

UPON THEIR LAWFUL OCCASIONS

Reflections of a Merchant Navy Officer
During War and Peace

Vernon G.A Upton

THE WAR AT SEA : FILLEIGH

I joined Filleigh on 9 October 1940 as Third Mate, immediately after paying off Istok the previous day. Although I had vowed not to serve in Tatem ships again, the Merchant Navy Officers Reserve Pool gave officers little choice generally, and in cases of emergency, they gave an option. It was a change to board a well-found and well equipped ship again after Istok, which had suffered from years of neglect under the Yugoslav flag. It was a case of packing my kit and moving across the Swansea Docks.

Joining Filleigh was like coming home. She was so similar to Appledore in accommodation layout and build. A fine ship with handsome lines, Filleigh was the smallest ship in the fleet, 4,856 gross registered tons: 395feet 6inches long: 55feet 4 inches beam: 25 feet 9inches loaded draught: and 9,100 deadweight tons. Her designed speed was 9.75 knots. She was known to be a faster ship than most of the others, Her shorter length and broad beam gave her exceptionally good sea keeping qualities.

Her Master, Captain A. Harp, had served in her for many years. The Second Mate, Ivor Day, was a long-serving officer. Both had served all their life at sea in ships of the Tatem fleet. The Third and First Mates had paid off, and the new First Mate was Mr. Thomas, I believe to have been a native of Barry Docks. They were good officers. Captain Harp was a meticulous Master. However, he, the Second Mate, and other officers who had served on the ship for the previous voyage, had been severely unnerved by the catastrophic loss of Tregenna, on the homeward bound Atlantic passage.

During our passage to the UK, in Istok in convoy HX74, the previous Halifax convoys HX71, HX72 and HX73 were at sea from Sydney Cape Breton.

Freetown convoy SL46 and outward bound convoys OB213, OB217, OB218, OB220 and OB221 were also at sea. There were 408 ships at sea, either in, or dispersed from the 12 convoys.

The number of escort vessels allocated for the protection of merchant ships was woefully weak- even then- over a year after the commencement of hostilities. The south western approaches had been closed by the occupation of the French Biscay ports, so all our traffic would have to be channelled through a narrow gap north or south of the Hebrides, east of 15 degrees.

Those who survived the slaughter will always reflect on the loss of 1,226 men in 48 ships in a period of 27 days, so close to U.K. bases and ask why merchant ship protection had not improved perceptively in over a year of hostilities. Yet, suitable aircraft were still not showing overhead, even close to shore, and convoy protection was undertaken by the dedicated personnel in a small number of sloops and older destroyers.

Filleigh had put to sea from Halifax in convoy HX71 on 5 September 1940 in company with 33 ships. She was stationed in the outer starboard column of the convoy, with Tregenna the next ship ahead. At 23:18 on 16 September 1940, Crown Arun, which had become detached from convoy HX71, was torpedoed by U-99 (Otto Kretchmer), and despatched by gunfire. She was south and east of the convoy.

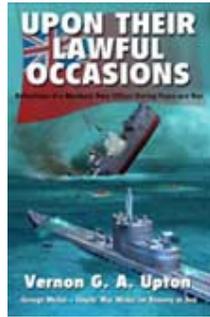
The following day, 17 September 1940, the ships in the convoy were pitching violently in a heavy sea and swell. Filleigh was in station astern of Tregenna, at the distance of three cables length, stem to stem. Tregenna carried about 8,500 tons of steel in her five lower holds. During the afternoon watch, it would have been likely that no more than four men would have been on deck on each ship – officer of the watch, helmsman, lookout and standby man. Hans-Gerrit von Stockhausen, in command of U-65, avoided the escort screen, and a spread of torpedoes was fired at the outside, starboard column of ships. It is likely that two struck Tregenna between Numbers 1 and 2 holds, possibly also in Number 3 hold, just as the ship pitched heavily forward.

Tregenna did not recover, and plunged downwards, standing vertically for about thirty seconds before sinking. The ships were travelling at about 8 knots, which would equate to a speed of 13.5 feet per second. Filleigh was about 1800 feet astern, stem-to-stern. Given the length of Tregenna as 413 feet, the ships were about 1400 feet apart, separated in time by under two minutes. Filleigh passed over the stricken ship, without having time to alter course to avoid her. According to the Second Mate, Ivor Day, Tregenna had sunk in forty-seconds.

Filleigh was ordered to pick up survivors, and made a wide turn to starboard around where the sinking occurred, lowering a lifeboat. The lifeboat rescued four men, the Second Mate, helmsman and lookout, all of whom jumped from the bridge, and a standby man, who jumped clear just as the stern was submerged. Filleigh stood by at dead slow speed ahead, and made a lee for an injured sailor, who was floating nearby. Blood was pouring from a huge wound in his head.

A rope ladder was lowered and an officer sat in the rungs, where he managed to hold the seaman with one arm around his body, waiting for a heaving line to be lowered. Then a tragedy occurred. A heavy sea washed the hat off the rescuer: whereupon he instinctively released his grip on the man to save his cap. The injured man was carried into the propeller of the ship, and cut to pieces. I do not know whether the officer who attempted the rescue was the Third Mate or First Mate, because neither remained on the ship for the next voyage. The effect on him must have been traumatic. Although it is very doubtful whether the injured seaman would have survived if he had been rescued, the feeling remained with the officer for the rest of his life.

Out of a complement of 37, The Master, and 32 of the crew of Tregenna has perished in less than a minute. This awful tragedy exemplified the lethal nature of steel cargoes. The four survivors were landed at Avonmouth on 22 September where Filleigh discharged her cargo, and then put to sea for Swansea, for bunkers.



“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.
LEST WE FORGET**

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