



[Malcolm Morrison - Hero of the 'Arlington Court' (1939)]

In 1938 two young 17-year-old lads from Calbost, Malcolm Morrison of No. 9 and Neil Macleod of No. 8, joined the sea-school at Gravesend, London with a view to train as deck sailors for the Merchant Navy. Not long after that the Second World War broke out and they were drafted into the Merchant Navy as soon as they were 18 years old. Deck boy Malcolm Morrison joined the 'SS Arlington Court', a merchant ship of the Court Line, London, trading between South America and Britain.

On the homeward bound voyage from Rosario in Brazil to Hull, with a cargo of grain, on 16th November 1939, the ship was torpedoed by the German submarine U-43 in Mid-Atlantic in a howling gale and freezing weather. There was no mistaking what had happened. The torpedo struck a hold and the ship's bridge above the hold collapsed. The cargo of grain was scattered far and wide throughout the ship, even to the crew's quarters. Malcolm had just come off duty and was preparing to turn in for the night when the torpedo struck the ship. Pulling on some clothes over his pyjamas he rushed up on deck.

Interviewed later by a newspaper correspondent Malcolm said that he ran up on deck and along to his boat station in time to help lower the lifeboat, but the explosion had fouled the falls of the boat and it fell into the sea and drifted away.

I had to slip down the grab lines hand over hand and jump into the sea and swim some distance to catch up with the boat. By the time I reached the lifeboat others were trying to bail it out with pieces of timber, but as she was broadside on to the very heavy seas the water was coming in as fast as they could bail it out. My first action was to get the tiller and fit it in place in order to manoeuvre the lifeboat round to running with the sea.

Fortunately Malcolm had helped to provision the lifeboat a few days earlier and he knew where there were buckets with which to bail out the lifeboat, and he showed the others where to find them under the thwarts. By this time Malcolm had realised that there were no ship's officers, or anyone else with any experience whatsoever about small boats or navigation, in the lifeboat, so he was obliged to take charge.

'There were seven of us', said Malcolm, 'the Chief Engineer, who was far from well, a 16 year old galley boy, a deck boy, a fireman, a cook, a seaman and myself'. What Malcolm learned in the company of his seniors at the inshore fishing in his native island, and during his brief spell at the Nautical College in Gravesend, was put to good use in the days ahead as he took sole charge of the lifeboat. He steered, sailed, navigated as well as rationing the food and water until they were rescued approaching the British coast after an epic six-day voyage.

Their first scare was just after getting the lifeboat under control, when they drifted over the German submarine, almost within touching distance of the periscope. The U-Boat stayed in the vicinity to ensure that the ship sank.

The 'Arlington Court' was slow in going down, probably due to the cargo of grain, and the U-Boat fired another torpedo into the forepeak in order to accelerate the end. Malcolm and his companions saw a small jolly boat with 4 or 5 of the 'Arlington Court' crew, rowing towards them but making little headway in the heavy seas. When it became dark they lost touch with each other and they never saw the small boat again. They also lost touch with the lifeboat, which contained the Captain and most of the crew. They were rescued not long afterwards.

On reflection, Malcolm remembered the course the ship was on before he came off watch. Using the small box compass in the lifeboat he set her on that course as he reflected on how fortunate he was to gain knowledge and experience with small boats back home in Calbost when he was a boy. 'I felt that the best thing to do was to keep to that course and hope for the best'. The days that followed were like a nightmare to young Malcolm and his shipmates. He stayed at the tiller, and at first some of the men attempted to row but as none of them had ever handled an oar, progress was slow. In the morning of the first day Malcolm decided to set sail and he had to leave the tiller, and with the help of the sailor they managed to set sail.

To add to their distress the Chief Engineer died on the day following the sinking. 'Like most of us he was lightly clad, he was elderly, about 66 years of age, and he was shivering dreadfully all night until he finally died'.

It was Friday, and they sighted a ship but she did not see them. On the Saturday they sighted another ship, which they thought was part of a convoy, but she did not notice them either. Sunday was still very stormy with heavy showers. They were soaking wet, cold and hungry. The sea had got into one water barrel and the other was half

empty so Malcolm rationed the water supply to one tablespoonful twice a day. Only the 65 year old cook was allowed a little extra water.

Day after day and night after night Malcolm was at the helm, navigating and sailing the open boat for hundreds of miles in Mid-Atlantic except for an occasional spell at the oars to restore his circulation. Monday and Tuesday no ships were sighted. The survivors were all growing weaker with the constant bailing and lack of food and sleep. Morrison felt he scarcely slept at all as he had to manage the boat. The poor galley boy fared even worse as he was only lightly clad and in slippers, and he was seasick all the time with nothing in him to bring up. They tried to cheer each other up by telling stories and lamenting the fate of the canaries which they had bought in Freetown, and which had gone down with the ship.

