



M.V. Stentor

Alfred Holt & Co. The Blue Funnel Line.
Built 1926. Caledon S.B.&E. Dundee. 6634 GT.

Painting by P.I. Walsh.

The loss of Stentor 27th. October 1942. By Capt Martin Spencer-Hogbin

Convoy SL125, the prefix SL denoting the point of assembly Sierra Leone (cf. HX for Halifax) left Freetown on October 16th. 1942 bound for Liverpool. The convoy consisted of 42 vessels including two Blue Funnel Line, Stentor and Ville de Rouen (B.F. managed), Stentor as Vice-Commodore leading column 9 (station 91) and Ville de Rouen station 83. The Commodore was P&O's Nagore, an ageing vessel with a maximum speed of 11.5 knots, reduced to 7 knots in heavy weather, considerably slower than many of the other vessels and arguably a doubtful choice as Commodore. The initial attack on the convoy by a pack of five U-boats, U-203, U-409, U-509, U-604 and U-659 was at about 1930 when the convoy was N.W. of the Canary Islands, escorted at that time by four corvettes HMS Petunia, Crocus, Cowslip and Woodruff.

It was dusk at the time and I was on the bridge, a comparatively raw Midshipman (as Alfred Holt & Co. opted to call their apprentices/cadets) and I recall the shock of observing the explosion when the Pacific Star on station 81 was torpedoed upon which Action Stations was immediately sounded and I went to my position in the chartroom where my duty was to assemble the secret code books in readiness to jettison them if and when necessary. Almost at once there was a huge explosion as a torpedo struck Stentor in No. 2 hold deep tank, loaded with palm oil, the force of which ignited the oil and engulfed the whole of the bridge with burning oil. Everyone on the exposed part of the bridge perished, including the Master, Captain Williams and the Vice-Commodore Captain Garstin R.I.N. Retd. It was purely a matter of chance that I escaped the same fate, being in the shelter of the chartroom.

Four of the lifeboats were lowered and the remainder of the passengers and crew had to jump for it; I have no recollection as to how I escaped from the bridge as the accommodation ladders would have been consumed by fire and my only clear memory is of the Stentor going down vertically, bow first after about seven minutes, or so it has been recorded. Woodruff arrived after about two hours and picked up some survivors which in itself was a risky

business considering the inadequacy of the escort protection of the convoy, but quickly left as her commander, Lt.Cdr. Gray reported a U-boat contact, but returned later to pick up the remaining survivors, a remarkable achievement considering the adverse conditions. Most of those rescued were suffering from the effects of the oil covering the surrounding sea and from a varying degree of burns, all of whom were taken care of by the crew of Woodruff in what were very confined conditions as there was an increase of 200 in their complement. I have an enduring memory of gentian violet to remind me of the care taken by the personnel of Woodruff.

I was one of a number transferred to H.M.S. Ramsay, Lt.Cdr. Stannard V.C. when she arrived to bolster the escort, and he directed me to take a watch on the bridge which in the circumstances was a wise and thoughtful decision to help keep the mind of a very young man as free as possible of the recent events. Considering the adverse circumstances, the speed at which Stentor sank, the swell pertaining at the time, the darkness, the fire and the oil in the water it was remarkable that so many lives were saved. Those that died were the Master, the Vice-Commodore, the Chief Engineer, the Surgeon (Dr. Chisholm, later awarded the Albert Medal for Bravery at Sea), the First, Third and Fourth Mates, 17 crew members, four nurses, three soldiers, and 16 passengers.

A lot has been written about the inadequacy of the escort provided for SL125, and it has been suggested that this was done deliberately to act as a bait for the U-boats in order to protect the troopships and other vessels involved in the North Africa landings occurring at the same time but obviously I am in no position to offer any comment on this. Altogether 13 vessels were lost with the accompanying vital cargo destined for the U.K.

I can still remember the strange sight we must have appeared as we came ashore in Liverpool, some of us going to be interviewed by Mr. Lawrence Holt, togged out in yellow survival suits. Then it was time to be fitted out with gear and textbooks and back to sea and that was typical of life in the Merchant Navy during the war.

On a lighter note. When I was a Supervisor with F.G. Strang, having sacked a wharfie for some heinous misdemeanour he said to me "You know what the trouble with you is, don't you" and I replied that I would be interested to know and he said "Your trouble is that you think you are inflammable". I suppose we all have to think that to survive on the waterfront.