

## Attack on the SS Staffordshire

*A first hand account of an attack on the SS Staffordshire on which the author, Joyce Thomas was a passenger, and her subsequent rescue and journey home. Dictated to her Aunt Miranda Galloway.*

I was sitting with two friends in the lounge of the SS Staffordshire at 11.40 a.m. on Friday March 28<sup>th</sup> 1941, having just been presented with two boxes of chocolates, as it was my birthday, when there was a very loud crash, apparently just outside on the deck, followed by a succession of crashes which obviously were our guns firing. Everybody present stood up, picked up their lifebelts – which were already beside them – and started to put them on. A loud burst of machine gun fire was then heard, and someone called out that we were to go to the saloon, which was on the lowest deck, and used as shelter during air attacks. As we reached the foot of the stairs which lead from the lounge to the lower decks, there was a terrific explosion which shook the whole ship. Everyone went quietly down, not quite knowing what was happening.

We congregated in the dining saloon, and as we stood there four or five passengers came down the steps with blood running down their faces, and shortly afterwards, an officer came down carrying the body of a young boy of seven – Robin Shelley – who had apparently been killed outright. Somebody remarked that the engines had stopped. We were unable to understand why this was so; the only explanation we could think of was that the engine room had been hit. At any rate we were a stationery target.

Up till now, I was under the impression that we were being shelled by a U-boat, as somehow none of us had considered any other form of danger, but on speaking to one of the injured men who had been out on deck, I learned that we were being attacked by a German bomber.

We were just collecting our wits when some gunfire broke out followed by a shattering explosion, that brought all the chandeliers and everything loose in the saloon crashing down upon us. The whole place was filled with dust and smoke and the screams of one poor Indian girl. She was the only person present in any way hysterical, and every excuse can be made for her, as she had but recently recovered from a severe head operation.

An officer then called out – “please go to boat stations”, and we moved up the stairs again. There was no sign of hurry or panic.

There was a lot of water running down the stairs and also across the boat-deck. I and another lady who had the same boat station No.7 reached it as the boat came down to deck level. It was full of lascars most of whom were in a demoralised state. There were five or six naval rating passengers who also had No.7 boat, and two of these assisted us into the boat and quickly joined us, when it was lowered.

Owing to two of the boats having been blown away by a bomb, the passengers for those boats had to find space in other boats. A rope ladder leading down from the ship to our boat was caught in the bottom of the boat, owing to the crowded mass of lascars moaning and crying and spreading over everything and everybody. I had one lying across each of my legs and the naval ratings were trying to get them out of the way of the oars etc. Meantime two or three passengers were climbing down the rope ladder to get into the boat, one badly wounded in the eye and the other with blood running down his face and from his arm. The lascars wanted to get the boat away before picking up these people and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the naval boys and two European stewards managed to keep the boat alongside until they were safely in. In the boat next to us, No.5, they were in a similar

state of confusion with lascars and to make matters worse they were trying to lower into the boat a badly injured woman – Mrs Shelley the mother of the boy mentioned earlier – whose face was torn with splinters and machine gun bullets and who mercifully died quickly; also a lady with a badly machine-gunned leg, a Mrs Ballard whom they had eventually to drop from a height of 14 ft.

About this time there was a zooming sound and a naval boy grabbed me by the neck and pulled me down, and we all lay flat as pancakes as the now familiar ratatat of machine gun bullets swept across the boats. From my position in the boat I could see them zipping in the water uncomfortably close, but I am thankful to say there were no casualties in our boat and very few from this particular attack in the other boats. About this time the Nazi dropped another bomb which gave us a bad moment, but fell into the water. Smoke was coming from his tail though it may have been only his exhaust; at any rate, that was the last we saw of him.

The boat behind us was also full of lascars who had managed to lower it and we heard more machine gun fire, as our own guns fired over them in order to stop them getting away with it.

I had now managed to extricate myself from the writhing heap of bodies and was sitting on one side trying to help the naval boys extricate the oars, also from beneath the writhing mess. This was accomplished eventually and somehow we managed to get away from the ship. There was a heavy sea running and it was a difficult business trying to keep head-on to the waves. After more confusion the sea-anchor was brought to light and put out and this helped considerably to steady the boat. I, unfortunately, sitting on the extreme edge (starboard) was dowsed about three times before we got the anchor out. Later, I was again twice dowsed before I managed to squirm my way further to the centre of the boat to get some shelter from the waves and wind, but this not until three hours later.

