



HMT EMPIRE WINDRUSH

Perhaps the most famous of the troopers, in our time anyway in 1845 the HMT Birkenhead gained fame at her death when she was wrecked in Algoa Bay near Cape Town when the troops stood fast on deck to allow the women and children to get away in what few lifeboats there were, coining the phrases 'Women & Children First' and 'Remember the Birkenhead' and the 'Birkenhead drill' of Rudyard Kipling's poem came to describe courage in the face of hopeless circumstances.

The Empire Windrush though gained her fame from her life not from her death, though that was a mite unusual. Though she was famous trooper with a colourful history it was a peacetime voyage in 1948 that made her name iconic when she changed the face of Britain for ever.

Derek Edwards one of our early Vindi boy members was electrician's mate on the Windrush when she caught fire and subsequently sunk off the Algerian coast in March of 1954. Derek who used to live at the Narrabeen caravan park in Sydney before he and Pauline took off for Ireland to buy a canal boat to live on, I never heard from them again but I do hope they are still afloat there and enjoying that beautiful country.

Derek wrote us a story about that day which I put in an early newsletter, which I can't find at the moment, so I will have work from memory to relate it:-

The ship was homeward bound on a voyage that had started in Yokohama & Kure where about 1500 recovering wounded soldiers, including soldiers from the Korean war including many from Duke of Wellington's regiment wounded at the "Third battle of the Hook" in May 1953 had been embarked.

The 29th of March, Sunday morning early, the ship was quiet and peaceful, the weather, dead calm, Derek with a mug of tea in hand went on deck for a breath of fresh air and noticed smoke coming out of the engine room vents. He wasn't alarmed, thought the engineers must be doing some oxyacetylene cutting or something of the like, but when the smoke got thicker he went into the working alleyway midships and met some engine room crew coming up shouting there's a fire in the engine room, someone went to the bridge to alert the officers on watch, the bridge crew had already seen the smoke, dispatched a watchkeeper down to find out what was going on and they had also pressed the fire Alarm button but the alarm didn't sound, the fire

had started in the lower engine room store locker which was immediately behind the main electrical switchboard, separated from it by just a wire mesh and the first thing the fire destroyed was all the main & emergency circuits including the alarms and the fire pumps and as the back up generators were broken down nearly all electrical power was lost.

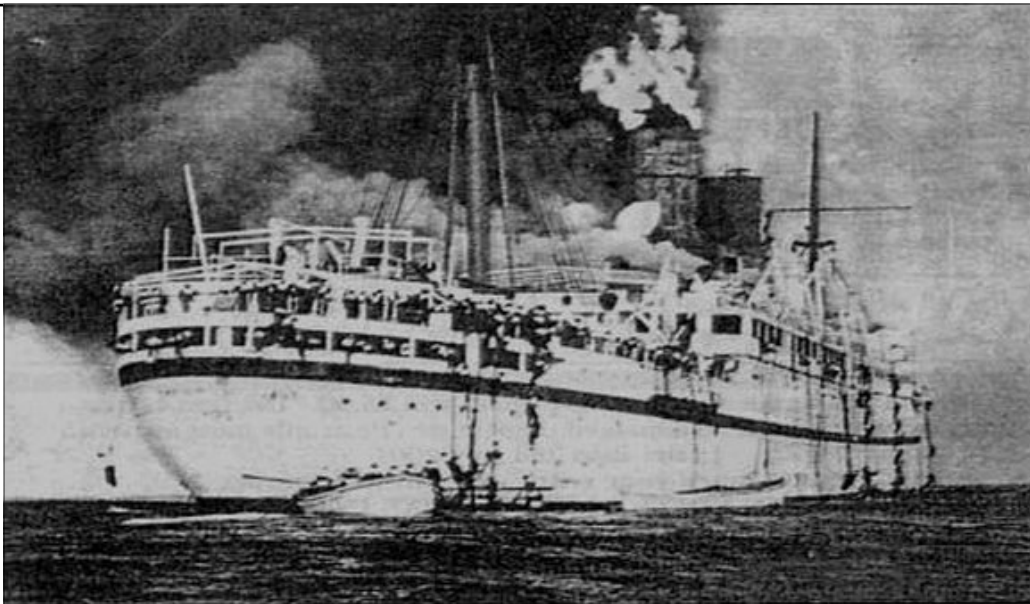
Meanwhile Derek and a couple from the engine room crew ran around the crew cabins opening the doors and shouting Fire, Fire emergency stations, of course no one believed them, thought they were having a joke and rolled over again in their bunks.

