

Ship Here After Two Rescues in Six Hours; Saved 300 From Torpedoed British Vessels

Stories of rescues at sea have become almost commonplace since the start of the war, but yesterday the Independence Hall, an unheralded American freighter, slipped through the rain into Hoboken with a story that combined nearly all the dramatic elements of the rescues by the City of Flint, the American Farmer and the Bilderdyk. It even had a new twist of its own, for 127 of those saved were terror-stricken Hindus.

The vessel, the same size as the City of Flint, and, like that ship, owned by the Maritime Commission and normally carrying no passengers, was 500 miles off the coast of Spain when on Oct. 17 she rescued 300 persons from two torpedoed British ships within six hours.

This topped the records of both the Flint and the Bilderdyk, for the Independence Hall rescued seventy-three more persons than the former picked up from the Athenia, and she made both her rescues on the same day, whereas the Dutch freighter's two were separated by almost a week.

The first rescue was made in the

late afternoon when the American vessel picked up seventy-three of the crew of the City of Mandalay, a British freighter in the Indian trade. The U-boat that sank the Mandalay, like the one that sank the Kaffiristan, whose crew was rescued by the Farmer, stayed by the freighter until the rescue was effected. Then, when most of the men were safely aboard, it flashed a message of thanks and headed northeast.

The second rescue, a larger and more dramatic, was made an hour later when darkness had already fallen. The freighter saved 227 of the 284 persons who had been on board the 10,000-ton passenger liner Yorkshire, which was carrying sick British soldiers home from India.

There were fifty-six Hindu seamen, or Lascars, rescued from the Mandalay and seventy-one from the Yorkshire. Most of the latter had "split heads," for, according to passengers, they had become panicky-stricken when the torpedo hit the Yorkshire. They rushed to the

boats and pushed the women aside. Englishmen hit them over the heads with oars, fire buckets and axes to drive them back.

There were thirty-eight passengers on the Independence Hall when she made the rescues. Men and women alike gave up what makeshift quarters they had to the survivors. They also helped to look after them, giving them clothes, coffee, tea and rum, and aiding the doctors in giving medical care.

Most of the Lascars were naked and passengers gave them blankets from their beds. All the Yorkshire survivors were covered with oil, for the ship's fuel oil had spread over the sea. According to one of the American seamen on board, they were so dirty and coated with oil that Europeans at first could not be distinguished from Hindus.

Lives Lost in Each Case

There was loss of life with each sinking. The chief engineer, the carpenter and five natives were lost on the Mandalay. Fifty-seven were lost on the Yorkshire, including the wife and two daughters of one of the British lieutenant colonels who was on board; the mother of a four-month-old baby that was saved by the father, the master of the ship and three other officers.

L. H. Sheldrake, the second mate, was the only deck officer saved. The ship sank within nine minutes and, according to Captain Daniel J. McKenzie, master of the Independence Hall, many more would have been lost if Mr. Sheldrake had not formed the salvaged life boats—two were reported crushed as the ship sank—into a line and had them tied together.

The Hall left Bordeaux on Oct. 14 bound for New York, Captain McKenzie related. At 4:20 P. M. on Tuesday, Oct. 17, he got a radio message saying the Yorkshire had been torpedoed twenty-one miles away. He started toward the position given in the message. Half an hour later a second message came in saying the Mandalay had been torpedoed.

Since the Mandalay was on his course for the Yorkshire, he went on. Five minutes after the second message, the Mandalay was sighted, settling slowly on an even keel. When the Hall got within a mile and half of her, she suddenly buckled in the center. Her bow and stern nearly touched, said Captain McKenzie, and she slipped out of sight.

Then the ship came upon four boats. The sea was "choppy, rough and confused" the Captain said. Two of the boats were floating high, but two were waterlogged and men in the water were clinging to wreckage.

Submarine Appears

The captain manoeuvred the ship to pick up the first boat on the port side. Just as the men from that boat boarded his vessel, a submarine broke the surface off the port quarter and proceeded to the stern. It came up to Number 2 lifeboat.

The submarine was so close to the lifeboat, according to one of the American crew, that "the British sailors could feel its exhaust in their faces."

