

LOST AT SEA

*An abridged account of the sinking of
The S.S. Fort Buckingham
January 1944*

by
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When these events took place, in January 1944, I was a Deck Officer Apprentice aboard the *umber* of columnin ballast, bound from Bombay to Buenos Aires with a stop at Durban for bunkers.

The German submarine U-188 was commanded by captain Ludden.

On the 20th. January he observed the Fort Buckingham at a distance of 2,500 metres and fired a spread of three torpedoes. They all missed. As the Fort Buckingham was now veering away Ludden thought he had missed his opportunity as the U-boat could not maintain superior speed. Not knowing anything about this, the captain of the Fort Buckingham made a drastic change of course- done routinely to shake off any shadowing U-Boats. But this manoeuvre actually brought the Fort Buckingham into a suitable position for the U-boat-and she fired another two torpedos , which both hit on the port side.

The Fort Buckingham went down in five minutes.

The Neglected Buns

My cabin was on the boat deck on the port side. I had made and drunk a cup of tea, but did not bother to eat the rock buns by the side; I was to regret this later. Fast asleep in my bunk, I was shaken awake by an explosion. As the noise abated I heard the rush of water filling up number 4 hold, where I had been working. All lights went out and I fumbled for my torch. Putting on battle dress, shoes and life jacket, I made my way on deck.

On my arrival I met 3rd. Engineer Coverdale. We cleared the lifeboat ready for lowering. The 3rd. Mate –Willoughby- was shouting from the bridge, in an attempt to prevent lifeboats being lowered until our Captain had decided on the best course of action. Coverdale and I went back to our cabins to recover items: he was never seen again. People began to collect on the boat deck.

On my return I found the Lascar seamen had filled the lifeboat, causing it to tilt. The davit guy rope had become jammed under the rudder pintle. It had to be cut free and as I had a knife I set off for the main deck to do this. I found the main deck already under water; the ship was sinking rapidly. Taffy Jones – a cool headed gunner- and I ran towards the bows to let down a raft. On the way the bows began to rise; when we reached the bridge the deck was so steep we could not go on.

We jumped into the water as the Fort Buckingham slipped beneath the waves. She went down vertically, with tremendous rending noises. We hit the surface just in time to see the bow, with its 12-pounder gun disappearing. It was all over in minutes.

Did my life flash before me? No- I remember being surprised how warm the water was! Although I was swimming 500 miles from land, at night with no lifeboat, I had not been sucked down by the ship, had survived the explosion and I had Taffy beside me- he seemed to know just what to do all the time. In truth I felt slightly euphoric.

We saw a light from a raft some way off, and swam for it with the aid of a floating door. I even picked up a food container; you don't find too many of these while swimming in the Pacific Ocean...

We climbed onto the raft together and were joined by two of the Lascars. We extinguished the light incase the sub surfaced and tried to shoot us. During the night other seamen

, and lights were spotted. At first light we counted five rafts containing 51 survivors. There were 11 on my raft; only one officer had survived.

A Glorious Day

Gradually the sun rose; the sea was blue and coloured fish surrounded us. It was a beautiful day-but there was no sign of a rescue aircraft. Two rafts drifted away and we lost sight of them. We tied the remaining three together, and tried to construct a mast for visibility.

We quickly became thirsty-hunger pains developed later. A look-out rota was devised, but tempers began to rise. The wind got up to force 3; during the night we had to cut the connections between the rafts for safety. At night it was cold and we had to huddle together.

Daybreak: still no sign of rescue. After 24 hours of fasting, hunger pangs commenced. A small empty tin was used to measure water rations: one tin at dawn, another at dusk.

Sharks appeared from time to time. We kept perfectly still and avoided dangling feet in the water! Taffy dropped a line and hook in the water without success.

The days that followed were of desolation and deprivation. The monsoon was blowing continuously, and the sea regularly washed over our raft. We collected some rainwater in the sail, but it was barely enough to wash out the salt deposited there. Things were getting desperate, and we had no charts, compass or sextant. Also we were not due in Durban for a fortnight, it seemed likely we would be missed - too late. At times I felt I was hallucinating; although the dreams were quite pleasant.

On the evening of the 11th. day, we sighted a puff of smoke on the horizon. We set off several rockets, to no avail – or so it seemed. In fact the smoke was from the SS Kongsdal. She had found one of the two rafts which had separated on that first day. The Kongsdal carried on, but sent a message to the East India Command.

Tragic Rescue Attempt

Three Catalina aircraft were immediately despatched from Koggola to begin a search. These were from the British 205 and Canadian 413 squadrons. Sadly one of the Catalinas, on taking off, plunged into the sea and her depth charges detonated, killing the entire crew.

Meanwhile, we were ignorant of all this. We had caught a shark, managed to light a fire on the raft, and had our first real food in days. Despite this, the next day found us all weak and listless. Then came the sound of aero engines; but had they seen us? The had. The Catalina (W8406 – I'll never forget) flew past low. I clearly saw a crew member in the port "blister". However, because of the swell the craft couldn't land. But she dropped a Thornaby Bag an arms length from the raft. It contained bottles of water, a Very pistol, cigarettes, chocolates, biscuits and barley sugar. It was practically party time!

The next day another Catalina arrived and dropped another bag; but this one fell wide and we didn't feel like swimming for it. The following day our renewed spirits started to sour. It was two days since we had been spotted, yet we seemed no nearer to being rescued.

We didn't know that the Norwegian MV Ora was on her way. It arrived on the 16th. day and we were taken aboard – then it was on to Bombay. We were in a state – five of the Lascars did not survive the journey to Bombay. The final count of survivors from the Fort Buckingham was 46.