

A Wartime Voyage on the Abosso

Our parents, Tom and Gladys Mallinson, were married in June 1937 near Leeds in West Yorkshire. They started their married life in Bramhope, a village close to Leeds. Tom worked as a manager in a tannery in Leeds while Gladys ran a hairdressing business with her sister. Times were difficult with it being in the middle of the depression years, and Tom was always on the lookout for opportunities to improve their lot in life. Such an opportunity finally arose in 1939 when he was offered a position with the United Africa Company (UAC) in Nigeria as a hides and skins manager. He accepted on condition that Gladys could follow him to Nigeria within a matter of months.

Unfortunately, the war had started in September, but Tom was able to obtain a passage to Nigeria on the Leonean in March 1940. His letters to Gladys over the next fourteen months reflect both his yearning for her, his delight with his new job and the freedom it had brought him, and his worries about Gladys's welfare in England and the dangers of a sea voyage. With the Battle of the Atlantic increasing in intensity, Gladys's departure was delayed indefinitely when the UAC decided that passages for the wives of employees were not a priority.

Eventually, the company relented, and Gladys was able to book a passage on the M.V. Abosso, an Elder Dempster liner, leaving from Liverpool in May 1941.

The account that follows was written by Gladys after she arrived in Maiduguri, northern Nigeria.

Our research has determined that the Abosso was part of convoy WS-8B, a military convoy that consisted of the following ships:

- Abosso** (Elder Dempster Lines, passenger liner)
- Almanzora** (Royal Mail Steam Packet Company liner, serving as a troopship)
- Christiaan Huygens** (Netherland Line, operating under British control as a troopship)
- Duchess of Richmond** (Canadian Pacific Lines, serving as a troopship. She was later re-named *Empress of Canada*)
- Georgic** (White Star Line, serving as a troopship.)
- Martund** (general cargo ship, carrying munitions)
- Orduna** (Pacific Steam Navigation Company, serving as a troopship)

As such, the Abosso appears to be the odd one out, as she was apparently not being used for military purposes, but was serving various ports in West Africa.

Although the convoy was small, the number of troops being shipped in it would make its loss a serious blow to the war effort, so it was given a very strong escort. No fewer than fourteen Royal Navy ships escorted it at one time or another up to its arrival in Freetown. These were:

- Argus** - Aircraft Carrier (ocean escort, with the convoy up until Gibraltar)
- Exeter** - Cruiser (ocean escort)
- Cairo** - Cruiser (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Cossack** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Sikh** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Zulu** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Maori** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Piorun** - Polish Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Eridge** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Ottawa** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Restigouche** - Destroyer (local escort, Western Approaches)
- Boreas** - Destroyer (local escort near Freetown)
- Duncan** - Destroyer (local escort near Freetown)
- Highlander** - Destroyer (local escort near Freetown)

During the course of the voyage, HMS Hood was sunk, and the Admiralty ordered most of the naval escort to leave the convoy and search for the Bismarck. Two days later, the Bismarck was sunk. One of the detached destroyers, the Polish Piorun, actually fired on Bismarck after signalling "I am a Pole", but broke off the action owing to lack of fuel.

In her narrative, Gladys refers to the Exeter as having left the convoy as one of those ships that were detached to search for the Bismarck. She was mistaken in this, as the Exeter and the Argus were the only naval vessels left as escorts after the others detached.

The narrative that follows is in two parts, from separate accounts written 56 years apart. Gladys mislaid the original account, and rewrote it from memory in 1997 for the benefit of her grand-daughter. Fortunately, the first account was found in 2007, and it forms the larger part of what follows. In the second account, she included details about the time prior to departure, and we start with this.

David and Michael Mallinson, November 2008

The Preamble

When Tom took the UAC job in Nigeria in 1940, we thought nothing of going because, although life was happy enough when we were together all the time, we were, along with everybody else in the 1930's, very hard up. Tom earned £4 per week working for Paul's tannery who were known as a mean firm. I earned £1.25 plus commission helping my sister Kathleen build up a hairdressing business that we opened in 1928 when we were 17 and 19 respectively.

