

UPON THEIR LAWFUL OCCASIONS

Reflections of a Merchant Navy Officer
During War and Peace

Vernon G.A Upton

THE WAR AT SEA : FILLEIGH

Convoy OB227

Our convoy OB227 had not been attacked, and dispersed early on 15 October, after crossing 15 degrees west longitude. During the middle watch, I was awaked with orders to join the master on the bridge. The First Mate was also given the same orders, and we both arrived on the bridge at the same time. The ship was at dead slow speed in a fresh wind, with rough sea and frequent sleet and snow squalls. It was bitterly cold.

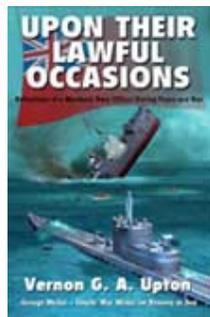
The Master and second Mate were on the port weather side of the bridge. In that period of the war, the cabins were not equipped with red night acclimatisation lights, so for the first few minutes, neither the First Mate or I had acclimatised our sight to the darkness. The Master handed me his Bulldog night binoculars, with the words, "What do you make of that on the port beam, Mr. Upton ?"

He repeated the question to the First Mate, who had been given binoculars by the Second Mate. "It appears to be a ship in distress, sir." We could see a ship on the port beam, apparently stopped, and well down by the head. There were several flickering lights close to the ship. "What do you make of the lights?" We both answered that they appeared, either to be lights on lifeboats, or on the lifejackets of survivors in the water; probably the former. The response from the Master was astonishing, "I believe that they are two U-Boats signalling to each other. They have not seen us. Mr. Day agrees with me." The First Mate replied "For Christ's sake sir, if we can see the buggers, how in hell can they not see us? They are survivors, and we must rescue them."

The reaction of the master was even more incredible. He persisted with his interpretation of what he had seen, which was corroborated by the Second Mate. He ordered full steam ahead, and we left the ship and resumed our passage; despite the vehement protestations of two officers, the First Mate and myself. I will never forget the event. With the statistics and records now available, it seems clear that the ship could have been Trevisa, recorded to have been a straggler from convoy SC7. Georg Wilhelm Schulz, commander of U-124, reported having attacked Trevisa on 16 October 1940 at 0350 hours, their time. This would have been an hour earlier than G.M.T. The position given was 57-28 N. latitude, 20-30 west longitude. Trevisa carried a cargo of lumber, so it is likely that she did not sink immediately, which would account for the fact that she was afloat when we encountered her.

It is on record that the casualties on Trevisa were 7 men killed out of a crew of 21. The survivors were rescued by the corvette H.M.S. Bluebell, and landed AT Gourrock. The only reason that can be advanced for the attitudes of the Master and Second Mate, was that they must have been unnerved by the sinking of Tregenna on the previous Atlantic passage. The fact that our ship was on dead slow speed, and as vulnerable as if we were stopped, made the whole event almost more unbelievable. We had to live with, and conform to the orders of our Master, but could not forget or forgive the incident.

We developed a fatalistic attitude. It was all so impersonal, if it was happening to someone else. There would be a blinding flash, the roar of the explosion, and always the impenetrable darkness. "Some poor bastards have had the hammer over in the port windy corner. Thank Christ it was not us!" The darkness was like a guardian angel, protecting us from the horrific tragedies that were occurring so close, but a world away. It was only occasionally that ships in convoy were sunk in daylight. That is why the sinking of the Tregenna had such a profound effect on the officers and crew of Filleigh. Survivors from sunken ships could never forget such events. The screams of drowning or burning shipmates: the scramble to escape from cabins: to man lifesaving craft in a chaos of flames and escaping steam: and all in the dark. It was sheer hell: yet, throughout all this, there were few instances of panic due to cowardice. Nevertheless, the strain was almost unbearable: and men kept a brave face because they did not want to betray their fear to their shipmates.



“The restless oceans are their shrouds, and their final resting places known only to the god they worshipped”.
Vernon G.A. Upton. May 2004.

In return for the permission to use the words and extracts of Mr Vernon G.A.Upton as part of our tribute, we recommend anyone interested, to read his book” UPON THEIR LAWFUL OCCASSIONS” The author has crossed the bar however, donates any surplus over production costs to charitable causes.

We thank his family, friends and publishers and believe that Mr. Upton would be pleased that we refer to and feature some of his work. We join him in remembering with gratitude the sacrifice of those seamen of the Merchant Navy and our comrades in the Regular and Reserve Naval forces, and the seamen of other nationalities, the airmen of Coastal Command, the gunners of the Royal Maritime Artillery and Naval D.E.M.S personnel, and all others who died during the long and unremitting Battle of the Atlantic, and other theatres of war.

Vernon G. A. Upton
George Medal, Lloyds’ War Medal for Bravery at Sea
“Has crossed the Bar”

We Remember Him,
We Remember Them.
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