Sitting next to me was a cook (European) and I asked him if this had happened to him before and he said "Yes, in the "Yorkshire". I must mention here that there was no officer in our boat, nor in any of the other boats nor anybody who seemed willing to take responsibility of issuing orders. The rowing was being done by the naval-rating passengers, one of the stewards, one of the male passengers and about two lascars. Our boat had about fifteen lascars, two women including myself, three civilian men passengers (two wounded), six or so naval-rating passengers, two European stewards, the cook and a young boy member of the crew and about five or six other people whom I couldn't identify from where I was. The impression given was that it was very overcrowded, as were all the boats. It was barely possible to move sometimes.

Looking at the "Staffordshire", we could see a fierce fire burning aft and she appeared to have a heavy list.

Very shortly after taking to the boats, a "Sunderland" appeared, which we all wildly cheered, as knew that we were at least spotted. About three o'clock we sighted a ship, from the crest of a wave, and noted that this was being directed by the "Sunderland" towards us. She came up to within about half a mile and stopped. We all thought she would pick us up, but she did not move and all the boats appeared to be drifting further and further away from her; we were, of course, by this time very scattered; we tried to turn and row towards her, but immediately we did so, were nearly swamped by the sea, so turned back again and continued to drift further away. One of the men gave it as his considered opinion that we would never get picked up before nightfall.

A sailor gave me a cigarette and I was immediately sick and felt much better as a result.

At about 4 pm a discussion began as to whether we should not risk being swamped in an effort to reach the rescue ship; one of the boats had already overturned. It was decided unanimously to try as there seemed nothing else for it. I was very numb and as I had by this time managed to edge up near to one of the oars, was able to help with it and this warmed me up considerably. We were very successful in our row back to the rescue ship and arrived there about 6 pm. However our spirits were somewhat damped at the sight which greeted our eyes. One boat had got to the extreme stern of the ship, which we now saw was the Norwegian SS "Sama" – and was partially submerged with its passengers hanging to the sides and being swept by the heavy seas round the stern. Two men, apparently drowned, were being hauled up further along the side of the ship. In order to prevent any similar occurrence to our boat, we rowed like the dickens to keep away from the "Sama's" stern and came alongside just about amidships.

Someone threw us a rope down and in the twinkling of an eye, half a dozen of the lascars were on their way up to the deck, swarming up like monkeys. One hopeful gentleman called out, "Let the women go first!" but we expressed a preference to wait till after the rush hour. When eventually the boat was half cleared, only the more decent lascars remaining, and wounded having been hauled aboard, a bow-line was passed down to Mrs Parsons (my cabin companion) which was put over her head and shoulders and she started to walk up the side of the boat, her shoulders being supported by the rope. Half way up, her feet slipped and she swung heavily against the side of the ship but was eventually hauled on board. The rope was now passed down to me and I put it under my arms and was just preparing to walk up in a similar manner to Mrs Parsons, when I suddenly found myself swinging in mid air – I yelled out "Wait a minute" – but needless to say continued my forced ascent. Fortunately I must possess a thick skull, as it was bumped against the side of the ship several times. On reaching the rail of the ship I stuck, owing to my life-belt catching. My rescuers pulled hard until I felt that every ounce of breath had been squeezed out of me, but finally something gave and I came with a rush over the side. I was relieved to find myself on my two feet again and noticed my hand was covered in blood and also on my coat, but I think most of us were in a similar plight either due to our own or someone else's injuries. Personally when I had time to survey the damage, I had a cut and a scratch and a good many bad bruises, but nothing worse.

I was told to go through a passage way and at the end of this, a dim figure grabbed hold of me and asked me if I were wet, to which I replied in the affirmative. I was hauled into a lighted cabin and was pleasantly surprised to see four of our lady passengers looking very comfortable and dry under blankets on two bunks. We greeted each other like long lost friends and I saw my benefactor was a young Canadian Flying Officer (on his way to Canada to fly bombers back home). He appeared to have the situation well in hand, judging from the pile of wet clothes on the middle of the cabin floor, and told me to get my wet things off. He ransacked his bag and produced a shirt, a pair of short pants, a pair of air force trousers, a pair of white woollen socks, an enormous pair of shoes and a rain proof jacket. I quickly changed and felt all the better for it although I was shivering all over naturally.

