

“A 21 Day Episode” or “When I was Sunk”

In this narration I will endeavour to tell truthfully, without any elaboration, the event of and after the sinking of the wireless and depot ship H.M.S. ANKING.

27th February. Java.

It was at Batavia, in a school in the Oranji Boulevard that men in the Far East without ships were waiting in one evening when the order came for all hands to evacuate and join the “Anking”.

I was there at the time with my mate Crawford. The two of us had been together from the time we joined the Navy in August 1941. We boarded the ship and it sailed out of dock at midnight. There was little spare room below but passed a quiet night.

28th February.

On waking next morning I looked out to sea, and realised we were in a small convoy with escort of two sloops. The other ships were a minesweeper, a cargo and two tankers. Later, watches were allotted to spare hands. Crawford and I were starboard lookouts, two hours on, four hours off.

On the night of the 28th, one tanker was hit by torpedo. Sloops dropped depth charges then one of them escorted the tanker, which was only listing slightly, back to Java.

1st March.

Next day we sighted Tjiletjap and were heading in for the harbour when we received signal to proceed straight back to sea for Fremantle Australia. Voyage was uneventful for two days but on the night of the 2nd no lights were allowed even below decks as enemy ships were suspected to be in the vicinity.

3rd March.

Next morning, Crawford and myself were on watch when at 0645 port lookouts sighted enemy ships approaching from right astern ship sailing in her usual zigging course and enemy came into focus from starboard quarter. I reported enemy to be of five ships, three cruisers and two destroyers. Light was then improving rapidly. We were making about 8 knots at the time and speed could not be increased. Our escort went in rear of convoy to lay smoke screen and signalled convoy to make all speed and proceed independently.

Meanwhile the enemy were opening their formation around astern of us and at once firing. I cannot say how the other ships fared after this moment except I feel certain they were sunk. A cruiser tagged us for her target and we began to get it really hot. The escort sloop was laying a smoke screen and firing back at the enemy. She was pounded very heavily but maintained way, smoke, and her fire for a considerable while.

Our ship was hit on the boat deck first, destroying two lifeboats and killing many men. Then shells were hitting the ship all over and she at first listed to starboard. Crawford and I had been told when enemy first fired to keep sharp watch for subs. When the ship was listing the captain ordered us to go down to the boat deck and then help lower lifeboats. Before then he would allow no one in the boats at all. We had no guns for surface defence so the men had nothing else to do but wait for orders.

As soon as we had lowered two boats a shell burst in one and killed all in it and another shell burst near the other boat, turned it over and punctured the bottom and killed some and injured others. However, a few men in the water righted the boat and with the two oars left in it made away from the ship.

Meanwhile the sloop's engines were out of action but she was still firing and was very close to the enemy. Another boat had been lowered on the portside and our ship had listed right over to port at a steep angle. The captain ordered Crawford and I to go astern and below and tell any hands below to abandon ship, ourselves also. This we did and I saw the ship's surgeon just come up from the sick bay and he said all "up" patients were up, and then he dressed a fellow's head.

Well, Crawford and I decided it was high time we were off ourselves. Then as we got near the galley I received my first wound in the arm but the shrapnel did not come right out. Crawford put a tourniquet on it for me and we decided we would go up forward to jump off. As we made our way forward we saw men lying everywhere dead and injured. The injured were so maimed it was impossible to do anything for them as they would die if they went over the side. As we got up forward by the crew's galley and work place, we ducked again and Crawford was injured badly in the heel and I was wounded slightly in the other arm and down my left leg. I tied a handkerchief round Crawford's ankle and heel and put on a tourniquet and we made a grab for the rail. Crawford found he was unable to stand so I helped him over then got over myself. (Time 0720)

After that we just had to swim as hard as we could to get away from the ship as it was just turning over and sinking, spurting steam up as it went under. Next we looked round for a boat or a raft. We got to a raft and I got on and pulled Crawford on who was weakening with loss of blood.

My arms were stiffening rapidly. Other swimmers came on the raft and then we sighted a dinghy. We paddled to it and got in with its only occupant who was wounded through the lung and was breathing through the shrapnel hole in his back. Next we drifted around and picked up other men in the water and off rafts. On one raft was half a big tin of biscuits and half a tin of water, fresh, about two gallons.

Meanwhile we noticed the sloop out of action and listing heavily to port. Then we had time to notice the enemy seaplanes from their cruisers overhead and they tried to sink the sloop, which was now abandoned, by bombing. This they failed to do, so a destroyer went astern of it at about 200 yards range and pumped salvo after salvo into the sloop before it actually sank.

