

## The Sinking of the Otranto

Introduction:

My father, Ernest Charles Goldsworthy graduated as Cadet Captain from HMS 'Worcester', the Merchant Naval training ship in August 1917 and immediately joined the Royal Navy and was promoted to Midshipman the following January, aged just 17.

On October 6th the ship in which he was serving was shipwrecked in a near hurricane force storm in the north of Scotland but he survived to tell the tale, despite the fact that he was suffering from Spanish flu, contracted in New York, from where they had sailed.

After retirement in his seventies he wrote his memoirs for his children and grandchildren. Being born and raised in Oxford his childhood dream was to be an academic, but such opportunities were not open to poor boys. Apparently the classical Don from Exeter College suggested he could become an Officer and a Gentleman through joining the Merchant Navy, via a scholarship to their training ship, the Worcester. Thereafter his life was inextricably entwined with marine matters. However he wrote his tale as if he had become that Oxford don who was chronicling the life's experiences of his childhood friend, his alter ego, Louis Charles Tumbay.

The centenary of my father's survival from a near death experience seemed to me a good excuse for a party as a thank you for all your kindnesses to me after Carl's death (and then my hip operation). I hope you enjoy this extract describing both Spanish flu and a shipwreck at the tail end of World War 1.

We join the story as the Otranto sailed into New York harbour and made fast to pier 56 in the Hudson.

It was swelteringly hot – too hot to go on shore with any degree of comfort during the daylight hours and only at 10 o'clock at night did the temperature drop a few degrees. It was at this hour we occasionally went on shore sauntered slowly through that vast city, two or three together, to end up at Childs near Central Park where we had coffee and hot waffles with lots of maple syrup poured over them. We ate and drank we watched the New Yorkers in after the theatre and wondered who they were, we had been told it was the haunt of actors and actresses, poets, painters, writers and even, it was whispered, the demi-monde – all terribly exciting for 17-year-olds on their first

encounter with the night-life of a vast city. We lingered over coffee and stayed as long as we reasonably could before being shamed into giving up our seats to the ever-increasing throng which poured in from the streets. Sailors in uniform were not unfamiliar to the New Yorker during the war and we were not accosted or drawn into any conversation with our neighbours. There was one occasion when the smallest of our gun-room found himself the object of attention of one lady in Childs who, it appeared, was under the impression that he wished to be cosseted as compensation for one so young having to face the dreaded perils of the sea in war time but with the help his two companions he managed to extricate himself and return to the ship intact.

'We were not entirely cut off from the social world for the ladies of New York had formed an organisation to provide entertainment to officers and seamen of the Royal Navy and on one occasion three of us were the Sunday guests of a family at Englewood, New Jersey. We enjoyed the companionship of the young ladies our hostess had brought in to assist and the pleasure of relaxing in a well-appointed house. Since we were British it was considered the appropriate Sunday dinner was roast beef, Yorkshire pudding - which the hostess was immeasurably proud of being able to make roast potatoes and other viands which, being polite, we ate until we nearly burst. We were driven around the countryside, shown the historical high-spots and had pointed out the houses of the famous on Riverside Drive. The girls were keen to know all about the ship and our life on board. We shrugged it off as if it were of no account or pulled their legs, embellishing the story as we went along until, as one father remarked, "It would appear that little had changed in the Royal Navy since Nelson's day when flogging and scurvy were in fashion". As good measure he asked whether we still carried sail at which the object of his humour replied, Well sir, girls expect a sailor to spin a yarn and you must remember, sir, that under articles of war we must not reveal, even to charming ladies such as these, the secrets of H.M. 'Otranto' " Honours were even and the pleasant hours rolled away until we returned to the ship.

