

Lisbon 1942 – the sinking of the ‘Alouette’

In September 2017, the author of this article visited Lisbon with his family to see the city, in particular the location of a group photograph of the survivors of HM Trawler Alouette, taken in September 1942. Richard's father was a member of the crew of HMT Alouette, which was torpedoed off Cape Espichel on 19th September, 1942. He made contact with the Society's then secretary, Edward Godfrey, who offered to look at the records of St. George's Church, however no reference to the Alouette was discovered. Edward then encouraged Richard to write this article for the British Historical Society's Annual Report recounting his father's experiences.

By Richard Robertson, Jnr

My father, Dick, was born in the fishing village of Dysart in Fife, Scotland on the 2^{6th} May 1920. He was the eldest of the four sons of Andrew McLaren Robertson and Helen Barrett Robertson. In years gone by, Dysart was a mainstay of the Scottish herring industry, indeed it was said that at one time, there were so many fishing boats in the harbour that you could walk across it over the boats from one side to the other without getting your feet wet. More recently in 2015, the quaint old harbour was used as a “set” for the hit American produced TV series "Outlander".

My father often told me that he grew up in a row of tenements called "Dovecot", so close to the sea that he could run straight out of the front door and into the sea! So I suppose it was only natural then that when WWII came along, he volunteered to join the Royal Navy. It's not that he claimed to be a hero or anything, but he knew that if he volunteered before they called him up, he would have the choice of which service to join, rather than be told. I don't really know why, but he ended up as a cook on board a minesweeper (although I do recall a mention of his being an apprentice chef in Kirkcaldy).

He joined the RNPS (Royal Naval Patrol Service) and was sent to the RNPS Headquarters, the "Sparrows Nest", in Lowestoft for training on HM Patrol Vessels. Lowestoft is the most easterly point on the UK

mainland and was therefore closest to the enemy! The RNPS was nicknamed "Harry Tate's Navy" (after the 1920's music hall comedian), as it appeared to be a bit of a ramshackle mix of fishermen and some conscripted men who had never been on a boat in their lives before.

His role, over and above being the only cook on the ship, was to train and practice at minesweeping skills. However he said he suffered terribly from sea sickness initially (the boats were quite small) until he got used to it. I can't really imagine how awful it must have been having to cook meals for all the men whilst being seasick! He had to get up early before most of the crew to prepare the meals and then after the evening meal, clean up and prepare again for next day all over again.

I am not sure if HMT Alouette (French for a lark - the bird) was his first posting or not. He said one minesweeper in particular was simply a wooden hull converted fishing trawler. I suppose this type of vessel must have been important when sweeping for magnetic mines, as some boats even had copper plated bottoms for this exact purpose. He told me that they often would attempt to explode a discovered mine from a safe distance by shooting at its horns with a rifle!



HM Trawler Alouette

The Admiralty War Diaries¹ record that on Sunday the 13th September 1942, the Alouette sailed at 16.45 to escort SS Esneh to Huelva and thence to assume Y1 Patrol, wherever that was.

The same records state that on the following Tuesday, the 15th September 1942, the Alouette rendezvoused off Port Bugio (sic) to assist in the escort of ships to Gibraltar. I presume that must have been the Bugio lighthouse west of Lisbon. Thereafter Alouette parted company to undertake Y3 patrol. There is a record of Alouette being positioned off Cape Espichel, Portugal, on the 17th September 1942, some two days before her sinking. It seems likely that between escort duties, she would undertake minesweeping activities helping to keep the sea lanes to Gibraltar clear of German laid mines. There were various types of mines. Some were contact mines with horns which exploded whenever it touched something hard, these were tethered by cables to the seabed and floated just below the water surface. Others were magnetic mines which exploded close to steel and some were sound activated. Towards the end of the war, Germany had developed a new type, which was activated by pressure from an approaching vessel's displacement or its wake. Some were even designed not to explode at all, until several ships had passed over it and then it would go off. Each mine could be set with different "counts" which not only made them very effective for damaging convoys, but also made discovering and dealing with them extremely difficult.