Firing in the distance, presumably against other ships in our convoy, ceased and a cruiser came right alongside and past us, almost upsetting us. Every man on that ship lined up at attention on deck and officers on the bridge. That was their salute to us the defeated. They left us and their planes did a final dive over us then joined their ships.

What lifeboats had been lowered had drifted well apart. I saw one lifeboat crammed full of men drifting right away from us but I saw no more of them. Next we spotted another lifeboat not far off rising into view with each swell of the waves. We had I believe two oars so some uninjured men in our boat rowed us to it. Then I realised it was the boat that had been overturned by a shell after being lowered, as I recognised three of the men in it and it was they who had righted the boat and got into it. They had lost the rudder and compass but the mast and mainsail had stuck inside, and two oars and a length of rope. Their boat was badly damaged and was almost half full of water.

We then in both boats checked up our numbers and how many were injured. There were twenty-six of us all, and I believe about twelve were injured. Among the numbers were

four Chinese who were stokers. First was a Surgeon Lieutenant, next Sub Lieutenant R.A.N. C.P.O, P.O, three leading hands, A/Bs and O/Ds, two NAAFI's. I cannot remember the names of all, but I have some: Lt Surgeon Cross RN, CPO Baker, PO Bray, Leading Seaman Bridge, A/B Sprague, A/B Abbiss, O/D Youens, Lewis and Southgate of the NAAFI and of course O/D Crawford and myself O/D Topping.

The sub lieutenant took charge: injured men were put in one boat, the dinghy, fit men in the lifeboat, which I believe now was a 32 foot whaler. The rope was tied from the stern of the whaler to the dinghy's bows. This arrangement felt very dangerous but was the only way of keeping together. Next we counted up our rations: 2 gallons of water, about 50 packets of "Marie" biscuits and 15 tins of condensed milk, which were on a raft. We decided to make the water last for seven days every man receiving equal.

Course was southeast by the sun but was hard to maintain, sea rough not heavy, spirits of men hopeful. We made progress that day as the sea was following. The first death was just about sunset and the best we could do was say a prayer and drop the body over the side. After the heat of the day the night was cold and the sea was more choppy and very often we had to bail out as we shipped water.

Daylight came and everyone scanned the horizon with hopes of sighting ships sometime. In fact all believed that rescue would come in answer to our S.O.S. before the ship did actually sink. We had our breakfast, two biscuits each and one sixth of a tin of condensed milk.

The sun got very hot and we were all getting very red. We kept ourselves cool by throwing sea water on our heads by means of a tin hat which someone had saved. In the larger boat baling out was going on continuously, each man taking turns. The boat was very badly damaged and had a very weak bottom which no one was allowed to put foot on. It would have been easy to do so and puncture the boat as the proper flooring of the boat was gone, almost all of it. The baling was done with a tin hat. We had three of these helmets but I do not know just how they were saved up till then.

Next morning we had another death and we repeated the action as before. Again the sun was hot and all were showing signs of sunburn and blisters. The sea now was very calm and it seemed as though we drifted in circles. Being no wind we were drifting the way of the sea and this was almost due north. The best we could do was to steer east as much as we could but our course turned out more northeast.

So the days went by, breakfast sun up and supper at sun down, each time two biscuits and a drop of milk and a drop of water. Five days went by with the water very low and the biscuits getting less. The sixth day we decided on a cut in the rations, i.e. one biscuit only each time, and one sixth of a tin of milk or one sixth of a tin of water but not both.

Then came joy for all. Rain was coming towards us. Many times we had seen rain on the horizon and sometimes pass us by rather close, but this time we knew we would get it. The sail was lowered in the first boat and everyone got ready to catch what they could. Some had milk tins, two had steel helmets, others used pieces of shirt. (Our shirts had ripped up for bandages the first day.)

It rained well and truly and it was cold and soon all were shivering. We tilted our heads back and opened our mouths wide to get an extra drink that way. The rain that was caught was all put into the big tin and it was filled right up so we had four gallons this

time. After half an hour the rain ceased so sail was hoisted and we set about baling out in our second boat. Baling had continued in the first boat the whole time. Night came and all were cold but pleased at having the water ration restored.

Next day the heat was terrific and not a cloud to be seen. We had the last of the milk that day so we were glad we had the extra water but we continued the ration as before but twice a day. I do not remember the exact number of biscuits or tins of milk.

