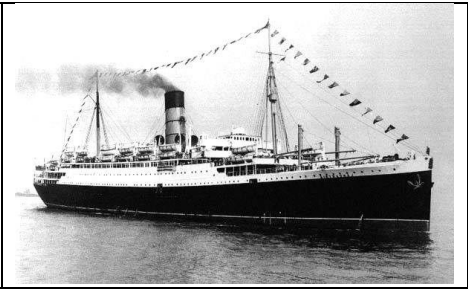




Serjeant Reginald Joseph Simpson

1896 – 1946

His Grandson's Recollections



My Grandfather survived the sinking of the Lancastria. He served in the Army since a young teenager in WW1 and subsequently in WW2 and finally ended up as a Sergeant in the Royal Army Pay Corps. We don't know too many details of the sinking because, like most other survivors, he was told not to discuss what happened.

When my Mum was alive she told us the brief story as she was told by him and my Nan.

We aren't sure which unit my Granddad was assigned to in France, but we know he made it to St Nazaire and was eventually taken by boat out to the Lancastria which was moored a few miles offshore as the water was too shallow to moor any closer. Granddad said that there were far too many people on board, and it was very cramped.

Granddad was a strong swimmer, they all lived on Canvey Island, and he would often swim around the creeks, beaches and back waters of the island. It saved his life.

He told my Nan that after he hit the water he swam as fast as he could away from the sinking ship, something he was aware of was the 'suction' of the ship going down apparently would drag anything nearby down with it. He said that it was like trying to swim through thick black treacle with hundreds and hundreds of cabbages floating on the surface.

The treacle was the oil which the sinking ship was haemorrhaging (still to this day rumours are that it wasn't only the ships engine oil but that it was possibly carrying 'classified cargo' too). The cabbages obviously weren't cabbages but floating bodies of those who couldn't swim. The heads bobbing on the surface as the bodies submerged under water.

He swam far enough away to try and avoid the strafing of the Junker JU88 aircraft that repeatedly flew around the sinking ship as it tried to ignite the thousands of tonnes of oil with its bullets. Thank God, he never managed it.

He spent several hours treading water, ingesting oil as he tried to stay afloat. Eventually he was rescued. We don't know by who or what boat unfortunately. He wrote my Nan a letter which was dated 18th/19th June after he was rescued. It was a very short note that said he was safe and on his way home and wished my Mum (who was about 8 or 9 years old) a happy birthday for that week.

He arrived home but didn't say too much about it. The memories however stayed with him and sadly, whenever songs like 'There Will Always Be An England' and 'Roll Out The Barrel' played on the wireless, he would switch them off. He told my Nan that as he watched the

ship sinking for about a quarter of an hour he heard the soldiers, the ones that couldn't swim, sitting and standing on the underside of the ship (as it was then practically upside down) singing these songs at the tops of their voices as they slipped into their watery graves.

He lived for another couple of years but had ingested so much oil that he got lung cancer and died in Braintree hospital a couple of years after the event.