Derek then ran aft to his emergency station which was at the emergency fire pump next to the steering flat where he met the engineer who's job it was to start it from its own batteries and get water on deck, which he did, but the pump only ran for a few minutes then stopped and couldn't be restarted.

When he got back on deck again it was obvious the fire was getting a lot worse, soon the order was given to abandon ship and boats were being lowered, he assisted with some of the lifeboat launchings and rigging ladders then went back down aft back to the fire pump room and then to the poop, from where he eventually jumped overboard after pleading in vain with a squad of soldiers fallen in on the poop deck awaiting orders to do the same and jump.

Being calm weather and other ships coming to assist all aboard her but four engine room crew trapped below were saved.

The ship was taken in tow by navy vessels from Gibraltar but she sank the next morning.



Troopship Empire Windrush on fire off the coast of Algeria. March 1954.



An inquiry later found that an engine room fire began after a fall of soot from the funnel fractured oil-fuel supply pipes. The subsequent explosion and fierce oil-fed fire killed four members of the engine room crew. The fire could not be fought because of a lack of electrical power for the pumps because the back-up generators were also not in working order, and the ship did not have a sprinkler system. The lack of electrical power also prevented many lifeboats from being launched and the remainder were unable to accommodate all the survivors, who were mostly clad in their nightclothes. Many were in the water for up to six hours before rescue vessels appeared to take them to Algiers, where they were cared for by the municipal authority and the French Army

Assistance was given by MV Mentor, MV Socotra, SS Hemsefjell and SS Taigete. Captain W Wilson, the Master of the 14,651 ton Empire Windrush was reported to have said, "The fire was brutal. It was a flash fire, and as soon as I had given the alarm an officer came to the bridge and warned that the fire was gaining and that an officer and three men had perished below. The engine room was gone. Nobody could survive down there. The smoke was pouring all over the ship. It was acrid and flames were shooting all over. That's when I gave the order to abandon ship."

Memoirs of Capt RN (ret'd) Michael RH Page, a passenger on the Windrush

I was a passenger onboard the Troopship Empire Windrush when she caught fire off Algiers in March 1954. This year is the 53rd anniversary of a remarkable rescue when over 1200 men women and children were saved without a single fatal casualty. Sadly four crew members died in the initial explosion but that was all. There were a number of fascinating stories reported at the time and it would be interesting to see who still remembers that day.

My own memory is still vivid because the day became the first of a new life. On board were all my worldly possessions and I never saw any of them again with the important exception of my camera and a pocket full of films. The pictures I took were published in Algiers and then made available to the UK papers without my consent. It was quite interesting to walk down Fleet Street and ask how it was done!!

More important the shipwreck was the cause of my meeting my wife Valerie. Her cousin was also a survivor and we met again at the Summer Ball at the Royal Naval College Greenwich. Valerie was his guest: the rest is history. I was returning from the Far East where I had been serving in HMS Defender, a Daring class destroyer in the Korean campaign.

The troopship had been in trouble in the Suez Canal with engine problems.

On the last Saturday of the voyage, there was a party to celebrate being "nearly home" but in the early hours there was a large sump explosion in the engine room. The fire spread rapidly and we had to abandon ship.

Fortunately there were many other vessels in the vicinity, the sea was calm and the sun was rising. Everyone was picked up from lifeboats or out of the water and we were taken to Algiers.

After a night in Algiers HMS Triumph, an Aircraft Carrier arrived to take us all to Gibraltar. Then the RAF flew us home. I was officer in charge of the Ratings flight and still have the nominal list.

For a young bachelor it was all rather a joke but for those families returning from a 3 year foreign posting it was anything but. This picture shows the ship burning taken from my lifeboat that carried many of the officer passengers (and with me in charge!) The other I took from our lifeboat as we approached the P&O Freighter Socotra. I took many more pictures and I still have the news papers published in Algiers and London.



Lifeboats alongside
P&Os 'Socrata'
below



The Windrush had a long and distinguished career under two flags of Germany & Britain for like the Vindi she was a prize of war.

She was built launched in Hamburg as the Monte Rosa at the famous Blohm & Voss yard on the 4 December 1930 For the hamburg South America line.

