

## An account of the sinking of the "Aragon", 30<sup>th</sup> December 1917.

The following letter was written by an unknown ship's Officer of the "Aragon" to Mr. John William Hannay, my great-grandfather, giving his account of the sinking of the ship, on which my grandmother, Agnes McCall Ney Howie (born Hannay, on 16 Jul. 1892), a V.A.D., on her way to serve in Egypt and Palestine, was a passenger.

Adrian M. Rowe      10 August 2002.

"5 March 1918

Dear Sir,

Your letter to hand, and I very much regret to learn of the non-arrival of your daughter's letter. On my arrival at Liverpool on Feby. 4<sup>th</sup>. I was compelled to submit all correspondence to the alien officer before being allowed to land. All letters had to be censored, and I was forced to put my signature to each one in my possession, before handing them to the authorities. Your daughter was very anxious that the letter she gave me should reach you intact, as she had written a full account of her experience in the terrible disaster, which befell the ship and her escort, and I am exceedingly sorry that circumstances necessitated my yielding the letter to censorship. As the letter has not yet arrived, and knowing the severity of present censorship in matters relating to the sinking of ships, I doubt if it will ever reach you now. However, I sincerely hope it will eventually come to hand; for I can fully realise how anxious you all will be to ascertain a correct idea of the whole catastrophe and Miss Hannay's escape.

Undoubtedly you have received some word from Miss Hannay since the incident occurred, but I do not expect she has been able to send any details of what actually happened, therefore I will endeavour to convey it to you. In doing so I may be exceeding my official duty, but since the loss of the ship has been declared to the public generally and the affair no longer remains hidden from view (although reports given and impression thereby conveyed have been so meagre and confused): I will give my own experience.

For two weeks we laid at anchor in shelter of the harbour at Marseilles, awaiting sailing orders each day, until at last they came and the ship sailed, in company with another Transport, the "Nile", and an escort of destroyers. On board were some 160 Nursing Sisters, 150 Military Officers, 2200 troops and the Ships own officers and crew, numbering in all a total of 2700 souls. Besides this, the ship was laden with the whole of the Egyptian Xmas mail, comprising some 2500 bags. From Marseilles we proceeded to Malta, in safety, and with but little excitement. For a part of the voyage the sea was heavy and many were sick, Miss Hannay being sick for one day. Her friend, Miss Parkes, was not sick at all. We arrived at "Windy Bay" Malta, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, where we remained for four days, thus spending the Xmas in safety. On the fourth day we again put out to sea, in company with the "Nile" and a fresh escort of destroyers, three in number, two of which were Japanese, the other British. Everything went well until the moment of actual torpedoing. This was on Sunday morning, the 30<sup>th</sup> inst., and our port

of destination was just becoming distinctly visible to the naked eye on the horizon. Everybody was eagerly gazing at the sight from every place of vantage, and looking forward to be soon landed safely. Indeed, many had packed all luggage and were already attired for disembarkation. One heard many congratulating themselves on the safe passage.