Round about Oct-Nov, 1939 UAC wrote offering Tom a job of buying hides and skins to be made into Army boots for the troops, in West Africa, with the promise that I could follow him in three months time. He had previously applied for and been offered the same job at £5 per week with house accommodation, car, servants, etc. and had accepted, only to be told that I could not go until he had been there six months. We had refused, so they lowered the time limit and pointed out that it had very good prospects and he had been chosen because of his knowledge of speaking a few languages and his leather qualifications which were a rare combination. So this time he accepted. Little did we know! Everybody thought the war would soon be over.

Tom sailed in the January of 1940 and we were relieved to learn by cable that he had arrived safely.

We found the separation pretty awful. Tom moved around different stations, Maidugari, Kano, Guidam, Funtua, Zaria, all in the Northern Provinces where the cattle were. He also bought snake skins which were exported for shoes and handbags. His main job was to buy leather for export to England to be made into Army boots.

The weeks were passing and no news of any ships sailing. Letters didn't arrive very frequently as ships were sunk and civilian airmail negligible. A year went past – no hope of going.

At last I had the offer of a passage, on the Accra, later withdrawn because she had been sunk by the Germans. Then a few weeks later another passage was offered on the Aida, but she was also sunk, torpedoed I think.

At last, my third offer came of a passage on the "Abosso" leaving Liverpool May 18, 1941, 8 months after the promised time. I accepted with alacrity, but by now the Battle of the Atlantic was in full swing so I only told the family – one didn't advertise the sailing of a convoy at that particular time.

Ready to go and all packed-up – very hush hush, the family gathered round to see me off. My dad, Percy Burton, and my sister Dora accompanied me to Liverpool to say goodbye there. What a shambles, there had been an air raid a few hours before we arrived. The overhead railway was crumpled up like a child's broken toy, great coping stones had fallen off ...broken glass, rubble...gas pipes were spurting all over the place as they dug for survivors.

We decided that our dad should get back home as soon as possible, but Dora insisted that she would stay the night and see me off properly, so our Dad reluctantly got on a train and we saw him safely away. Dora and I found accommodation in a nearby hotel of sorts, somewhere near the docks. We cuddled up together in the only bed they had, a double one, and so to sleep, but not for long – the wail of an air raid siren woke us up. We lay on the floor underneath the bed. Nothing happened but the “all clear” never materialized so we spent a restless night.

I remember next being in a long queue to board the Abosso. There were seven check-points and as I was standing in the second one, who should be next to me but Effie Colbeck. Curiously enough, Dennis (Tom’s youngest brother), had pointed her out to me the previous Sunday saying “That woman over there is a missionary going back to Africa”. At the moment of writing (January, 1997), we have known each other 56 years and it’s been a friendship that I have always valued. She took me under her wing.

Leaving Liverpool at twilight on 18 May, 1941 we joined a convoy (WS 8B) of 17 ships at Greenock and slowly sneaked out under a starlit sky.

(The narrative continues from the earlier version...)

Leeds to Maiduguri

It was a very pleasant day on May 18th, 1941. I boarded the ‘Abosso’ at Liverpool, my destination being Lagos, and from thence to Maiduguri in northern Nigeria.

I made a tour of inspection round the boat, and found my cabin comfortable-looking with my cabin mate for the next few weeks already there, a Mrs. Frost, a very pleasant and agreeable person. We chatted a little, or rather she did, for having lost my voice the day before, I could but listen, and then I went on deck to watch the luggage coming aboard. Yes, my three trunks had been slung over, and ‘slung over’ was an apt expression, for never have I seen luggage literally thrown about so much.

I thought sorrowfully of my tea set and coffee set, and various other oddments of china and glassware, and hoped they would still be whole when unpacked. Later, on arrival, I found much to my surprise that they were.

