

LOST AT SEA, 1941 – THE SEAFORTH

During the Second World War, 2,426 British merchant ships were sunk and 29,180 seamen killed.¹ This represents 1 in 6 of the 185,000 merchant seamen who served.² With losses on this scale it is perhaps not surprising that in June 1941 the Government decided to stop the publication of monthly shipping losses.³ But lack of reporting has meant that the ships and seamen have been in danger of being not only lost at sea, but lost from history.

In February 1941 alone, 68 British merchant ships were lost by enemy action, and many seamen with them.⁴ This is the story of one seaman and one ship, both lost at sea in 1941.

Arthur Albert Cole (1922-1941)

Arthur Albert Cole was born in Lambeth on 23rd May 1922, son of Albert Edward Cole (known as Joe) and Bertha Cole, née Geldard. Arthur's mother died when he was 3 years old, and his father died when he was 12. Arthur was then sent to Heswall Nautical Training School (HNTS).

In a letter to his younger sister from HNTS, dated 15th July 1940, Arthur writes:

“The boys in the school are being issued with rifles soon, to use against any parachutists or 5th columnists who care to visit Heswall.

When I went to Liverpool last week to get my job, I saw several French ships with our soldiers in control, and Liverpool is packed with French sailors.

All the roads up this way have been barricaded, and machine guns put in the middle of the roads.”

In the same letter, Arthur describes what his first job at sea was to be:

“Well, I am going to sea on Monday or Tuesday on the ‘Empress of Britain’. We may go to Canada or Australia. I am not sure. But I will only be away for two months at the most. Then I will come home for a day or two.”

The Empress of Britain was an ocean liner owned by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company. On the 26th October 1940, the ship was travelling along the west coast of Ireland, with 416 crew, 2 gunners, and 205 passengers on board, when it was hit by 2 bombs from a German Focke-Wulf C 200 Condor long-range bomber. The ship caught fire and most of those on board were evacuated and picked up by other ships. An attempt was made to tow the ship to shore, but on 28th October, it was hit by 2 torpedoes from the German submarine U-32, and sank.⁵ 25 crew members and 20 passengers died.⁶

Fortunately for Arthur, he was not on the Empress of Britain, as he explains in a later letter:

“Well I wasn’t on the ‘Empress of Britain’ fortunately, but three of my friends were. I was transferred to my present ship at the last minute. As to you not being able to find out if I was killed (which is very unlikely), we have to leave the name and address of our nearest relative when we sail.”

Arthur’s ‘present ship’ was the Duchess of Richmond, which was also an ocean liner operated by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company. In a letter in which Arthur gives his address as Deck Department, RMS Duchess of Richmond, c/o C.P.R. Dock, Gladstone Dock, Liverpool, he writes:

“Just a few hurried lines to say I have arrived in Liverpool, but only for a few days...

I am sorry I can’t come to London as promised, but the law is that we mustn’t leave the port we dock in.”

The Duchess of Richmond was Arthur’s first ship and he was employed as a ‘deck boy’. He was described as being 5’1” tall, with brown hair and brown eyes.⁷ Arthur served on this ship between 24th July 1940 and 24th November 1940. Both his ability and conduct were recorded as ‘very good’.⁸ The Duchess of Richmond survived the war, and in 1947 was renamed the ‘Empress of Canada’.⁹

Arthur was not so lucky. His second ship was the Seaforth, which he joined on the 10th December 1940 as an ‘Ordinary Seaman’.

The Seaforth (1939-1941)

The Seaforth was a new ship, built in 1939 by Caledon Shipbuilding & Engineering Company Ltd, and owned by Elder Dempster Lines.¹⁰ Elder Dempster Lines was based in Liverpool and served West Africa.

On November 27th 1940, the Seaforth arrived in Liverpool from Lagos, and on December 12th, it commenced its next journey to Lagos. En route it stopped at Glasgow, Freetown, Takoradi, Cape Coast, Winniba, and Accra, arriving in Lagos on 11th January 1941. Additional crew members were signed on there on 13th January, including one who was dismissed on 25th January, while still in Lagos.¹¹ In this case, it seems that bad conduct was rewarded.

On February 18th 1941, the Seaforth was returning to Liverpool from Monrovia, Liberia with a cargo of West African produce. On board were 47 crew, 2 gunners and 10 passengers.¹² The ship was travelling alone and was attacked by a German U-boat (U-103), south of Iceland. The U-boat fired 3 torpedoes, 2 of which hit the Seaforth, and it sank. The commander of U-103 reported seeing lifeboats being launched after the first hit, but no-one was saved.¹³

The loss of the Seaforth was not reported in British newspapers, and official documentation referred to it as ‘missing’ for some months. It was not until September 23rd 1941 that the Registrar General asked for the records to be amended:

“This vessel is reported by Shipping Intelligence Branch as ‘Torpedoed, 18.2.41. Presumed sunk’. It is requested, therefore, that the wording at (3) respecting Termination of Voyage (page 1 of List C & D) be amended to this effect. The words ‘Vessel missing’ should be deleted from column 12.”¹⁴

The full title of ‘List C & D’, referred to in this letter, is ‘List of the Crew and other Particulars of a Foreign Going or Home Trade Ship’. When the Seaforth sank, it took its papers with it, and officials at home were left to compile the required list of those who had been on board. Archived letters requesting information about those on board show that this was not an easy task.¹⁵

Other information given on ‘List C & D’ for the crew includes the ‘Balance of Wages due on Discharge’ and ‘Report of Character’ (ability and conduct). In Arthur Cole’s case, this was £22-3s-1d, and “very good”.¹⁶

Merchant seamen from the Seaforth are commemorated at the Tower Hill Memorial, which commemorates men and women of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets of both world wars who have no known grave. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission ‘certificate’ for Arthur Cole reads:

In Memory of
Ordinary Seaman ARTHUR ALBERT COLE

M.V. Seaforth (Liverpool), Merchant Navy
Who died age 18
On 18 February 1941

Remembered with honour
TOWER HILL MEMORIAL

Commemorated in perpetuity by
The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The names, ages and occupations of all the people who were aboard the Seaforth when it was sunk are given below.¹⁷ The two men from the Royal Navy, who were both on the crew list of the Seaforth, are commemorated at Portsmouth and Plymouth Naval Memorials.¹⁸ As well as the crew, there were also passengers on board, including a clergyman, missionary, science teacher, and engineers. There were no survivors.

