

## AN EXPERIENCE AT SEA

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FEW vessels were better known to Nova Scotians, especially to those residing in Halifax, than the *Lady Hawkins*. The *Hawkins* sailed the very waters in which the man whose wife's name she bore—Sir John Hawkins—centuries ago patrolled the seas for Britain against the Spaniards and the French. For eleven years, from the day she sailed into Canadian waters until the war began, the *Lady Hawkins* was in constant service between Halifax and the West Indies.

At midnight on January 16, 1942, the *Hawkins* departed from Halifax on her fateful voyage, bound for Boston. Reaching Boston safely, travelling without a convoy, we proceeded towards Bermuda via New York. At approximately ten minutes to two, in the early hours of the morning of January 19, the German U-boat struck. Without warning of any kind, one torpedo struck the liner forward; swiftly it was followed by another. The engine-room was smashed, the generators stilled, and the lights went out.

Before "turning in" at about eleven o'clock, I had placed my clothes where I could get them quickly in an emergency. When the first torpedo struck, I was sound asleep. The terrific explosion threw me from my bunk. Realizing we had been torpedoed, I began to pick up my clothes and life jacket, but before I could leave the cabin another torpedo struck amidship and again I was knocked down. The lights went out, there was broken glass everywhere, and my bare feet were cut and bleeding. The smell of burnt cordite and the fumes from the explosion filled the air.

Already the ship was listing to the port side as I stumbled up on deck. While I was crossing the deck, a terror-stricken negro steward grabbed at the clothes I was carrying. I hit him with all the force in my body, and he sprawled to the deck. When I reached my lifeboat station, passengers and crew began to assemble. Dressing quickly, I tied on my life jacket. The ship was sinking rapidly. Up on the next deck men were endeavouring to lower the lifeboats. As our lifeboat came down, one of the cables fouled and had to be cut loose. Minutes seemed like hours as we waited anxiously below. By now the ship was listing so badly that the lifeboat swung too far from the side of the ship to allow anyone to climb aboard. The Chief Officer came down a rope ladder and cried out, "Everybody jump for your life!"

Without further thought I dived over the side and swam to the side of the lifeboat, climbed in and began to help on board those who could reach the lifeboat. Seeing my pal, a Wireless Officer, feebly attempting to reach the lifeboat, I reached for him and with the aid of another man hauled him to safety.

Many were too frightened to jump into the water; others feared the sharks and barracudas. The rest of the lifeboats on the port side had been smashed by the concussion of the torpedoes. The water was so covered with oil that one could not tell a white man from a coloured man. In the turmoil I was hit on the head by a boom, but I seemed not to feel it. As the lifeboat was loaded to capacity and we feared that the ship would suck us down, the oars were manned and we pulled away. From the stricken ship came cries of horror. Flames shot skyward from the ship's hatches, lighting up the water and the tragic scene. It was a heart-rending sight.

The sea was quite rough, and we had all we could do to keep the bow into the wind. Then came another agonizing moment. The submarine had come to the surface, and was playing a searchlight on the ship. "Will they machine-gun us?" ran through everyone's mind. I prepared to jump overboard if they opened fire. After several moments of suspense, the light was extinguished, and we were alone on the vast waste of water. That night, for the first time in my life, I was seasick, because of the oil and the salt water I had swallowed in reaching the lifeboat. We were all drenched, and were cramped together without room to stretch. At daybreak we counted the number present. There were 76; the lifeboat was built to hold 63, so one can well imagine our difficulties. We hoisted the sail. Then we discovered that the rudder was missing; so we had to use an oar instead. The Chief Officer immediately rationed the limited supply of water and "hardtack". At noon we had a small portion of water and a small piece of biscuit. During the afternoon we could see sharks swimming alongside. We kept a continual lookout for ships. Once or twice someone thought he saw smoke on the horizon, but the ship was never close enough for us to signal.

The next night there was a bad storm, and it looked as though we could not possibly survive until the morning. We were standing in water up to our shins, in spite of the efforts of the bailers. Bailing had to go on day and night for us to keep afloat. That night the first of our number died; we buried him the next morning with a few words of prayer and a hymn. Each night following, at least one person died. Many were becoming

delirious. Some drank salt water and went stark mad. At times the waves appeared as high as a house and seemed about to swallow us. Occasionally the crest of a wave would strike the small boat and send a deluge of water over us. We were always wet and uncomfortable. As the rations were consumed, we began to feel hopeless and to be resigned to our fate.

Then at approximately 10 p.m. on the night of January 24, there was a cry, "I see a ship!" Most of us were too weary to look, believing it to be only someone's ravings. Then another shouted, "It is a ship, thank God!" We all jumped up. We could hardly believe our eyes. The Chief Officer ordered a signal flare to be lit. We could see the ship had decreased her speed. Thank God, she had seen us! Willing hands picked up the oars and we made way towards the ship. As we reached her side, a ladder was lowered and we made the lifeboat fast. Our weakness left us in the expectation of rescue. If only we could get aboard that ship! As soon as we had scrambled up the ladder, we collapsed. I remember my legs felt like putty, and with a man on each arm I was taken to the saloon, where the crew gave us food and drink. Words cannot describe our thankfulness for our rescue from certain death.

We spent the next two days sleeping, eating, and receiving as much medical attention as was possible. Many broke out in salt-water sores. Infection set in my right leg, and after the third day I was unable to get out of bed. Upon arrival at San Juan, Puerto Rico, I was rushed to hospital, where a doctor operated on my leg. There I remained for about a month. Two members of the crew had to have their feet amputated. One man took pneumonia, went out of his mind, and died several days later. Everyone had to be treated for shock and exposure.

The Red Cross and the British War Relief Society looked after us wonderfully and sent cablegrams for us to those at home. We certainly had much to be thankful for. After recuperating at San Juan, I was shipped to New York, then to Montreal and back to Halifax. I shall remember this experience as long as I live, and the memories of my brave shipmates who did not return.