The luncheon gong went, and I made my way to the dining saloon with Effie Colbeck, a missionary from Roundhay, Leeds, whom I had casually had pointed out to me at Bramhope Church by Dennis, Tom’s brother. We had been told to look out for each other, but never dreamt that we should be travelling on the same boat. I had made myself known to her whilst waiting on the landing stage, and she had arranged for me to sit at their table.

I’m afraid I was a poor companion for the first three days being unable to speak, but made up for it afterwards, as we had lots in common and had many hours of fun together.

But I am digressing...

Towards evening, we moved up the Mersey waiting for the next day, and the convoy to assemble. We spent the night with mixed feelings. There were sirens wailing which some heard and some didn’t, but nothing developed, and there was no raid over Merseyside that night.

We hung about the next day, and in the afternoon ships started to appear until there were two large troopships, a munitions boat, two destroyers and ourselves, making six in all. We were all quite bucked to see that we were well escorted.

We sailed at 6:40 p.m. and three hours later at 9:45 p.m. two Jerries were flying around fairly close and we were peppering them. We didn’t realise they were hostile craft, and foolishly stood gazing up at them. But they were soon driven off, and as it was getting fairly dark we proceeded without further happenings.

The next morning we were disappointed to find that we were anchored in the Clyde, but the Scottish hills compensated in some measure by looking very beautiful in the early dawn, although an hour later the weather changed to a nasty drizzle and a slight fog. We stayed there all day and most of the next, feeling a little impatient to be off, until at 8:25 p.m. the anchor was raised, and with the engines humming we slowly made for the open sea.

Three more vessels had been added to our convoy, two cruisers, and an aircraft carrier, making nine in all. The men on the troopships whooped and shouted and waved as they passed us heading the convoy, and there were lots of misty eyes on board as we waved back. What were those boys going to? How many would return? It was indeed a touching sight to see them leaving old England's shores so cheerfully, and all anxious to do their bit, each in his own different way. How many homes were represented, and what misery parting had meant for them all?

Well we were off at last. What was in store for us? We soon knew. The boat rocked and rolled as the sea became rougher and rougher. One's insides felt like a jelly as she bumped and bounced along. There were 130 sick, and I remember nothing of that day except knowing I should be sick every time I got up, and actually being sick when doing so. Mrs. Frost came in and reported that we had been firing at another Jerry, but personally at that stage I wouldn't have worried if 2,000 Jerries had been overhead. Better to go under quickly!

The next morning the biggest excitement of the voyage came. Mrs. Frost had been walking the deck for daily exercise, and came down to do her hair for breakfast, when suddenly at 7:40 the klaxon horn gave two blasts. "What does that mean?" I asked, but before she could reply there was a terrific bump and a dull thud accompanied by gunfire, and the engines stopped.

Mrs. Frost pulled me out of bed and threw my coat round me, pushed my handbag under my arm, took my lifebelt and said "We've been hit; quick, follow me to the lifeboat station!" I had just time to jam my false teeth in (one might as well die looking respectable) and stagger along the passage and up the steps to the 'take cover' station. We all looked strangely green, and it being early morning many women appeared wearing curlers, hair nets, pins etc. One girl was in the bath when the bump came, and had only her dressing gown on. Another was making her face up and had only one eyebrow on, but bomb or no bomb, she stayed to finish her make-up before running.

We had been attacked by a solitary raider, who had come sneaking over the water extremely low, out of range of the other ships' guns, machine-gunned the bridge, lifeboats and deck, flown over, dropped his bombs, and machine-gunned the other side before making off quickly.

He had dropped a 250lb bomb on one of the engines, and another in the sea 20 yards away, and in that short time he had done damage to the extent of £1,000. Some of the lifeboats were damaged, and the deck was torn up in places. Near my deck chair there was a hole in the deck and loose bits of shrapnel lying on the floor. One engine had been damaged, but fortunately we had on board a party of Royal Engineers travelling as passengers, who worked like troopers and helped to repair it.