' We had so much enjoyed these social occasions we determined to ask them to a tea party. Invitations went out and acceptances received: six girls were coming accompanied by one mother and one father as chaperones. We organised the whole thing as if it were a military operation. The first job was to give the gun-room a clean up and we made a good job of it having been well trained in 'Worcester' or 'Conway' in scrubbing decks, tables, chairs and polishing brasswork. We would be supplied with bread and butter but decided to add china

tea to our shopping list which included 12 meringues, the same number of cream buns, an assortment of biscuits and a bunch of flowers to give an air of culture to the gun-room with its bare, steel bulkheads and spartan furniture. All we required now was the necessary money to purchase these commodities and, if I tell you that we had five shillings a day, of which two were deducted for messing, there is little left and china tea and cakes were expensive on Fifth Avenue as I found on the morning of the party.

'The great day arrived. Two of us boarded a tram for Fifth Avenue and immediately were engaged in conversation with a grey-haired lady who, despite many years in New York, had not lost that indefinable accent of the cultured French woman speaking English. She soon ascertained where we were going and, intrigued with our mission of tea and cake buying, insisted on coming with us to assure herself that we did not pay more than the right price. We were a little taken aback but without being rude we had no alternative to accepting the dear lady's guidance. Oh how she fussed in the shop and embarrassed us by questioning the attendant on the freshness, quality and price of each item. Having made our purchases we carried our little packages to a florist, bought a few flowers, bade farewell to our guide and mentor, took a taxi and in no time were rather shamefacedly walking up the gang-way with our purchases.

'The trysting hour drew near and two of us were posted on the gangway to escort our guests to the gun-room. It should have been a wonderful party but, alas, it was marred by circumstances over which we had no control for we were being fitted out to take 600 American troops on our return voyage as well as acting as the armed merchant cruiser of the convoy. It was unprecedented, but so great was the demand for troops in France to withstand the German push that every available ship was requisitioned. As a consequence the ship was swarming with carpenters, ironworkers, plumbers, electricians and a host of others transforming the holds and 'tween decks into quarters for the troops. This turned the ship from a spick and span vessel into one of dirt and disgust as these men invaded the accommodation alleyways. We were aware of this, but had considered our guests would not come into contact with the workmen or in any way with interference from them; how naive we were!

First of all there were some ribald comments as our party came on board which may or may not have been overheard by our guests. However, we got them down to the gun-room, hoping they would not

turn up their noses at our somewhat restricted and spartan environment. But they seemed delighted and said the right things as we settled down to what we hoped would be a most pleasant tea party. And so it proved to be – until just before the end one of the young guests became ill and I was asked by the lady chaperon to show them to a W.C. This I did, but on opening the door found to my horror that the workmen had invaded it and the 'hole place was in no condition for any young lady or any other person for that matter to go into. I was dumbfounded and unable temporarily to know what to do but the mature chaperon came to my rescue and suggested we went to the doctor's cabin, a proposal which I leaped on. To my great relief he was in and, after the speediest of introductions I left the young lady and her chaperon with him. When they came out we returned to the gun-room and shortly afterwards the whole party gathered themselves together and were escorted by us to the dockside and their waiting cars. It later transpired that our young guest had been stricken with the Spanish flu which was then sweeping across America and, amongst others in the ship, laid me low a few days before sailing.

'We sailed at the end of September with our convoy of 14 ships of different types, many carrying troops. Incarcerated in my cabin with flu I did not go on watch until two days later. That same evening off the banks of Newfoundland fog shut down. It was cold, wet and miserable in a blanket of silence until, suddenly, we heard the cries of men and the sound of a vessel bumping down our side. We had run down and half torn out the side of a fishing smack which lay becalmed in our path. We stopped, made a signal to the commodore of the convoy and were instructed to take off the crew and sink the vessel since she would be a danger to navigation. In the glare of our searchlight the fishermen took to their boat and came alongside, five men and two Newfoundland dogs. We scuttled the boat, trained the guns on the smack, fired and sank her, The skipper and his crew were taken below together with the two dogs who would not be parted from them. They were firm favourites with all on board and were the centre of adulation at their morning and evening walk around the deck. It was all one-sided for they were inexorably attached to their owners and did little to return the affection shown, for they were one-man dogs whose duty was to guard and, if called upon, save life from drowning.'