The other occupants of the cabin were a Chinese lady, whom I now learned had fallen into the water when getting into the boat (due to the panic of the lascars) and was not rescued for twenty minutes and this in a heavy north Atlantic sea and I understand from a fellow passenger had not stopped smiling once during all that time. Furthermore she was in great danger of being crushed between the boat and the ship; she had two small children on board, too, both of whom I am glad to say were none the worse; a Chinese lady doctor; a friend – Miss Scott – with whom I was at the time of the attack and who had a dislocated shoulder; and Mrs Toyne.

Miss Scott asked me where Mrs Parsons was, and I suddenly remembered that the last I had seen of her was her legs 'going over the top'. I left the cabin in search of her and found my way to the lounge, which was full of sailors and other passengers in various stages of dress and undress. My Charlie Chaplin-like appearance was greeted with loud laughter. I found Mrs Parsons sitting, still in her wet clothes, shivering, so I set out to look for my good Samaritan to see if I could get her a change, and from his magic bag he produced a fur-lined flying suit and another shirt! When I went to tell her the good news I noticed a shivering but very cheery sailor on the floor covered in blankets who told me he had just been fished out of the "drink" and had been brought round after an hour and a half's artificial respiration. He was very worried as he was unable to find out who had saved him.

There were now six of us in F/O Jones' cabin. It was by now about eight thirty pm and a destroyer and another bomber had arrived to rescue any other survivors and look after the "Staffordshire". We learnt that the fire had now been put out on her and they were hoping to bring her into port under her own steam.

We were trying to find out who had been rescued, but this was difficult owing to the fact that some people were on the destroyer and there was a chance that some were still aboard the "Staffordshire". In the next cabin Mrs Ballard, mentioned earlier, was suffering agonies from her machine-gunned leg and there was no hypodermic with which to administer morphine to her or other wounded on board, four of whom died during the night. A Norwegian steward brought us hot sweet tea and some meat, for which we were very thankful.

The "Sama" sailed about 8:30 am and Jones told us that we were on our way to Stornoway, the nearest port and hospital. He added that they had watched us, through the glasses, being bombed, but that their ship could not turn back to our assistance until officially ordered to do so by the "Sunderland". They were about sixteen miles away and the "Staffordshire" was about 200 miles off land.

We settled down for the night as best we could. I was sitting on a very hard seat against a very hard wall and my back which had been slightly strained when I was bent back by the lascars, was giving me considerable pain. Even sitting was painful on account of bruises. However, we got through the night somehow only too thankful to be dry and safe, as we well knew we might have been still in the open boats and from the howling storm outside and the tossing of the ship, knew that many would not have survived.

Next morning we were given more hot tea and an egg each with some ship's biscuits. Never did food taste sweeter. We learned from the Norwegian steward that the destroyer and the "Staffordshire" were still with us and I might as well say here that the latter was taken into another port safely.

We were landed at Stornoway at 4 pm on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> March, and found most of the inhabitants there to greet us on the quayside, together with a large contingent of naval officers and ambulances. We were first taken to the town hall and given tea by the WVS. The party from our cabin still clad in flying kit with our wet bundles under our arms. We were billeted out in various places, Miss Scott and I being in a hotel, as I was helping her on account of her injured arm. Miss Scott, by the way, is a professor of psychology at Rangoon University.

Our first act was to go out to buy toothbrushes, paste etc. I had fortunately managed to hang on to my bag, with all my money, papers etc., and was acting as banker for the two of us. Whilst buying the toothpaste, a lady came up and tried to pay for what we were buying and as we would not allow it, asked us if there was not something she could do for us. It occurred to us that we had no nightdresses

and she promised to send us some for ourselves and others who might lack them. Later in the evening her sister called with these articles and asked Miss Scott and myself to come to tea the next day.