We had been ordered to leave the convoy and return to Liverpool, but the captain, whose first command of the 'Abosso' it was, was determined to proceed, and obtained permission to do so if the convoy was not held up more than two hours. We proceeded slowly wondering what was going to happen, and about an hour later our speed increased a little. Then faster and faster we went, and soon we caught up with the convoy and were well under way again, much to our relief. We had been a few days getting away and naturally nobody wanted to go back.

The captain came round beaming, and told us all that we hoped to keep pace with the convoy, and although we should have to put up with a few inconveniences they hoped to get us through all right. He was heartily cheered, and our inconveniences were few considering the difficulties under which the staff worked. Most of the potato supply had been damaged; also the flour had been flooded so things were cut down a little.

Everybody was shaken, and the next day not many people stayed in bed, sick or not, and few people took their clothes off for a number of days. It was very rough, and it would simply have been suicide to try launching lifeboats as they could never have braved those seas. It was said that the captain was so furious that he stood on the bridge shaking his fist at the retreating plane.

Fortunately there were no casualties, the only injury being the gunner who had a grazed cheek, but seeing that he had hit the plane, and it was unlikely that it would be able to reach home, he was given £25 which bucked him up considerably. But we wondered. Would that plane get home and give our position to 'U' boats? As the 'Battle of the Atlantic' was in full swing, it was not a very pleasant thought.

When the 'all clear' had sounded, we were shepherded into the lounge where breakfast was served. It consisted of heartily made sandwiches and coffee. What a noise! Everybody seemed to be talking at once. Some had been on deck and watched the machine coming, but thought it was one of our own from the aircraft carrier, and didn't run for it until the duh-duh-duh of machine-gun fire startled them.

We had carried lifebelts everywhere, but now we added a macintosh, a torch, a box of toffee or chocolate, and later in the voyage a sun helmet. We carried them everywhere, and later after our many excitements, if there was an unusual noise of any kind, everybody quickly picked up their bundles, ready for anything. One day a steward dropped a tray full of cutlery, and everybody grabbed their goods only to look very sheepish after realising what had happened.

All next day we rocked and rolled, first this way then the other, occasionally giving a mighty shudder when hitting a particularly big wave. Being Sunday, I made my way up to the lounge to attend the morning service, but it was cancelled owing to the motion of the boat, and so many of the passengers being sick including the parson, poor fellow. He was sick for many days.

We rocked, rolled and tossed our way into the next day, when to our dismay we read on the notice board that the 'Hood' had been sunk off Greenland. Our crack battleship. What had happened? Our news was scanty because the use of wireless is a forbidden thing in wartime, until out of certain danger areas.

Towards the evening the weather calmed down a little, and it became warmer, and the next day we were sailing smoothly along, but it was rather hazy. It must have thickened during the night because the next morning we learnt that one of the troopships in the convoy had developed engine trouble, and we had all merrily sailed along and left her behind. Consequently we had to turn back and had spent two hours looking for her. She lagged behind most of the next day, but after that seemed to keep pace with us without any trouble.

That evening two of our escort cruisers ('Cossack' and 'Exeter') left us, and the next morning the captain walked round with a beaming countenance announcing the fact that we had avenged the 'Hood' by sinking the 'Bismarck', Germany's crack battleship. There were loud bloodthirsty cheers. It was said that the cruiser which had left us, the 'Exeter', had helped to finish her off, but I don't know how true that was, and we never found out, but we couldn't have been very far from that terrific sea battle.

We remarked that this had been an eventful voyage, and we hoped that all our bits of fun were over, but they weren't, for the next morning about 11 a.m. the 'boat stations' signal was given. We had been zigzagging and going around in circles for a few minutes. Now we knew why. A submarine was trailing us. What a ghastly feeling. Everybody looked a bit scared as we stood ready for the boats.