HM Trawler Alouette (FY101) was an AWS (Auxiliary War Ship). She was built in Smith's Dock in Middlesbrough, South Teeside, in England in March 1939 as a steam fishing trawler named Esquimaux for Hellyer Bros. of Hull and was requisitioned by the Admiralty on 30th August 1939. She had a displacement of 520 tons (a relatively small ship) and had one 4 inch gun. Prior to her sinking she had three Masters, the final one being T/Lt Richard Adams RNR from the 17th April 1942.

¹ www.naval-histories-net

Newly completed, it appears unlikely that she was ever used as a fishing vessel, which would at least be of some slight consolation to the crew, as many minesweepers stank of old fish mixed with oil, coal and smoke. Conflicting reports of the timings within various available records make the exact time of the attack on Alouette inaccurate. My father said however, that it was in the wee small hours of 19th September whilst he was in bed, when the first torpedo hit.

The records state that *"She was hit on the port side forward by one G7e torpedo from U-552 about 7 miles west of Sesimbra, Portugal. The bow ahead of the bridge broke off and sank, while the aft part remained afloat on an even keel. So the U-boat fired another G7e torpedo from the stern torpedo tube as a 'coup de grâce' at 03.30 hours, that struck the armed trawler on the starboard side and caused her to sink immediately after a big explosion".*²

I vividly recall my father's tale, which he told me often when I was young, and then again to my own son in 1989 (after a RNPS reunion in Falkirk, after having had one or two shandys!) that after the torpedo hit and the ship began to sink, he quickly jumped overboard *"in only my underpants"!!* He could not remember if *"abandon ship"* had been called or not, but he did say he wasn't hanging around to find out. Sadly his friend who had agreed to be 'Best Man at his forthcoming marriage to my mother returned for some of his belongings, never to be seen again.

Dad was a non-smoker and so always swapped his cigarette rations with the crew for any luxury items, especially chocolate which he took home to his fiancée and mother. He had built up quite a large "stash", as he was coming to the end of his patrols and was due some home leave. He was most annoyed that he *"lost the lot"*, my mother often saying she was just glad he had decided not to go back for them!

² Source: www.uboa.net

The records go on to say *"One officer and twelve ratings were lost. The Master and 26 others (six of them hospital cases) were picked up by Portuguese fishing boats about nine hours later and landed at Setúbal. Another injured officer and two ratings were picked up from a Carley float by the Portuguese fishing trawler, Ilha Graciosa, at 21.30 hours and taken to Lisbon, but another rating had died while on the float. All survivors were eventually transported to Lisbon from where they were allowed to leave by ship to Gibraltar"*.

At least nine hours was quite some time to be in the water ... good job it was September off Portugal and not the Arctic convoys in winter! I always remember him saying that he was swimming in the water, so I don't know if he managed to get onto a raft, or just held on to some debris. The crew were all worried about the rumours they'd heard about men being shot in the water, which, according to some reports, was true! After being rescued by the Portuguese fishing boat, my father said that all the survivors removed any Royal Navy insignia etc. from their clothing before arriving at Setubal. On arrival, they told the Portuguese that they were all Merchant Navy and not Royal Navy, in case they were interned by neutral Portugal until the War ended. Of the ship's complement of 44 men, sadly 14 died. Were any bodies brought ashore?



Twelve of the survivors of the sinking of HMT Alouette, 1942 at the Jardim Dom Luis in Lisbon. Dick Robertson is front row far left

The photograph above was taken in Lisbon of twelve of the survivors is one of around twenty photographs he kept of his wartime activities. He is the handsome one in the front row far left. They all look like extras from a James Cagney movie! It must have been taken before the end of September, as he had to sail to Gibraltar, then to England, and then travel to Scotland, all in time to marry my mother on 17th October 1942. I often wondered where they got their clothes. Who took the photograph? Whose camera was it? Did they get the photos developed in Lisbon? Where did they stay? If only I had asked these questions whilst I had the chance.

After a brief honeymoon in Alva, close to Stirling at the foot of the Ochil hills during some well-earned home leave, he travelled once more down to the "Sparrow's Nest" at Lowestoft (RNPS crew were also nicknamed " Sparrows") ready to "fly the nest" for his next draft..... another trawler minesweeper. This time, in November 1942, it was HMS Gweal (T246), an Isles Class trawler built in Hull. She survived the war and was sold by the Admiralty in 1948. So, thankfully, did my father Dick, who with my mother, Ina, raised two daughters and two sons (yours truly being the youngest, the bairn). My father never worked as a chef ever again! I can't really blame him.