The "Monte Rosa" and used her for cruises. Many passengers on these cruises were aboard as privileged Nazi Party members, as part of the Nazi Strength Through Joy programme, intended to reward and encourage party members and as a reward for services to the Party.

During the Second World War, the ship was used as a barracks ship at Stettin, then as a troopship for the invasion of Norway in April 1940. She was later used as an accommodation and recreational ship attached to the battleship Tirpitz, stationed in the north of Norway, from where the Tirpitz and her flotilla preyed on Allied convoys en route to Russia. By 1945, the ship was in the Baltic, being used as a refugee evacuation ship rescuing Germans trapped in East Prussia and Danzig by the advance of the Red Army.

In May 1945, the Monte Rosa was captured by advancing British forces at Kiel and taken as a prize of war. The following year the ship was assigned to the British Ministry of Transport and converted into a troopship. She was renamed HMT Empire Windrush on 21 January 1947, for use on the Southampton-Gibraltar-Suez-Aden-Colombo-Singapore-Hong Kong route, with voyages extended to Kure in Japan after the start of the Korean War. The vessel was operated for the British Government by the New Zealand Shipping Company, and made one voyage only to the Caribbean before resuming normal troopship voyages.

The name derives from a series of ship names used by the British government for the ships they owned or chartered for the carriage of troops. Many of these ships were secondhand (like the Empire Windrush was), and renamed when bought. The names begin Empire, and then added the name of a river in Britain. Among others well known at the time was the Empire Wansbeck, which from 1946-61 took British soldiers based in Germany from Harwich.

The river Windrush is a minor tributary of the Thames, flowing from the Cotswold hills down towards Oxford.

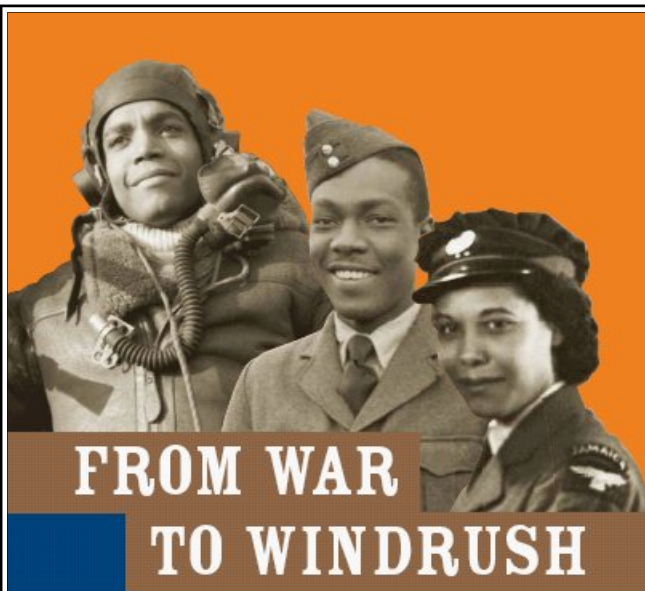


A wartime photo of the river Windrush near Oxford, an American tank has crashed through the parapet wall of a medieval bridge and fallen into the river.



The Empire Windrush carried many soldiers off to war during her lifetime. These photos from the 'Soldiers of Gloucester Museum show the Gloucester Regiment embarking in the Windrush at Southampton on their way to become known as the 'Glorious Gloucesters' after their heroic last stand against overwhelming Chinese army forces at the battle of the Imjin River 1951.

Looking at those faces: you wonder which ones didn't come home.



The 22 of June 2008 was the 60th anniversary of the voyage that put the Empire Windrush firmly into the pages of British history.

To mark that sixtieth anniversary a special exhibition 'From War to Windrush', was staged at the Imperial War Museum in London to mark the arrival of the first West Indian immigrants to Britain.

(Quotes from a media reports of the day)

"The MV Empire Windrush was a ship that is an important part of multiracialism in the United Kingdom. The Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury on 22 June 1948, carrying 492 passengers from Jamaica wishing to start a new life in the United Kingdom. The passengers were the first large group of West Indian immigrants to the UK after the Second World War.

The arrival of the passengers, and the image of the Caribbean passengers filing off the vessel's gang plank, has become an important landmark in the history of modern Britain, symbolising the beginning of modern multicultural relations which were to change British society significantly over the following years. In 1998, an area of public open space in Brixton was renamed Windrush Square to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the West Indians."