The convoy had scattered, and we were moving in all directions, just like a swarm of ants with something in their midst. There was a considerable amount of noise as each boat blew her siren for altering course, added to which was the noise of the aeroplane which had left the aircraft carrier. We went round and round, leaving deep marks in the sea. Suddenly, there was a loud dull bang. A depth charge had been dropped. Gosh, how near was that submarine? But something had happened, because after about twenty minutes we saw that we were all collecting and making a straight course again. Then the 'all clear' was sounded, and we breathed more or less freely.

The next day was uneventful. We passed the time playing ping-pong and deck tennis, whilst others played deck golf and quoits. It was a lovely day with cool breezes. We all walked round the deck several times after dinner and then one by one made our way into the library, except one girl, a Mrs. Murby. A few minutes later she dashed in to say that there had been a fire on the upper deck, which was soon put out, but she hadn't been to tell us for fear of frightening us. Was it possible that anything else could happen on this voyage? But yes, events later proved that it was.

The next four days were really enjoyable with nice warm weather and nothing happened apart from routine except that the aircraft carrier left us making for the East. The sea had changed to a deep blue, and we watched flying fish and porpoise. Also a long strange fish that we christened 'the Loch Ness monster', as nobody seemed to know what it was. In the evening we watched a seaplane being catapulted off a destroyer, and hauled back by a crane. A ticklish job in rough weather one would imagine.

Whit Sunday had come around, so we spent a quiet day and went to the morning and evening services which we enjoyed.

There were many rumours flying round the boat as to which day we should reach Freetown, as we thought once in Freetown all our troubles would be over. But when we heard that 17 ships had been sunk round about Freetown we weren't too optimistic. Should we be the 18th? We sincerely hoped not. Providence had been very kind to us so far.

We reached Freetown in the early morning, and dawn was breaking as we cruised inland. What a pleasant land Africa looked. The green hills, the orange coloured sand, the palm trees were all so delightful to the eye. But alas we were not allowed to land so could not explore its hidden mysteries. Some passengers applied for permission to go ashore and succeeded in hiring a motor boat, only to be wet through when a deluge of rain suddenly descended, and then told again that they could not land.

But we bought some fruit, a thing we had been longing for. Small boys paddling their native craft round the sides of the boat sold us oranges, bananas, pineapple and coconuts. How we enjoyed them and what fun we had buying them.

We stayed in Freetown two days and each morning we had alarms as Vichy French reconnaissance planes circled overhead.

We took on board 26 Norwegian survivors from the 'Alfred Jones', a boat which had had four torpedoes through her. They were bright and cheerful considering the harassing time they had been through, and told wonderful stories of their experiences since the beginning of the war. Some of them had had wonderful escapes, and one told the story of being on a raft for days with two other men, one of whom had succumbed to his injuries and died, whilst the other had gone mad. There he was with a madman and a corpse, and the madman would not have the corpse thrown overboard, so it stayed there until they were rescued. Could one be in a more horrible position?

Another survivor had been torpedoed by a German submarine which had given them warning, and also hung about for two days and given them food. An unusual thing one must admit, but one which proves that all Germans are not wholly bad as we are made to believe.

We left Freetown about 6 p.m. We had been looking out for a boat which had left England two days before us, the 'Adda', but she hadn't then turned up. We learnt later that she had been sunk by enemy action.

We had left our troopships and destroyers and munitions ship behind, and were accompanied by two corvettes and one destroyer, a huge vessel equipped with lots of guns and very majestic in appearance. How we laughed when we inspected it through glasses. It was a fake, and only had two or three anti-aircraft guns and machine guns. The camouflage was very clever. What was she carrying? We didn't know and we didn't find out, and when she left us the next day, on the horizon she looked like a mighty battleship – to be feared.

