. It was too late to get out of the quarters and so I told her that if she wished to see a mine explode she could see one now. At that moment it did and water from the explosion thoroughly washed down the stern walk. The old ship rose to the explosion and then settled down again with no damage done. I then recalled the cadets on board.

Arrangements were made with the headmaster of Mostyn House School Parkgate, to accommodate the cadets for a few days. We were most grateful to him for it caused him a lot of inconvenience. The cadets took their hammocks and kit and in charge of Command “Monty” Douglas stayed at Mostyn House for two days when it was decided to send the cadets home. Further discussions found that training could be better carried out in peaceful surroundings and so it was decided to send the ship to the Menai Straits where there was an anchorage off Bangor which would suit us.