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IN MEMORY OF THE PEOPLE WHO DIED ON THE SEAFORTH, 18 -2-1941

NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	NOTES
MERCHANT SEAMEN			
ARNOTT Henry William	40	Electrician	
BELLO Raiymi	23	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos
BISHOP Henry George	44	Radio Officer	
BOYD Charles	49	A.B.	
BRADY John Francis	39	Assistant Steward	
BROOMFIELD George Francis	41	A.B.	
BURKE John	19	O.S. Sailor	
CLOTWORTHY W	20	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos
COLE Arthur Albert	18	O.S.	
CONSITT John Alfred	23	3 rd Officer	
CONWE M. E.		Stewards Boy	Signed Lagos. Mark EGWANWE?
COTTIER Douglas Christie	19	Apprentice	
DEVENNEY William	41	Chief Steward	
DILLON Henry	24	Sailor	
FULLER Delaport	50	Bosun	
GRAHAM Charles	40	Carpenter	
HEPWORTH Robert Arnold	21	Radio Officer	Ronald?
HICKS Thomas	18	Deck Boy	
HOLT William John	28	2 nd Officer	
HOPKINS John Boyd	58	Chief Engineer	
HUGHES Thomas	48	Purser	
ISAACS K	28	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos
JOHNSTON William	43	Ships Cook	
JONES Richard George Kenneth	17	Apprentice	
KELLY Eric Francis	31	2 nd Steward	
LAMB Stuart McLaren	25	4 th Engineer	
LANGSHAW Frederick	20	Sailor	
MAWER Edward Algernon	60	Chief Officer	
McKEEVER Patrick	19	Assistant Cook	
MINNS Walter	52	Master	
MORRISON Arthur Ernest	30	A.B.	
OKARO Thomas	22	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos
OKECHUKU Nelson	24	Stewards Boy	Signed Lagos
OMATAYO John	23	Stewards Boy	Signed Lagos
PAPAFIO A. B.	20	Stewards Boy	Signed Lagos
PATTERSON William Henry	39	2 nd Engineer	
POTTS Jonathan	17	Apprentice	
PURCELL Patrick	19	Radio Officer	
ROLLINSON Clifford	20	5 th Engineer	

RUSHTON Gordon Leslie	26	3 rd Engineer	
SMITH Donald Kay	18	Apprentice	
SMITH Leslie	19	O.S.	
SMITH S	22	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos
WESTON Albert	24	Sailor	
WHYTE Randolph	15	Deck Boy	
WOGU Edward O	23	Stewards Boy	Signed Lagos
ZONKEY H. A.	23	Assistant Cleaner	Signed Lagos. YANKEY?
ROYAL NAVY			
JENKINS George	30	Deck Hand	Gunner?
WILLIAMS Stanley	21	Deck Hand (Gunner)	
PASSENGERS			
GREIG Elizabeth Pettigrew P	37	Housewife	
GREIG George	37	Clergyman	
McKENDRICK Mary Ann	27	Housewife	
McKENDRICK Philip R	33	Teacher of Science	
PYKE Ernest George	44	Captain, Mining Engineer	
REID Margaret Underwood Baillie	55	Missionary (Scottish Mission)	
ROBERTS George Watkin	36	Agent of United Africa Co.	
ROBERTS Lilian	37	Housewife	
TRUDGEN John	48	Mechanical Engineer	
*			

* There were said to be 10 passengers. The explanation may be that Thomas HUGHES appears on one passenger list with a note alongside saying that he “signed on as Purser”.

¹ Edwards, Bernard, *The Quiet Heroes. British Merchant Seamen at War*. 2003, p172

² Elphick, Peter, *Life Line: The Merchant Navy at War, 1939-45*, 1999, p12

³ The Times, June 19, 1942, p5

⁴ The Times, May 14, 1941, p5

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Britain_\(1931\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Britain_(1931))

⁶ <http://www.uboat.net/allies/merchants/643.html>

⁷ C.R.1 for Arthur Albert Cole, R196704, National Archives, BT 349, fiche 552

⁸ Continuous Certificate of Discharge for Arthur Albert Cole, No. R196704

⁹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Canada_\(1929\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Canada_(1929))

¹⁰ Pocock, Michael W, http://www.maritimequest.com/daily_event_archive/2008/02_feb/18_seaforth.htm

¹¹ Registry of Shipping and Seamen: War of 1939-1945; Coast Trade Official Log Books and Crew Agreements; Ship number 166259, National Archives, BT 381/1656

¹² Lloyd's War Losses, The Second World War, p190

¹³ Pocock, Michael W, op cit

¹⁴ National Archives, BT 381/1656, op cit

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Compiled from information contained in BT 381/1656, op cit, primarily 'List C & D'.

¹⁸ They were also listed as being attached to HMS President, which was common practice for Royal Navy personnel acting as gunners for merchant ships. See Elphick, Peter, 1999, op cit, p15