It is impossible for me to describe in detail the overwhelming kindness we received from these people of Stornoway as well as from those on the "Sama", but I think most of us felt that it helped to balance up against the hate let loose upon us by Hitler.

We were now able to get news of our other acquaintances and friends off the "Staffordshire". We learned of the death of two more children, the eldest and youngest of three sons of a naval Commander (aged 9 and 6) who were playing where the first bomb fell. A Naval officer told us that out of five bombs dropped, three hit the ship. The casualty list seemed to be large, and though I am not aware of the actual number there were at least thirty killed or drowned and fear there may be others. Mrs Ballard, whose leg they were hoping to save at the Stornoway hospital when we left, died later as I saw from an announcement in the paper on reaching London.

Next morning, having had our things dried at the hotel, we collected the flying kit together and returned it to the "Sama". The use of these warm clothes no doubt saved us from possible serious after effects had we been unable to change from our wet things. As it was, though exceedingly stiff and sore, we were none the worse for our soaking.

At the time of the attack we were dressed ready for emergency, all the women wearing slacks and most of us having heavy coats with us.

That Sunday afternoon (30<sup>th</sup> March) the Stornoway authorities kindly arranged for a Thanksgiving Service to be held in the Town Hall. After this service we were all given £10 each. We have not yet been able to find out whether this money was provided from the Government or the Bibby Line nor if it is a loan or a grant.

At about 10 o'clock that evening we embarked on the "Loch Ness" preparatory to being taken across to the mainland. She was not due to sail until 3 am. Up till 3:30 am I had a hard seat in the lounge, as of course there was very limited cabin accommodation. However, at this hour someone came and offered me a bunk and I thankfully went to it. We arrived at Kyle of Lochalsh at between 8 and 9am next morning in a heavy snow storm. From there we were put on to a train for Inverness. At Achnasheen some passengers who had returned to the "Staffordshire" when they found they were unable to row to the "Sama" without being swamped, joined us on the train. We were particularly pleased to see a young mother with her nine months old baby, whom we had feared lost. She had managed to bring some of her luggage from the ship. From her I learned there was a likelihood that my cabin was all right. She said that they could not sit down owing to the list of the ship, but had to either lie down or stand against the walls. She gave us news of some of the other passengers who had been left on the ship owing to being knocked out by the blast etc., and told of those who died from their injuries.

At Inverness, where we arrived at 3:30pm (Mon 31<sup>st</sup> March), we found lunch awaiting us. Having eaten it, we were informed that this was a mistake and was meant for another party of "Shipwrecked mariners" (as we were officially described on our railway passes) and we were asked to pay for it. We were also told that carriages had been reserved for us on the London train, but when we went to take possession of these, we found the same mistake had been made and the other party got the carriages. We found seats where we could and at 5:15 pm commenced our journey to London. There was no restaurant car on the train and it was held up during the night between Perth and Carlisle. It was very cold and snowing heavily all the way through Scotland and we had another sitting-up night of it, but

this time without any food or hot drink. We were unable to obtain food at any station we stopped at until we reached Crewe at about 1 pm where we got some sandwiches. We did not reach London till 5:30pm so that we had been over twenty four hours in this train.

It can be imagined what a bedraggled crowd got out of the train at Euston, the women still in slacks and the men unshaven and all of us feeling thoroughly dead-tired and dirty, but very glad to see London once again.

I saw Miss Scott, of the injured arm, into a taxi for Charing Cross and took another taxi home, where a bath, a change of clothes and food worked wonders.

The Norwegian ship "Sama" which picked us up was a fast little ship of I imagine about 5,000 tons. She has by now restarted on her interrupted voyage across the Atlantic and I hope she will arrive safely.

I must mention here that on the Sunday morning in Stornoway we met a "Staffordshire" officer looking very worried. Apparently the lascars, to whom the hotel had kindly given shelter and food refused to leave to go back to the ship. He said he feared that force would have to be used and I understand they eventually had to be brought out under naval guard.

I forgot to mention that Mrs Shelley and her little boy Robin, whose deaths I have described were the first people with whom I made acquaintance on the ship. I met her in the queue before the Immigration Officer at Liverpool landing stage and she told me she had been torpedoed in September last with her husband and son. Her husband had got back to India safely since and she was trying again.