We had now been at sea three weeks and were all impatient to reach Lagos. We had sent cables to friends and relatives at Freetown, making arrangements to be met, but, alas, they were useless. The blackboard was put up containing the news that although our original ports of call should have been Takoradi, Accra and Lagos, we were now being taken to Cape Coast and Port Harcourt. What consternation there was. What altered arrangements. I don't know what the Cape Coast people did about transport, but we were fortunate, the people going up-country, as arrangements had been made for two trains to run direct from the port, one to Lagos, and the other to Jos. How disgruntled the Lagos people were, as they had to travel hundreds of miles further than they had anticipated.

Travelling in Nigeria is no fun. One is drenched in perspiration, and covered with smuts and sand which stick, added to which the conveniences for washing are extremely inadequate, and the noise as the train bangs and clatters on its way makes sleep almost impossible, so that you arrive at your destination after a day or two feeling filthy and bad-tempered. But a bath and a square meal soon put you right. No, the Lagos people didn't like it at all.

But we hadn't finished our sea journey yet, life was still a bit risky. After we had survived the shock of the altered course, we sat in our deck chairs, sleepily surveying the sea. Life seemed very peaceful when suddenly the horn sounded. Submarine? Boat stations quick! We jumped to it, but it must have been a false alarm for the 'all clear' went about 15 minutes later.

Sunday came round again and there was a good attendance at the morning service. We lazed the day away eating, sleeping and talking when suddenly the ship's siren blew. What was it this time? The man asleep in his chair next to mine jumped as if he had been shot, giving me a terrific kick on the shins. We hurried to the deck side in time to see a small vessel gaily sailing right across our bows. She had numerous flags flying and her sides were painted orange and black. A corvette went up to challenge her and evidently she was a harmless craft, being a Portuguese boat of some kind. She was the only other strange boat we saw during the whole of the voyage.

That night our escort dropped behind and we could see land, so we must be somewhere near Cape Coast. We were. We sailed in early the next morning with one corvette which had turned up again at 8 a.m., and there wasn't a soul to be seen on the shore. We drew closer and closer sounding the siren to bring out the surf boats. We were obviously not expected. We had mails ready and the mammy chair used to swing the passengers overboard to the boats, but no boats came.

After we had waited about an hour, boats appeared, twenty of them quickly paddled by native boys, whose perfect physique looked well in the surroundings. Their brown bodies glistened in the sunlight, and they kept diving in the water just for the sheer fun of it. They were very childlike and kept begging cigarettes from the passengers. At last all the passengers and their luggage had gone ashore, and we swung round about 12:30 making for the open sea again.

We passed another pleasant day and in the evening I had some sandwiches and drinks brought to my cabin where five of us celebrated my fourth wedding anniversary. I had hoped to arrive in time to spend it with Tom, but it was not to be.

The next day we hoped to reach Port Harcourt, but we arrived at the 'bar' just half an hour too late having missed the tide, which delayed us for 12 hours.

But we had landed safely, and there were numerous parties on board. We had a prayer meeting in one of the cabins, and then we had a real beano. What fun we had! The strain of the past few weeks was over and we could at last breathe freely again.

The next morning the pilot came on board at 7:45 a.m. and we sailed very slowly up the river, which is extremely narrow, and at times the boat seemed almost to touch the river banks. One wondered that a boat of that size could negotiate such a narrow strip of water, but thanks to those concerned we did, and anchored at 9:30.

It was evidently quite a surprise for the people of Port Harcourt to see a boat the size of the 'Abosso' in dock, because they turned out in hundreds to gaze at her, and the officials were so confused that it took until 4:30 to see us all through the customs.

We were told that the trains would run at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. respectively, and that we must all have left the 'Abosso' by 10 p.m. but the first train left at 10 p.m. and we were still there at midnight. However we eventually left after much shunting and removal of luggage, and I arrived in Jos where Tom met me, and at last our months of separation were over.

We left Jos together in a kit-car and made our way along the 367 miles to Maiduguri our future home, on June 15th 1941, in thankfulness and contentment.

And so ended my journey of 5,000 miles under wartime conditions.

