

The following is an account by Bill Fraser of his time, as an apprentice, on the M.V. Durham in 1941. It tells of the voyage from Gibraltar to Malta and back – the second leg of which proved to be so eventful.

DURHAM IN WARTIME
BY
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Durham was almost everything that Essex was, except that she had Sulzer engines instead of Doxfords. She was a cadetship, but by the time I joined her in the summer of 1941, we only carried 4 cadets. The company didn't want to lose the whole flower of its youth in one disaster!

We started by repeating the events of the previous "Essex" voyage. Imagine having our beautiful, clean, refrigerated No. 3 lower hold filled with COAL. Quel humiliation!

Our companions this time read like a catalogue of the finest ships of the British Merchant Service. Viz: Port Chalmers, Sydney Star, Melbourne Star, City of Pretoria, Deucalion. *Ducalion? (Blue Flue Ship)*

We still left Gibraltar with an impressive fleet escort, but they deserted us just before the difficult bit. I think they had a date with the Italian Navy off Cape Matapan. We were mildly attacked by torpedo bombers and E-boats, but I don't think the Italians were terribly serious about it. At this stage the Germans were very busy in the Ukraine. In the event, we all got through. We all discharged our cargoes. We all enjoyed a pleasant social like ashore (air raids permitting), and then the question arose "What happens to these merchant ships now?"

It was decided that the ships should adopt neutral colours and proceed independently to Gibraltar. Durham was selected to go first, for reasons I will not go into here.

So! Two large canvas French flags, with booms top and bottom, were delivered on board, and at sunset we strapped them round the ship, and sneaked out of the Grand Harbour. We streamed our paravanes and headed off to the West. About 2.00 a.m., I was awakened by a muffled THUMP! On arriving on the bridge I learned we had an explosion forward, and on investigation No. 1 hatch slabs were scattered everywhere, the lower hold was full of water and the hatchbeams were lying in all directions and some missing through the bottom. Our paravane hoisting wires were leading under the ship, and hatches 2 and 3 were making a small amount of water.

OPTIONS:

- (1) Turn back to Malta. No good. They certainly didn't want us, and repair facilities by this time were virtually non-existent.

- (2) Run ashore on Cape Bon and become P.O.W.'s. No enthusiasm for this one. While she floats let's stay with her.
- (3) Stand on with caution, which we did.

At daylight we stopped the ship to sort out the paravane mess. We lowered the port recovery wire and hauled up on the starboard, fishing up a tangle of 2 paravanes, one mine with parachute, and lots of tangled wire.

At this point, I should explain that the type of paravane gear fitted to Durham consisted of a boom goosenecked at the waterline on the starboard bow, and hooking on to the stemhead in the raised position, and on to the forefoot in the lowered position. The paravane towing wires streamed from the jib of this boom. In this system the paravane lifting wires were not detached on streaming, but remained shackled to the paravanes, and in the case of DURHAM, led to the two forward winches of No. 2 hatch, via the derricks thereof.

Now what had happened was this: we struck a mine exactly on the centre line, right under No. 1 hatch (lightship-trimmed by the stern). This tied up our paravanes and the other mine, but also bent the boom, so we could not raise the boom to release the towing wires. We got rid of the lifting wires by simply running them off the barrels, but could not get rid of both towing wires. Our carpenter, Jim Newlyn, hauled himself out over the side, took stance amidst all the tangle, and cut the towing wires with a cold chisel. He got, I think, the BEM, and we finally got rid of the incubus, and proceeded to Gibraltar without further incident.

On arrival at Gibraltar, our troubles were far from over. There were no drydocks available, and no berths available. We were anchored off, and one night some nasty but very courageous Italians came across from Algeciras in midget submarines and put a limpet mine in amongst our stern gear. I was on the bridge at around 7.30 a.m. when it went off, blowing the bottom out of No. 6 hatch, and scattering No. 6 hatch slabs all over the place. Fortunately the crew, which lived in the old cadet quarters surrounding No. 6 trunk, were not yet on deck, where they used to sit on No. 6 hatch for a smoke after breakfast. So nobody was seriously hurt.

Unfortunately, as well as having built-in swimming pools in Nos. 1 and 6 hatches, the blast also stove in the tunnel door and flooded the engine room. This meant we were now floating at about our load water line, on buoyancy of Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, all of which were slowly making water.

When we were doing our studies round the decks, we all used to go HAW, HAW, HAW! at the hand-gear still fitted to our electric windlass. As if we would ever use hand gear, when each cable link weighed about 56 lbs! With no engines and no electricity, we had to walk back the windlass with the hand gear, to get sufficient slack to knock out the shackle pin and slip the anchor. The tugs then pushed us on to the beach at La Linea, where we settled on the bottom for many weary weeks.

We were unable to go ashore for accommodation, as every Pole, Czech, Frenchman, Dutchman, RAF pilot, every escapee and refugee had filtered down through Spain to Gibraltar, and were added to by a constant stream of D.B.S. from ships torpedoed close to Gibraltar, plus lots of service personnel waiting to go on leave. There was NO ROOM AT THE IN, so we cooked over an army field kitchen on the foredeck, and had an 80 KW genset on the foredeck for accommodation lighting and, presumably, domestic refrigeration.

Eventually the Navy divers welded up the tunnel door with underwater welding gear, and the Dutch tug "Thames" put 4 x 8 inch suction into the engine room and cleared it of water. The ship by this time had developed such an affection for the coast of Spain that she was very reluctant to part with it. Eventually we got a couple of destroyers out at high tide, and they charged around making waves, so finally we floated and were cosseted into the harbour. At this juncture, surplus personnel were put aboard the BATTERY (Polish flag carrier on Atlantic passenger trade pre-war) along with 5000 others (ship built for about 1800), and with an escort of 2 destroyers we were in Greenock in 3 days.

Durham was eventually towed to Falmouth, restored to original condition, and resumed her role as a company cadet ship.

These notes are written entirely from memory, and I have no contemporary documentation. After more than 50 years, it is possible that some of my recollections may be slightly at fault, e.g. the power of our deck generator on Durham while on the beach. All of these are minor matters and can easily be verified from other sources. In essence, everything written here is true from my own experience.

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