Joyce Violet Thomas, 6 April 1941.

*Joyce's son Jeremy, copied this account verbatim from her aunt's transcript on 24 August 2010. Joyce was 23 at the time these events took place. The Staffordshire had been en-route from Liverpool to India, when the attack took place. Below is an extract from - From Hitler's U-Boats to Kruschev's Spyflights: Twenty Five Years with Flight Lieutenant Thomas Buchanan Clark RAF, by Chris Clark*

Also during March 1941, Flight Lieutenant Alexander, flying 201 Sunderland "R", which rejoiced in the nickname of "Reilly FFoull", tried conclusions with a Fokke-Wulf Fw200 and a Junkers Ju88, both caught in the act of attacking S.S. "Staffordshire". At the beginning of the action the Fw200 was approaching at 1,000 feet out of the sun, about five miles distant from the Sunderland, which was at an altitude of only 100 feet. The German made a dive attack on the ship's starboard bow, dropping four bombs – one or two of which were direct hits. While the enemy aircraft circled in one direction to continue the attack, the Sunderland went the other way round in order to intercept it. This it failed to do, owing to the lack of sufficient speed, but in the second enemy attack a near miss was the best that the Fw200 could manage. At this stage of the scrap the Ju88 put in its appearance. The newcomer dropped a stick of four bombs, which fell short of the ship's port side; then, on his second run, he was intercepted by the Sunderland; he steered off and was not seen again. Flight Lieutenant Alexander then turned up-run to be in an advantageous position should further attacks develop. Almost immediately, the Fw200 was seen approaching head-on. It opened fire at 600 yards, but fortunately the shooting was bad and the shells went wide, as did those fired a few seconds late from the rearward-facing guns in the ventral gunner's position. The Sunderland used its front gun – the third burst of which was seen to hit the Fw200's nose – both midships guns, and the tail turret. The enemy disappeared into low cloud and was not seen again. Sunderland ZM "R" scarcely deserved its uncomplimentary nickname, for in the twelve months from May 1940 to May 1941 it put in 1,100

flying hours – a performance which 201 Squadron claimed to be a record for any one aircraft in the service. On 12 May 1941, Sunderland “Z” L57798 was deployed to RAF Flying Boat Base, Reykjavik in Iceland.

*More information about the Staffordshire (from Bibby line archive):*

STAFFORDSHIRE was built in 1929 by Fairfield Shipbuilding & Engineering Co. at Glasgow with a tonnage of 10654grt, a length of 483ft 7in, a beam of 60ft 2in and a service speed of 15.5 knots. Sister of the Shropshire she was launched on 29th October 1929 and commenced her maiden voyage from Liverpool to Rangoon on 22nd February . When the Second World War broke out in 1939 she remained in commercial service from Birkenhead to Rangoon until April 1940 when she was requisitioned by the Ministry of War Transport for trooping between Southampton and Rangoon. On 28th May 1941 [*this date is probably incorrect*] she was bombed three times by German Focke Wolf aircraft when she was 140 miles northwest of the Butt of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. The ship had to be abandoned and most of the casualties, 14 passengers and 14 crew, were due to hypothermia after jumping into the near freezing sea. The undamaged lifeboats were so crowded that the survivors had to stand up holding on to each other for 10 hours. The passengers were transferred to the naval escorts and the crew eventually reboarded her and beached her on the coast of Scotland. She was towed to the Tyne where she was repaired and converted into a troopship for 1800 men. Her tonnage was marginally increased to 10701grt and she returned to service in January 1942. In August 1944 she took part in the South of France landings and in August 1944 was present at the invasion of Malaysia. Following that she was engaged in repatriating Russian and Italian prisoners of war. During 1946/7 she continued service as a troopship and was scheduled for decommissioning in 1948. However, due to the problems in Malaysia she carried the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards to Singapore before being returned to Bibby's in November 1948. She was immediately sent to her builder and modernised before returning to the Liverpool to Rangoon service where she remained for ten years. On 4th July 1959 she arrived at Liverpool for the last time and, in the October, she was sold for demolition. Renamed Stafford Maru she made her last voyage from Liverpool - Casablanca - New Orleans - Yokohama and Osaka where she was broken up by Mitsui Bussan Kaisha.