'With the last of the fishing smack we gathered way to rejoin the convoy. The cold, wet night air pierced my greatcoat and through the

layers of clothing to the very marrow of my bones. By the time I was relieved my temperature was up and I climbed into my bunk as fast as possible hoping that by morning all would be well to carry on Tuesday night. I cannot recollect whether I slept but by the morning had a high temperature and fever. The doctor pronounced: 'Bed, and stay there!' I was not alone. Throughout the ship and the whole convoy men were stricken down of this vile influenza so much so that every day at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. the engines of all ships stopped as the dead went to their resting place in the sea. The nearer to England the shorter the time of stopping engines, due to the greater danger of submarine activity. But nature, cruel as it may be, rendered service to the convoy for as we cleared Newfoundland the wind came up from the south-west, veered west and away to the north-vest and blew great guns. The big seas made us roll, pitch and yaw, while the wind howled and the rain poured down incessantly. One by one we lost our convoy in the storms until there were only four ships in sight, Through-out these days and nights I lay in my bunk and slept intermittently, satisfied with a pill, a glass of water or milk. But on the sixth day I felt better and the doctor prescribed a boiled egg, toast and tea for my breakfast. Even though we were rolling and pitching I welcomed the steward who came with a tray, put it alongside my bunk and poured out the first cup of tea. As I reached out to enjoy it a terrific impact on the ship momentarily stopped our roll and reacted on the tray so that together with tea, cup, saucer, plate, egg and toast, it was deposited on the deck followed a second later by myself. My first reaction was one of excessive annoyance and a feeling of greater hunger on seeing my breakfast on the cabin floor. I picked myself up, sat on the edge of the bunk and only then asked myself 'what was to do?'.

I was left in little doubt, for it was clear the vessel was stopped and listing more and more. I put on my greatcoat, stepped into the alleyway and, holding to the handrails on either side, went towards the midships companionway. There one of my Worcester colleagues told me to get dressed and report to the wardroom. "We have been razed amidships by one of the ships in the convoy and her bows have torn a gap in our side from the boat-dock to below the waterline," he said. I returned to my cabin, put on woollen underclothes and dressed in my no. 1 uniform. In my uniform case were purchases from New York intended as presents for my parents. These were chocolates, sugar and dried fruits and, not knowing what might happen or how long we might be without food, I stuffed a packet of raisins in one greatcoat

pocket, a tin of 50 cigarettes in the other and made my way to the wardroom, a slow business - being weak on my legs - against a lurching ship with a 20 degree list. A number of officers were discussing the collision and it appear that owing to the appalling weather of the past five days only two ships of the convoy, 'Kashmir' on our port beam and 'City of York' astern, were with us. We had been navigating by dead reckoning for the past 48 hours for there had been no sun or stars to observe and about eight o'clock that morning 'Kashmir' was observed turning to starboard having seen land on her port bow. She was thus heading towards us and the captain of 'Otranto', against the advice we were later told, of the officer of the watch who wished him to proceed full speed ahead for Kashmir to pass clear of our stern, ordered full astern. In the event, 'Otranto' slowed down to such an extent that 'Kashmir', though herself nearly stopped, struck us amidships. Our cross bunker was pierced, water flooded the engine room and we lay immobilised, broadside on to the huge seas, drifting towards the Isle of Islay. 'Kashmir', whose bow was crumpled, could do nothing to help and was ordered to make for the nearest port as best she could. We learned later she suffered no casualties and landed her troops safely at Glasgow.