Crawford was very ill now as his foot was gangrenous and the doctor could do nothing for him. Everyone had sores all over them and most had big sunburn sores on necks, backs and feet, and fingers were swelling. My wounds in the arms were now improving. I had picked out most of the gangrene and I kept bathing them in the sea. The doctor took the shrapnel out of my arm and I had a hole I could almost see through. Our anxiety was aroused because wounds became bigger each day however clean we kept them, and the doctor swore I would lose my right arm. However I did not do so.

I did my best for Crawford, washed him in the morning, bathed his foot and doused him with the seawater during the heat of the day.

On the twelfth day, or thereabouts, we cut down to one biscuit a day. We thought we were nearing land as there were more birds flying around us. So we continued and things looked black when we had another death. On the fourteenth day another man died in the early morning after a very delirious night.

In the afternoon it rained but not for long and we only caught a small amount of water. From then on we had a breeze and we seemed to head about north-northeast. The birds now settled on our gunwale and we tried many times to catch them. Once we succeeded but we got quite a few scratches from it. It was plucked and gutted and hung on the mast to dry and on the evening it was cut up in small bits and passed round. All we could do was chew it but no more, as it was so tough. After chewing till our jaws ached we spat it out. However we got a bit of nourishment from it I think.

Beards were now growing well, and I think we looked like old hermits with our long hair. I believe that everyone had big festered and swollen fingers and sore hands and I know everyone had sores on their bodies (scurvy sores I think).

Sharks were more numerous and we always had at least one following us. Two flying fish were caught, one in each boat, and the little bit we had was tasty. We had been trying to fish with a length of thin string and a bent pin but all we caught was a sea snake on the seventeenth day out. Once again we had a chew. On the eighteenth day we had our last biscuits for breakfast so now only had water.

Crawford died two days before that which was the 19th March. Most of us were feeling low when the morning of the nineteenth day land was sighted. Our spirits rose but we knew it would take a while to make to land. We lost sight of it when a mist came up, the sea got rough and a drizzle started. The sub lieutenant died that day and another man.

The sun seemed to have left us for it rained on and off all the time from then on. The sea became an area of moving mountains, and waves kept washing in on us. The sail had to be lowered, and the mast, as it was dangerous to leave it up. One minute the towing rope was slack the next it was taut. The storm lasted for about two hours but when dark came the seas were still rough.

Next morning we rolled on a long swell and in the afternoon sighted land again which looked more like a row of mountains. We made more headway on the swell than we had done previously and land loomed closer.

We caught another bird on the gunwale but it took five of us to kill it as we were so weak and our hands so sore. However we managed, but I had a hard job to chew as I now had an abscess below my right ear and the other side was swollen as well which also turned out to be an abscess after I reached hospital.

During that night, which was our last, we realised we were drifting in close as we could hear the roar of the breakers on the shore, so we had to pull out to sea a bit to get out of danger. We used the oars in the front boat and the flooring boards in the second boat and struggled hard to get out of the reach of breakers. Then the sea seemed to change and we drifted out very easily.

Next morning we discovered we were well away from land again so we hoisted the sail and tried to get back to land again. The leading seaman, the P.O. and an A/B left us at about 1200 hours and tried for land to find a suitable place for landing through the surf. They suffered the same fate as ourselves. This we did not know at the time and after waiting in vain for their return we rowed in for land packed in the ship's lifeboat.

We kept as straight as we could and A/B Sprague made a good job of the rowing of one oar and watching the course. However, bad luck for us, a huge wave came up behind us and one man shouted, "Look!!" I looked, as all did and all I could see astern of us was a great wall of water. The next moment it was on us. I felt a great smack on the back of my neck and head and the boat was gone from under me.

It took a long time for me to reach surface again and I was gasping for breath. Another wave pushed me forward, under, and then seemed to drag me back to sea again. However I surfaced again, swam forward and as the next roller came I let myself go forward on it by reaching upward, and when I went under I felt the bottom, so gripped tight in the sand and so prevented the roller taking me back again.

Once more I surfaced and the next roller took me forward and I grabbed in the sand, and as the roller receded I found I was just on the edge of the sea with about only a foot of water.

I tried then to walk on the beach but I could not do so as I was very weak, so instead I crawled out of reach of the water, and was too exhausted to move further.

It was then I was able to take stock of the others and I was surprised to see so few.

Camps/dates

1. Captured 24 March 1942. Held at Jakarta, Java until June 1942.
2. Moved to Changi, Singapore June 1942
3. Also held at Intok Valley, Thailand (Dates unknown)
4. Campuri/Katcha Puri Hospital Prison Camp until release 25 November 1945