At daybreak, on the sixth day, they were all feeling very low when they sighted a tanker and they lit a flare. It turned towards them. By then they had travelled hundreds of miles in extremely rough weather with only a pocket compass to guide them and an 18 year old to steer them. Most of them were so weak that they had to be hoisted on board the tanker and they could not stand when they got onto the deck of the ship. A glass of whisky, warm baths and comforting blankets on board the tanker were bliss to them. Malcolm, however, refused to go to hospital and he made his way home to Calbost on leave.

Malcolm was among the first war heroes to capture the public's attention. His feat of courage and endurance was to be an encouragement to others. He was summoned to the Admiralty to receive official congratulations and the Press reported that the office workers of Whitehall were among those gathered outside the Admiralty gates to cheer this slightly built youth who had written a glowing page in the history of British Seamanship. Yet he looked shy and bewildered as he dismissed the whole thing in three words, 'just my job'.

The BBC and the newspapers of the time, French included, extolled the achievements of the 18 year old Lewis deck boy. The Daily Mail wrote, 'His excellent seamanship will pass down to posterity as one of the epic tales of the Merchant Navy'. Malcolm Morrison's story was told in a BBC Empire programme by an Admiral. The Admiral began his talk by referring to the epic battle of the 'Graff-Spee', and then turned onto the story of Malcolm Morrison, the young boy from the Isle of Lewis. The extraordinary feature of Malcolm Morrison's achievement was that, when he was picked up by a Norwegian tanker he was still on course and almost within sight of land.

Malcolm was awarded the Gold Medal of the Shipwrecked Mariners and Fishermen and Mariners Benevolent Society, bearing the inscription:

Presented for heroic exertions in saving life from drowning

That medal was presented in Stornoway Town Hall, where about 700 people crowded into the hall. He was also awarded the medal of the London Shipping Federation for meritorious service on the recommendation of the Gravesend Nautical College.

Malcolm was one of five brothers in the armed services. Donald and Angus were both in the Royal Navy; Angie was in the Army, Alasdair, the eldest, was in the Merchant Navy. He survived sinking by enemy action on three occasions in the War and nearly lost his life when his fishing boat was wrecked in a howling gale in The Minch. He survived the sinking of the 'SS Cumberland' in 1940, the loss of the 'SS Michael E' in 1941 and of the tanker 'Aldersdale' on 5th July 1942 with the Russian convoy 'PQ 17'. Shortly after the War he was shipwrecked in the motor fishing boat 'Delight'. The Morrison family of Calbost certainly served their country well.

Calum Morrison of the 'Arlington Court'

In 1940 the 'Arlington Court' was sunk in the Atlantic and Calum Morrison from Calbost in Lewis was among the survivors. In his lifeboat, he was the only one who could handle a sail, and so spent five days and nights sailing eastwards until they made it into the English Channel. He was seventeen at the time.

Dear to my heart
Are the lads from the bays,
the lads from the creeks
as they march aboard.
Dear to my heart
Are the lads from the bays
Who would attack the enemy
When roused.

I heard
Of the brave young Morrison,
His fame broadcast
Through the cloudy ether,
Who found himself in dire circumstances
Out in the Atlantic,
Alone among English speakers,

None of whom could set a sail.

But seal pup of the ocean that he was,
The know-how was in his blood -
Baling, beating,
Driving under full sail.
Fearless, not even feeling the cold,
Hammer-hard,
Nobody with him capable of untying
A tight knot with his bare hand.

They didn't know how to steer
Nor alter sail,
They couldn't row
Nor haul a rope.
They just slept and crouched down,
With no desire to live,
And were a subject of ridicule
For splayfooted Lord Haw-Haw.

The clean handsome young man
Who steered her to safety,
His name will be
Newly entered in the lists.
He who sailed with intelligence
A course through the wide ocean
With not a speck of land
To guide him, only the clouds.

Young Calum saw the light of day,
Not in a smoky city -
By his deeds he proved this -
But in cattle country,
The land of salmon and of nets
At the mouth of the Stromes,
And he suckled sustaining milk
At the breast.

My loved Lewis
Is sad and sorrowing,
For her warriors,
Needed by the Crown, are scattered the world over,
Their sleeves rolled up
As they man the big guns,
Steadfast in their conviction
To fight the death for freedom.

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Hero of 'The Arlington Court'

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 3, Section 53

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/3

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See also Hebridean Connections, for more information about Malcolm Morrison:

<http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/Details.aspx?subjectid=23342>