"Its most celebrated voyage took place the following year. En route from Australia to England via the Atlantic, it docked in Kingston, Jamaica. An advert had appeared in Jamaica's Daily Gleaner newspaper on April 13th, offering cheap transport on the ship for anybody who wanted to come and work in the UK. The war had created a labour shortage but many of the positions were low-paid and lay unfilled.

The fare for a place on the troop deck was a cut-price £28 and 10 shillings. When the Windrush departed on May 24th, 1948, it had 300 passengers below deck and 192 above, from the colonies of Jamaica and Trinidad. It took a month to reach England, eventually docking at Tilbury in Essex on June 22nd.

Most of those who bought tickets were ex-service personnel, who had fought on the British side during the war. They were promised jobs would be waiting for them, and some looked forward to joining (or rejoining) the RAF. Others were just curious to see what they thought of as the "mother country" at first hand.

Although the atmosphere turned out to be far from welcoming when they first arrived, 202 of the passengers found work straight away. The newly-founded National Health Service was a major source of employment for some – others worked in factories and mills – but the largest employer was London Transport.

While the Windrush was on its way to Britain, there was some debate in Parliament as to whether its passengers had any right to come here. Some argued that they ought to be turned away on arrival. It was pointed out in their defence that they had British passports, had served King and Country in wartime and would only be likely to stay for a year anyway. During interviews at the anniversary in 1998, some former passengers said they too had only intended to stay a short while, because they feared the climate and working conditions might not agree with them.

On their arrival on that June day, 236 of the travellers were temporarily housed in the Clapham South deep shelter in south-west London. This was one of a network of constructions beneath the underground stations, designed as refuges during the wartime bombing.

Before the end of war, the one at Clapham South had been used for holding German and Italian prisoners-of-war. The shelter was less than a mile from the nearest labour exchange (job centre), on Coldharbour Lane in Brixton. As the men spread out into local accommodation, they marked the district's debut as a multi-racial community.

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Windrush passengers, June 22, 1948

TROOPIN' (OUR ARMY IN THE EAST)

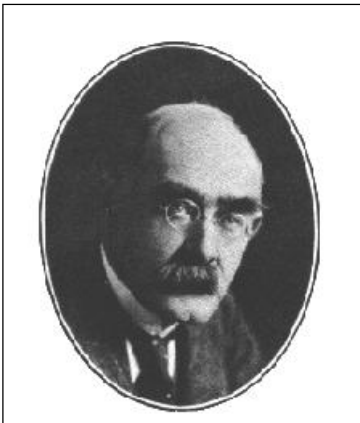
Troopin', troopin', troopin' to the sea:
'Ere's September come again – the six-year men are free.
Oh leave the dead be'ind us, for they cannot come away
To where the ship's a coalin' up that takes us 'ome to-day.
We're goin' 'ome, we're goin' 'ome
Our ship is at the shore
An' you must pack your 'aversack
For we won't come back no more.
Ho, don't you grieve for me,
My lovely Mary-Ann,
For I'll marry you yit, on a fourp'ny bit
As a time expired man.

The Malabar's in 'arbour with the Jumner at 'er tail
An' the time-expired's waitin' of 'is orders for to sail.
Ho! The weary waitin' when on Khyber's 'ills we lay,
But the time-expired's waitin' of 'is orders 'ome to-day.

They'll turn us out at Portsmouth wharf in cold an' wet an' rain
All wearin' Injian cotton kit, but we will not complain:
They'll kill us of pneumonia – for that's their little way-
But damn the chills and fever, men, we're goin' 'ome to-day.

Troopin', troopin', troopin' winter's round again!
See the new draf's pourin' in for the old campaign:
Ho, you poor recruities, but you've got to earn your pay –
What's the last from Lunnon, lads? We're goin' there to-day.

Troopin, troopin', give another cheer –
"Ere's to English women and a quart of English beer.
The Colonel an' the Regiment an' all who've got to stay,
Gawd's mercy strike 'em gentle –Whoop, we're goin' 'ome to-day.
We're goin' 'ome, we're goin' 'ome,
Our ship is at the shore.
An' you must pack your 'aversack,
For we won't come back no more.
Ho, don't you grieve for me,
My lovely Mary Ann,
For I'll marry you on a fourp'ny bit
As a time-expired man.



Rudyard Kipling
(Born December 30, 1865, Died January 18, 1936)