He started working on building sites until in 1948, aged twenty eight, he had a fall and broke his back. He spent a long time in hospital recovering, and was told he would never walk again, but after some time and surgery he did! After a near full recovery (except for a wee bit of a limp) Dick worked hard for the remainder of his working life, driving HGV's, heavy plant vehicles etc. He retired from work in 1984 and then enjoyed his time with his wife and family of 4 children, 8 grandchildren and a great grandson. Sadly Dick passed away on Christmas day 1996 having led an amazing life and a wartime experience we all would never wish upon anyone.

Fortunately, in December 2016 I gave a Lisbon contact, who was working in Edinburgh as an architect, a copy of the group photograph and asked for his help in tracing the location. He returned in January

after his Christmas break and told me that his father thought it was taken at the Jardim Dom Luis, Santos, an area of Lisbon popular with mariners in the 1940's. After a bit of searching on the Internet and contact with the British Consulate in Lisbon, I managed to confirm the location.

On Tuesday, the 26th September 2017, seventy five years later (possibly to the day?), I had the privilege of visiting the Jardim Dom Luis square together with my wife Christina, son Richard III, daughter Lee and her son Oscar, our grandson and my Dad's great grandson. The monument and square look pretty much unchanged since the 1940's (except for a wee bit of graffiti) and the stonework is maybe not just as white. It was strange to be there and to see it personally after all these years of studying the photograph. Many new photographs were taken around the memorial and some in a similar pose and position as Dick and his shipmates.

After an energetic walk from the Jardim Dom Luis all the way up the hill to the Jardim da Estrela by St. George's Church, we had a lovely relaxed lunch in the cafe in the park. Afterwards we met Edward Godfrey at St. George's where he kindly took time to show us around both the church and cemetery. I was keen to establish if any of the Alouette's crew, who had died and possibly been brought ashore, had been buried in the Commonwealth War Graves in the cemetery. After viewing the graves and consulting the CWGC book listing all war graves in Spain and Portugal we drew a blank. We must assume therefore that all the crew brought ashore had survived. Edward pointed out the nearby former British Hospital and I wondered if that is where the injured were treated.

— ooOOoo —

Footnote

In 2014, the British Historical Society published “British Institutions in Portugal”, a collection of articles and booklets written by the late d’Arcy Orders. One of these articles relates the history of the British Seamen’s Institute which was founded in 1939 on the initiative of several members of the British Community who wished to provide amenities in Lisbon for British seamen. Undoubtedly the facilities of this Institute were used by Richard’s father and fellow crew members. Extracts relevant to the above article are as follows.

The premises were located at Rua da Moeda, 5-2º, in the Cais Sodré area, near the Jardim Dom Luis where the group photograph of the survivors of the Alouette was taken.

The premises were open daily from 5 p.m. until midnight and staffed by over one hundred helpers drawn from the British Community and divided into teams. Facilities available were billiards, table tennis, darts; a library with magazines and newspapers; a piano, wireless and gramophone and light refreshments.

Seamen from several torpedoed vessels were entertained, some for considerable periods. An appeal for clothing to the British community was most successful. Various excursions were arranged to places of interest, to cinemas, bullfights and football matches. Cricket and football were played at Carcavelos.

During 1942 there were 22,031 visits, including a considerable number of survivors of shipwrecked crews, and a “Port of Honour” was offered to the captain and crew of twelve men of the trawler Ilha Graciosa who saved the survivors of the Alouette.

Notes on U-552 and its captain, Oberleutnant Erich Topp³

The U-boat U-552 was the second of several hundred submarines built by Blohm & Voss in Hamburg during World War II. It was a Type VIIC laid down on 1st December 1939, launched on the 14th September 1940 and commissioned into the "Kriegsmarine" on the 4th December 1940 by Oberleutnant Erich Topp. He was born in Hanover on 2nd July 1914 and at the age of nineteen he joined the Nazi Party and also commenced his naval career, serving on various vessels and light cruisers, before joining the U-boat force in October 1937.

