

The following article by Hugh Ferguson, based upon the tragic loss of the British India ship GAIRSOPPA during World War II, is a fascinating example of research following a chance discovery.

**THE SOLE SURVIVOR
BY
HUGH FERGUSON**

During a visit, on the 18th March 1990, to the small hamlet of Church Cove, Landewednack, (on The Lizard, Cornwall) I had a wander around the churchyard of St. Wynwallow. There, on the east side of the church I noticed three Merchant Navy headstones.



One was inscribed with the name R. F. Hampshire, Radio Officer, s.s. GAIRSOPPA, 16th February 1941. Next, on the left was another identical headstone inscribed, A Sailor of the Second World War, s.s. GAIRSOPPA, 16th February 1941.

I returned home with my mind full of the disaster which must have occurred nearby for their bodies to have, presumably, washed up on the rocky shores of Cornwall; I felt compelled to investigate what exactly had happened to these people.

Within minutes of arriving home I had discovered that the ship had been an aging unit of the British India Steam Navigation Co., and in the book VALIANT VOYAGING by Hilary St. George Saunders, there is an account of how, at the end of January 1941, the GAIRSOPPA, Captain Hyland, having on board a large quantity of pig iron, joined an 8 Knot convoy at FREETOWN and due to bad weather was obliged to leave the convoy and make for the nearest port to replenish coal bunkers. Which port that may have been was not stated.

They must have feared the worst when they were circled by a large four engine aircraft at 8 am on the 16th February. At 10.30 pm the GAIRSOPPA was torpedoed on the starboard side in No. 2 hold. She sank within 20 minutes and although it was thought that three boats were launched the only one of which anymore was heard was the one in charge of the second officer, Mr. R. H. Ayres. The boat had on board another two Lascar seamen who

were found clinging to an upturned boat. The position of the sinking is reported in British Vessels Lost at Sea 1939-1945, as 300 miles to the S.W. of Galway Bay.

German records, as appearing in Der U-Boot Krieg vol. 3, indicate that the U-Boat involved was the U. 101, which under command of Ernst Mengersen torpedoed the GAIRSOPPA at 1208, 17th Feb. 1941. (U-boats kept their logs in German time). The convoy left was recorded as SL. 64.

From the book VALIANT VOYAGING, I already knew that the sole survivor of this



Second Officer R. H. Ayres, M.B.E.

sinking was 2nd Officer Richard Ayres, and to determine if he was still alive, and knowing that the B. I. Company had become part of P & O, I contacted their pensions department who immediately informed me that he was, and if I wished to communicate with him they would be pleased to forward a letter.

The first letter I received from Captain Ayres was dated 26th October 1990 and the 3¹/₂ pages it contained gave a most vivid description of just what these seamen had been through. The following is a quote from that letter:

“When we arrived at The Lizard [Caerthillian Cove] in the early morning [13 days after the sinking, i.e. 1st March], there were 3 or 4 Europeans and 2 Asians [still] alive and as you know all drowned except myself. But, not all the bodies were recovered.”

“Whilst I was in Helston Cottage Hospital, [where Mr. Ayres had been taken], I was interviewed by someone in authority to [help] establish the identities of the bodies that were recovered, both Asian and European, but as I was incapable of walking this was not possible and they were buried after I had given my descriptions.”

“The Asians, who were Mohammedans [Muslims], were buried at my request in accordance with their religious rites, i.e. east-west facing Mecca but the topsoil in Christian manner, north-south.”

“I wrote to the relatives of messrs Hampshire [Radio officer], Thomas [gunner] and Cadet Woodcliffe and some B. I. Personnel who naturally wanted some solace at that time but I have not heard anything from the three schoolgirls.”

“The identity of the actual cove I remember being told by a Mr. Richardson [Richards], the coastguard, who pulled me ashore, and that I was taken up the cliff on a hurdle to a large house at the top belonging to Lord Semphill.”



Brian Richards points out where he rescued Mr. R. H. Ayres after being warned by the two little girls.

“After 9 months on 100% disability pension I returned to sea with B.I. and later the R.N.R.”

Having now acquired the names of two of the people involved in the rescue of Mr. Ayres, I was able to reconstruct almost all of the sequence of events, which occurred on that fateful winter day in Caerthillian Cove.

As the boat was being driven shore wards, rudderless and out of control, it so happened that three evacuee schoolgirls were walking over the cliffs and saw the boat capsize in the swell and surf throwing the few survivors into the sea. One of the girls (their names were Betty Driver, Olive Martin and sister), ran down to the beach shouting to the men to keep swimming, help was coming.

Another of the girls ran off across the fields to get help from a Mr. Richards, the coastguard, who was working there. He ran down to the beach in time to drag Mr. Ayres out of the water more dead than alive. The drowned men's bodies, which were recovered from the sea, were those of Mr. Hampshire R/O., Norman Haskell Thomas, D.E.M.S. gunner and two Lascar seamen.

On my first visit to St Wynwallow I had assumed that the headstone commemorating an "unknown sailor" could have been that of the gunner. I was mistaken; the two M.N. headstones were for the Lascar seamen and names were missing simply because Mr. Ayres did not know them, and so they went unrecorded.

On a later visit I discovered that the gunner had been interred in a civilian burial and his headstone was only feet away from the others. This ensued from my having succeeded in contacting several of his relatives. I was able to take photographs and sent them to the various people. I have not been successful in trying to trace relatives of Mr. Hampshire, or any of the evacuee girls.

For this incredible act of courage in which, in one account 34 died before reaching land, (in another account 30 died), Mr. Ayres was awarded an M.B.E.

Anyone who may visit Caerthillian Cove will see for themselves what a forbidding place it is; rock-strewn with a curling breaker making it even on a summer's day an almost impossible beach on which to make a safe landing.

This was just one of the catastrophes enumerated in the recent German publication entitled DEUTSCHE U-BOOT-ERFOLGE (successes); there are 71 pages of them listed and that was only the U-Boats!

Note:

The comments in square brackets in Captain Ayres's quote are those of the author, Hugh Ferguson.

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