Captain McKenzie then manoeuvred over to Number 4 boat and picked up its men. The submarine came alongside his starboard side, ascertained the name and nationality of the ship and signaled by blinker light, "Thank you very much." It then disappeared into the darkness.

The captain picked up the other men. By 8:22 P. M. he had rescued seventy-three men, "all in a very sad state of exhaustion," but none seriously injured.

He proceeded south southwest. The night was dark and clear. At 9:36 P. M. he came upon six lifeboats of the Yorkshire that had been drifting for more than five hours. They had flares and were all strung together with Mr. Sheldrake in the first boat, a motor launch. He towed them to the ship's starboard side.

"The Europeans were orderly," Captain McKenzie said, "and the women were particularly brave and very calm. There were twelve of them. Some of them had babies in their arms. The natives were exhausted, scared and unable to help themselves. Seventy-five per cent of them had to be hauled aboard in cargo nets."

Two Regular Physicians

The ship had two regular physicians, Dr. Lewis Littlepage of Norfolk, Va., and Dr. Joseph Carletti of Pittsburgh, a work-a-way. Mrs. Littlepage, who is also a doctor, and Mrs. Carletti joined them in caring for the sick. So did Dr. Antonio Robert Gibert, a young Spaniard who is on his way to

Mexico, and Jean Souffront, Vico de St. Andre de Cubzac of the Virgin Islands, who had been studying medicine in Paris for five years.

Dr. Carletti worked for twenty-five hours at a stretch, he said, and could remember sewing up at least seven heads. At one time he said he had to borrow a needle and black thread from one of the women.

"There were about fifty seriously injured," Dr. Littlepage said. "There were broken bones, skull fractures and cases of influenza and pneumonia."

Captain McKenzie was full of praise for the work of the passengers. They worked hard and fast, he said, and did everything possible. They removed the wet clothes from the survivors and cleaned off their oil coating.

But despite all their efforts one of the natives died that night. His shipmates buried him at sea. Two days later a second man, a British sergeant major, died of a heart attack.

At 10:30 P. M. before the second rescue was complete the captain received a third radio message. The Saigang with ninety-six women and children on board reported she was being chased by a submarine.

Captain McKenzie, who under ordinary circumstances said he would have stayed near the spot where the Yorkshire had gone down until daylight, decided at 11:45 to leave for the Saigang since there seemed to be no hope of rescuing any more from the Yorkshire.

No Sign of Vessel

He reached the point where the Saigang had sent out its SOS at 6:52 A. M., but there was no sign of the ship and a later message gave its position elsewhere, so at 7:10 A. M. he started back for Bordeaux.

Passengers said the captain went back to France instead of going to a nearer port in Spain because many of the men rescued from the Yorkshire were British army and naval men, and under international law might be seized by Germans as prisoners of war in a neutral port. The highest ranking officer rescued, they said, was Rear Admiral D. M. T. Bedford.

Life on board for the next three days while the ship was bound for France was made more difficult by the religious customs of the natives. They refused to wash in still water and had to have water in basins so they could pour it over themselves. Then they refused to eat the meat that was offered to them and went on a hunger strike when they could not get hard-boiled eggs.

During the nights the ship was extremely crowded. The 393 persons on board slept in whatever space was available. The third night August Lepik, the boatswain, shared one of his forward staterooms with the body of the sergeant major.

On Friday evening, Oct. 20, the overloaded freighter finally reached Bordeaux. Those passengers who could muster the strength sang "God Save the King" and "America." The rescue ship remained in port for the next two days, and then on Oct. 23 sailed for home with the thirty-eight passengers who had originally set out nine days before.

From
New York Times

Nov. 6, 1939.

(see pg. 2 for pictures)

BACK FROM RESCUING 300 FROM TORPEDOED FREIGHTERS



Captain Daniel J. McKenzie
Associated Press, 1939

The Independence Hall arriving at Hoboken yesterday after going to the aid on Oct. 17 of the Yorkshire and the City of Mandalay, British ships that were sunk by submarines 500 miles off Bordeaux, France.

Associated Press



Radio Operator John Drougal

From
New York Times
Nov. 6, 1939.