The ship, with the British destroyer "Attack" was just entering the Channel which leads into the Port, and had actually passed inside of the first "buoy" which indicates the entrance to the Channel, when a wireless message was intercepted from Trawlers in the Channel, stating the presence of mines therein. The "Attack" immediately signalled to us to follow it, at the same time turning seawards. One of the Trawlers was also observed to be Flying the same signal, indicating that by an order of earlier period, it had been sent to direct the ship through the Channel. The destroyers signal was at once obeyed, that being the senior ship, and the "A" manoeuvred to follow it. In doing so she had to keep well away from the "buoy". The submarine was lurking at the "buoy" and was unable to Fire its torpedo as the ship entered the Channel, because of the close range, but immediately she turned to follow the "Attack" she presented a perfect target for the enemy, who took full advantage of the situation. The officers on duty on the bridge saw the periscope of the submarine, and at the next instant the wake of the torpedo, which was coming straight for the ship. An endeavour was made to turn the ship, and avoid the torpedo, but it was of no avail, as the ship was going very slowly. The explosion was a dull crashing blast, and the ship shuddered like a reed. I was on duty at the moment, and all the glass in the office came crashing on my head. Next instant the ship was alive to the awful fact that what we had been dreading, had actually happened, and everybody was at "stations" in record time: orders being obeyed with wonderful precision. The first great duty to every man was the rescue of every sister, and they were all mustered in their respective boats and lowered to the water before any other order was given. This operation took but a few minutes and was carried out without a hitch, the boats being the best in the ship, and in a position to afford greatest possible facility for getting off. I happened to be the officer in charge of the boat to which Miss Hannay was allotted, but being on duty, was unable to reach the boat, it being my great duty to stand by my instruments, and here I might mention, the Wireless call for assistance had been transmitted and replies received within a few seconds. By the time the sisters' boats had got clear, the ship had taken a heavy list to starboard and had sunk deep astern. For a few minutes she seemed to remain thus and during this time the destroyer had run up alongside. The troops were ordered to get "off" and they managed to do so by attaching ropes from the ship to the destroyer. On other parts of the ship troops were ordered to "take the water" and rafts were let loose. In a few minutes the sea was full of struggling men. On the boat deck where I was performing duty, the ship's boat crews were working in vain to get off the remainder of the boats, which had become jammed by the list. One could feel her going fast, and the list was rendering it impossible to stand upon the deck. About fifteen minutes had elapsed from the time of the explosion, when the Commander gave the order – "Every man for himself". Then there was a rush to get over the side, but nowhere was there any sign of panic. The discipline throughout was astounding, and troops clung on to each other, singing and cheering until they reached the water level, and then broke up into struggling masses. Just at this moment a groan and a cry of – "She's going" went up from everybody, and she began to sink rapidly astern. I

found it time to move, and managed to scramble on hands and knees to the side, where the destroyer was still at rescue work. One rope still remained attached to the destroyer, and to this I climbed and was sliding down – when alas! - it was cut, thus throwing me into the sea between the two ships, where I sank like a stone with all my uniform, boots and all on. When I got back to the surface I found myself in the midst of a mass of struggling humanity. It was a grim moment! Somehow I succeeded in getting to the destroyer, and got aboard, but some few seconds elapsed before I recovered my senses. Then I looked around – the destroyer was crammed with men: some wounded and bleeding, others stripped of clothing; many were laid out unconscious and dying. The “A” was disappearing rapidly amid a roar of rushing water, and the smashing of internal fittings. Scores of poor fellows still clung to the decks, and now at the last moment were attempting to throw themselves into the sea, rather than be “sucked under”, but from the great height to which the bow had raised, they were being killed outright as they touched the water. It was an awful moment! With one great surge, a roar of inrushing water, and the explosion of the ship's boilers, she went beneath the surface. Once out of sight, a grim silence seemed to settle on all, and I shall never forget the expression written upon mens' faces, as I saw it then. The spot over which she sank seemed enormous, and all around were struggling men and wreckage, upturned boats and rafts, to which they were clinging. One lot of Scotch lads I saw near by were standing shoulder to shoulder on a raft, knee deep in water, and singing “Loch Lomond”. It was pathetic! On the destroyer all hands were busy helping unfortunate ones, and preparing to clear a way for her to move ahead, when a shot rang out and next instant there was a terrific explosion. The middle of the destroyer had been smashed and men blown into the air. Oil, fumes, splinters of wood and steel flew in every direction, and she broke in halves and commenced to sink at once: the two ends, bow and stern – rising into the air and the middle sinking rapidly, where the torpedo had hit. There was no chance to do anything but “jump for it” which I did, as did also everybody else who could do so. It is impossible to describe the “mess” there was around those severed remains of that fine destroyer as they sank, and there was little hope to be entertained for those who could not swim, as the only means of rescue remaining were the two Trawlers, who were near at hand, and upon which the Sisters were: besides these, only the “A's” boats were available for rescue work; everything else, excepting rafts and wreckage, had disappeared.

However, these boats did wonderful work, and took hundreds of rescued fellows back to the Trawlers, where the Sisters worked unceasingly and with great heroism. Other Trawlers soon became visible on the horizon, and were rushing at top speed to the scene, but as the port was at least eight miles from the ship, they took quite a while to arrive, and many went down in the interval.