He served on U-46 as a Watch Officer and then had considerable success from June 1940 as the Commander of the smallish U-57, sinking some six ships (36,862 tons) until on the 3rd September 1940, U-57 collided with the Norwegian ship "Rona" and sank. This collision did not appear in any way to interrupt Topp's rise up the ranks; indeed it was only two weeks later he was given command of this larger submarine U-552 becoming a Kapitänleutnant. This appeared to be typical of the luck he would have throughout his career life and career.

Erich Topp survived the war having sunk a total of 36 ships, became a Rear Admiral and worked for the UN in the United States until retiring in 1969. He died in 2005 at the age of 91. Although he finished the war as the third most successful U-boat captain, there are some reports that suggest that all was not "squeaky clean" with Kapitänleutnant Topp. After the war, there appeared to be quite a cult following of him, a celebrity even, with books written about him and busts made of him!!! Indeed, his name appears dozens of times on Google! Indeed there is even some film footage of him during his wartime operations on the U-boats and some documentary footage of him in later years discussing naval and U-boat tactics.⁴

³ Source: www.uboat.net

⁴ Available on Youtube

U-552, or the "Red Devil" as she was called, due to having a conning tower motif of a running red devil carrying two torches, became famous (or infamous) for three reasons:

Firstly, under the command of her first captain, Erich Topp, on the 31st October 1941 she twice torpedoed and sank the US destroyer USS Reuben James (DD245) whilst on convoy duty off Iceland..... five weeks before Pearl Harbour !! This was at a time when the USA was still officially neutral and the sinking caused a huge diplomatic row. U552 had just sunk the first US navy ship of WWII killing some 115 men out of her 160 complement including all the officers. This event was latterly immortalised by the folk singer Woody Guthrie's song "The sinking of the Reuben James" which has also been recorded by Pete Seeger and many other famous bands and singers over the years.

Secondly, again under the command of Topp, on the 2nd April 1942, off the east coast of the United States, she surfaced, ambushed and fired upon the SS David H. Atwater a small unarmed US registered coastal steamer, shipping coal from Norfolk, Virginia to Fall River, Massachusetts. Some US reports state that under the direct orders of Kptlt Topp, the U-boat crew fired upon survivors whilst they were in the water or in life boats/rafts. US coastguard and other vessels that arrived at the scene confirmed seeing bodies and survivors with bullet wounds and life rafts riddled with bullet holes. As you would expect, these actions caused some outrage in the USA. Rather than receiving any reprimand or Geneva Convention charges on his return, Topp was allowed to undertake a further two patrols on U-552 until the 13th August 1942. In September 1942 he became Commander of the 27th (Training) Flotilla, where he wrote the " Battle Instructions" for the new Type XI "Elektro" U-boats. He commanded one - U-2513, which he surrendered at Horten, Norway in May 1945, when the war ended.

Thirdly, and most importantly for me, was the sinking of the minesweeping vessel HMT Alouette on the 19th September 1942, seven miles west of Sesimbra by U-552 with her new commander Kapitanleutnant Klaus Popp.

That is because my late father, Leading Cook Richard (Dick) Robertson (LT/MX 83109) was a crew member on board when it was torpedoed. Klaus Popp was born on the 30th May 1917 and joined the German navy on the 5th April 1935. He took command of U-552 on the 9th September 1942, immediately after Erich Topp. According to the records, U-552 departed under Kptlt Popp from the U-boat base at St. Nazaire, France on the 10th September 1942 (presumably under cover of darkness) for operations in the Central Atlantic. Quite why the boat was only seven miles off the coast of Portugal, is a bit of a mystery.⁵

— ooOOoo —

Richard Robertson Jnr was born in 1956 in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland. He graduated as a Building Surveyor from Napier College, Edinburgh in 1978. He and his wife Christine are both members of Historic Scotland. They presently live in Wallacestone, Stirlingshire, which is either named after William Wallace, or after 'Red Comyn', a Scottish nobleman who was Guardian of Scotland during the Second Interregnum, who was stabbed to death by Robert the Bruce (who later to become King Robert I of Scotland) at the church of the Greyfriars at Dumfries in March 1306. A stone pillar, which replaced a much older stone, marks the place where Wallace reputedly stood to watch the approach of the English army during his last battle during the war of independence against the English under Edward I, on the 22nd July 1298.

⁵ www.mpsa.co.uk; www.wrecksite.eu; www.naval-history.net; www.thefullwiki.org