Measures were taken to save the ship but there was little anyone could do other than muster the troops at their abandon ship stations where they tried to keep warm as they watched the waves roll away into the unknown. Word came through that six destroyers were on their way from Lough-Foyle and anticipated arriving alongside about 11 a.m. in the hope of evacuating all on board. The officers debated how this was to be done in view of the sea condition and heavy list of 'Otranto'. We of the gun-room had nothing to contribute to the discussion and to me it all seemed academic with no sense of great danger. Rather was it as if this was the opening night of a play and we were waiting in the wings for the curtain to go up. The stewards served drinks and biscuits and, sipping a glass of port, I listened to the officers swapping stories which alternated from the nonchalant to the ribald and bawdy. I must have guffawed at one of the stories for another midshipman chided me with "How can you laugh when you might be in the hands of your Maker at any moment?" I should have been contrite but I was in no mood and my reply was almost blasphemous. "That would suit me fine," I said, "and would, indeed, be a miracle, for I should be transplanted to Oxford and to my parents who would, no doubt, be pleased to see me. I felt a cad as soon as it was said for I had the highest regard for my questioner but we are as we are and under such

circumstances most will try to hide their emotions so as to preserve the equanimity of the occasion.

We waited for the destroyers and as at the time of their expected arrival took up our stations. Mine had been a life-boat on the port side now a crumpled mass of steelwork and wood with one davit torn from its socket and the other leaning over the gaping hole made by 'Kashmir' I went below to my emergency station on the starboard side of the well-deck aft where I was joined by my quarter-master, a man in his middle twenties, six feet tall and the epitome of reliability, yet with an air of devil-may-care that reminded me of one of Alexander Dumas' musketeers. He knew I had been ill and without expressing sympathy seemed to throw a physical guardianship over me while we leaned against the rail which, because of the list, was but a few feet from the sea. Visibility, never more than a mile, varied with the rain squalls so that I queried how any vessel could find us. But one destroyer did and when she appeared we wondered what she could do. The captain of 'Mounsey' - for that was her name - proposed we lower the life-boats on the lee side to act as fenders when he came alongside. 'Otranto's' captain at first would have none of this since he considered it would endanger 'Mounsey' and be ineffective in saving the lives of those in 'Otranto' but the Captain of 'Mounsey' threatened to come alongside whether we lowered the lifeboats or not and so won the day. Lifeboats were lowered to water level and the American soldiers instructed to jump onto 'Mounsey' as soon as she came alongside but despite the exhortations of 'Otranto's' officers and crew they were reluctant to jump onto this small ship. Some jumped too late and fell into the sea as the surge swept 'Mounsey' out, She repeated the operation twice more with increasing success as soldiers and crew gained courage and jumped quickly or swarmed down the lifeboat falls. Even so, many fell into the sea to be crushed or drowned. From the after deck we watched; we were physically and mentally detached from the main operation and our conversation centred on the wonderful exercise of seamanship carried out by 'Hounsey'. On her fourth run in she was closer than before so that her bridge when abreast of us was no more than 15 feet out and I feared she might strike 'Otranto' where there was no fendering. As she passed, her stern, caught by a freak wave, swung in towards me and without thinking I climbed on the bulwark rail, jumped onto 'Mounsey's' deck and clutched the after torpedo tube with both hands as her stern, responding to the surge, swung out. I turned and saw my quartermaster standing where I had left him on 'Otranto'. He was clapping his hands and laughing - no doubt

from the spectacle of me flat on my face. I was angry that he had not jumped with me so that I shouted and shook my fist at him. By then we were thirty feet apart and my voice did not carry against the wind. With a laugh he cupped his hands to his ears, shook his head, then waved farewell. I never saw him again.

