

Last Voyage of MV TUVA

by O. E. Brown, Second Wireless Officer, MV TUVA

The torpedo struck at about 0400, Oct. 2, 1941. There was no mistaking that shuddering shock and crashing explosion. The sound of engines died, the light went out in the Radio room. The Chief Operator came out of his adjoining cabin to call the bridge, then he took over at the radio to send the "SSSS" report. My task was to dispose of the code books and then get the emergency radio to my assigned lifeboat. As I tied the weighted sack into which I had dropped the code books, the stern of the ship settled a little more, so that the pad and pencil on the desk slid to the back. The chief was already sending the message, in morse code, and did not even pause. Out on deck it was very dark, the weighted sack was tossed over the rail and I made my way up to the boat deck, got the radio out of its stowage, and carried it to the lifeboat where one of the Mates was already organizing the crew to free the boat from its lashings and prepare to lower.

The MV TUVA was three days out of Reykjavik bound for Florida in ballast, to pick up another load for England. She was a Dutch vessel, under charter to British Admiralty. Her Officers and crew were mainly Dutch, except for the Chief Sparks who was British, and myself, a Canadian not long out of radio school as Second Sparks. Some of the crews were English, but most were Dutch. The Dutch men were cut off from their homeland, with no news of their families, and some had already survived one or more torpedoing.

Back in the crews' quarters the damage was very heavy, as I learned later. The gun mount had collapsed into their quarters, stairways were gone, and doors jammed. The way out was through the ceiling and the two who climbed out first, stayed to help the others out. One they could not help as he was pinned under a bulkhead. They had to leave him.

Our lifeboat was filled and launched without problems, and the crew began rowing into the seas. Waves were quite high and the boat was pitching steeply. I began to wonder how long it would take for seasickness to catch up with me. Suddenly there were voices, the waves seemed lower and there was a ship beside us. In minutes we were climbing over the low railing with helping hands extended to us -- it was HMCS ST. CROIX, our escort. We were lucky this time, on board a rescue vessel with hardly even a splash of salt water on our shoes. The men from the other lifeboat and two rafts were also picked up. Only two men had any injuries.

In the darkness and confusion I was sent below with the crew, thankful to be warm and dry in a friendly bunk. I drifted off to sleep, but after a time awoke feeling definitely queasy. Climbed out of the bunk and headed for the deck, where fresh air and daylight greeted me. The First Mate of the TUVA was the first person I recognized, and he was surprised to see me. Apparently he had not noticed that I had gone below when we came aboard, and thought I had been lost. He directed me to the PO Mess where I was made welcome and the men were full of questions about our ship. They were particularly interested in the rescue light we had attached to our life vests. It was battery powered and the light came on when wet with salt water.

The PO Mess in the Forecastle of the Destroyer got a fairly rough ride, as it rode up on the waves and dropped into troughs, and took waves over the bow with tremendous noise effects. At times the motion was a corkscrew spiral. I was unable to overcome the queasiness during the four day run to St. Johns, Newfoundland, and spent a lot of time in an upper bunk. On one occasion I awakened on the deck, having been pitched out of the bunk. Someone had loaned me a heavy sheepskin coat as a covering, and when tossed out of the bunk I apparently rolled and landed on that coat.

Another feature of that mess deck that remains in my memory is the condensation everywhere, running down the bulkheads and dripping from the overhead. Those destroyers had no insulation so the temperature of the seawater controlled the temperature inside.

The Chief Radio Officer of TUVA, Harry Mellor, had heard a few characters of morse code when he finished sending his 'SSSS' message. He was convinced it could have been a submarine and he wanted to listen for more signals. He got permission to stand watch at the DF in the radio room of ST. CROIX, and he wanted me to spell him off. However, I was in no condition to do so because of seasickness, especially since he was in fact standing at the DF controls in the radio room of the pitching vessel. He did not hear any signals.

At St. Johns we were taken ashore to a hostel, which I can no longer identify, and we were given ditty bags by the Canadian Red Cross. The razor, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and hand-knitted wool socks, were most welcome and appreciated. I kept that kit for many years afterward. The next day, after refuelling, HMCS ST. CROIX took us down to Halifax, leaving the two injured men in hospital, and another voyage was over.

Footnote: In researching the available records of HMCS ST CROIX I note that the time of the torpedoing is recorded as about 0515. Our ship's time was set according to the Captain's wishes as we proceeded westward through the time zones. The records of HMCS EYEBRIGHT report the time of the incident as 0415.

By O.E. Brown
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