For more than an hour my senior officer and I were struggling for existence, before a Trawler picked us up, and it was a long time before either of us could “stand up”, as the temperature of the water was very low indeed. On board the trawler we had an exciting time, as we feared both submarine and mines. The Trawlers did fine work indeed, and but for their presence, few would have survived. As they became filled, they went back to port. Those with the Sisters were the first to reach land, and it was about 2.30 p.m. when they landed, everyone being safe. The Trawler upon which I was, arrived alongside the wharf at 4.30 p.m. Every possible provision had been made for our reception, and all were treated to the best that it was possible to acquire. The

Sisters were taken in motors to the Sisters Quarters, a fine Hotel, and given every comfort. The Wounded (a large number indeed) were taken to hospitals, and all other survivors were looked after in a manner which drew forth the appreciation of one and all.

To sum up the affair – The “A” was torpedoed approximately eight miles from Alexandria, at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917, and sank in twenty minutes. Her escort, the British destroyer “Attack” was torpedoed about 5 mins. later, in the act of rescuing survivors, and sank in from 5 to 7 mins. At the commencement I omitted to say that the other Transport – the “Nile” with the two Jap. destroyers, left us at daybreak, the same morning, and continued their course to Port Said. I understand that they also were subjected to Submarine attack, but reached their destination safely.

Up to the time of the calamity, the voyage had been one of the happiest in my experience, and I had thoroughly enjoyed the Xmas season. Indeed, I think everyone had! and as the company assembled were such a splendid lot, and had been on board so long, many lasting acquaintances were formed. For many days after the ships were sunk, friends were meeting friends, and a mutual rejoicing extended. Experiences were related and fortunes and misfortunes shared. I saw Miss Hannay on several occasions, and had the pleasure of dining with her and her friend Miss Parkes and others. She related her experience to me, and I gathered that she had rather an exciting adventure before leaving the ship, as at the moment of the explosion she was in her cabin, together with Miss Parkes, and they were packing luggage in preparation for disembarkation. In the excitement of the moment they rushed into the corridor, where they discovered that they were not prepared to rush on deck, being minus some portion of apparel, which Miss Hannay had left behind, so she returned to seek it. These few seconds seemed “Ages” as she put it, and upset both young ladies for the moment. They lost everything in their possession, except that in which they were attired. Miss H. was greatly troubled about the loss of her gold wristlet watch, which she explained had been a valued present from you. It had been removed to prevent its being broken in packing of luggage. She saved all her official papers and documents, including money, and was granted a compensation of £50 for losses, by the Military authorities. As far as her health was concerned, she was none the worse for the experience, and when I left Alexandria for England some eight days after the landing, she was on duty at one of the chief Hospitals in Alexandria, and was delighted at the prospect of a permanent duty there. Miss Parkes was also attached to the same Hospital. Beyond the loss of valued treasures, and personal equipment, and the inconveniences caused thereby, I think they are none the worse for their experience, which, sooner or later, will be given to you by their own lips, I trust sincerely. In the meantime, I have every reason to believe that they are sure to be well cared for, and have things conducive to their happiness, and well being, which fact should remove any anxiety from your mind. I am personally well acquainted with Egypt, and can say conditions are far better there than in the homeland just now.

I trust that this plain note of what actually occurred will be sufficient to convey some little idea of the very sad and deplorable loss. Much more comment might be given, but from which I must refrain, for obvious reasons.

I hope Miss Hannay is in good health at present, and should you be communicating with her, please convey my kind regards, both to her and her friend.

Personally I am at this moment on leave on account of ill health through the experience, but hope to return to duty on the high seas soon. Should you wish to gather more detail of the disaster, I shall be pleased to help with what information I can offer."

P.S. My mother Mary Morrison Rowe (née Howie) confirms the authenticity of the above letter. She was told by her mother that after the ship was hit by the torpedo and they rushed out of their cabin and along the corridor, my grandmother discovered that she did not have her skirt on! As she was not prepared to be seen in this state, she fought her way back to her cabin, against the flow of passengers trying to reach the deck, to finish dressing!

Adrian M. Rowe