'Two of 'Mounsey's' crew helped me down the after wardroom hatch and, feeling weak, I looked for somewhere to sit. I found it - the w.c. seat in the officers' lavatory. 'Mounsey' went alongside twice more before ceasing operations due to the numbers on board and the state of her port side which was liable to be pierced at any moment. The engines and propeller noise increased and she pitched and wallowed having left the shelter of 'Otranto's' lee. By that time the quarters aft were full of rescued men as was my little lavatory, some squatting on the deck, others standing. Two of the squatters were sick and their vomit, mixed with seawater, slopped backwards and forwards. Half an hour later there was a terrific lurch, the stern dropped like a stone and the seas thundered on deck. Outside there was a rush to the ladder to get on deck despite the order bellowed by an officer to "Stand fast." It seemed we must go under but slowly the stern came up and the noise grew less as the ship was nursed in the heavy seas. Some few minutes later an injured man was brought down, having been swept over the side by one wave and swept back by the following one. He was suspected of having fractured ribs and internal injuries and had to be kept as still as possible. I suggested to the sergeant of marines standing alongside that he could sit between my legs on the lavatory seat so that I could cushion him against the ship's movement. The idea was approved and the injured leading-torpedo-man was soon snugged down between my straddled legs and with my arms around him for steadiness. Gradually the weather moderated, the seas grew calmer and the ship steadier as we came under the lee of the land and late in the afternoon word was passed we were heading for Belfast where we arrived and made fast alongside about 1800 hrs. During the afternoon I remembered the raisins and cigarettes and deputed the sergeant of marines to distribute them; this reminded the leading-torpedo-man that inside his jumper was a flask of rum. He said he was a confirmed teetotaller but kept some for medicinal purposes for others and flatly refused to touch it. I passed it to the sergeant of marines, saying: "Share that with our immediate circle for there is not sufficient to invite the host outside. The sergeant had no intention of so doing and remarked, Well, sir, we can rule out those who are sick for to give



them any would be a waste." So on the long journey to Belfast some had a little sustenance and a cigarette to keep them going.

Still nursing the injured man I waited until the stretcher party arrived three-quarters of an hour after making fast and, when I came on deck found the ship deserted and was told 'Otranto's' officers had been taken to an hotel. The Royal Engineer's major in charge of operations took me to their quarters an hour later after he had cleared up. By then I felt like a wet dishcloth and wanted only to go to bed but they insisted I have food and drink and started with the latter which was Irish whisky. They poured out half a glass, added a dash of hot water and told me to neck it down. The steward brought a plateful of stew and vegetables and, telling myself I must be hungry having had nothing solid for five days, I did my best but could only tackle a quarter of it. In desperation I asked to be excused and allowed to go to bed whereupon they took me to a cubicle where I undressed and dropped off into a fitful sleep. The following morning I remember a blurred picture of people hovering over me and words like 'doctor', 'ambulance', 'hospital' and later ending up in bed with white figures floating about. Twentyfour hours later I was able to confirm the figures in white were nurses in uniform and I was in the Mater Hospital. They told me I would soon get well and meanwhile I was to sleep. I swallowed some medicine, was lowered onto the pillow, tucked up and was soon oblivious of everything.

'This was the third worst bout of the flu. I was past caring and could without any resistance have floated off into eternal sleep. But it was not to be and on the third day I began to take an interest in life. Meanwhile 'Otranto's' officers and crew had returned to England but no one knew who had been saved and who lost. The fever left me and I was able to eat, enjoy the occasional company of a nurse, ward help or visitor and was strong enough to write to my parents telling them where I was, and that I hoped to be home shortly. It was fortunate I did so, for on the day my letter arrived George Hiscock, a fellow officer who lived in Oxford, had plucked up courage to call on my parents to report I was drowned for no one had seen or heard of me. He told me later of how he walked up down three times before having the courage to knock at the door, meanwhile rehearsing his speech of what a fine fellow and officer I was. My mother opened the door and said how glad she was to see him, especially as she had a letter that morning from me and was expecting me home any day. You can imagine how relieved he was to get the news and not have to make his prepared

speech. We had a good laugh when he told me about this some weeks later.

It was three weeks before they pronounced me fit to travel to Devon port via Oxford. I went by the night boat on a calm sea under a clear sky and spent half the night on deck enjoying the solitude of ship, sea and stars until, fearing to fall asleep standing up, went below, lay on my bunk fully dressed and slept until the ship docked. That same day I arrived home and after a long weekend reported to Keyham Barracks, Devon-port. My voyage was over.

There was a long pause as Tunbay stared into the fire and we remained still. The silence was broken and we strained to catch his softly spoken words. 'Otranto' piled up on the lee shore only just over a half of those on board got ashore alive through the raging seas beating on the rocks of Islay. That day, the 6th October 1918, nearly 600 of the crew of 'Otranto' and of the American Army were lost. Their voyage was over for eternity.