

BRIARWOOD

160733 Middlesbrough 90YR

J. Constantine & Sons Ltd., Middlesbrough-on-Tees

Built 1930 Northumberland Shipbuilding Co., Newcastle upon Tyne

4019 GRT (2465N)

L. 364.8' B. 51.0' D. 24.9'

411 NHP Coal Gyro compass

Wireless telegraphy; direction finder; echo sounder

General cargo carrier. Gyro compass for iron-ore trade and for northern latitudes.

Bofors anti-aircraft gun in addition to the usual anti-submarine gun and machine guns.

Early in the War, transported men (B.E.F.) and stores to St. Nazaire. Was one of the last ships to leave Harwick when Norway fell.

In May 1940, in English Channel, destroyed two aircraft.

4/7/1940 Off Portland was bombed by aircraft and damaged

5/11/1940 Was a survivor from the JERVIS BAY convoy when this was attacked by ADMIRAL SHEER

In July 1941, when sailing alone from Gibraltar to New York, destroyed a Focke-Wulf bomber.

In November 1941, left Iceland for Russia in PQ3 but was holed by an iceberg and had to return. Later that month, having been repaired, sailed from Iceland in PQ5, going alongside at Molotovsk in December. Just before the year end, she left Russia in QP4.

In March 1942, she sailed again, in PQ14, destroying one

aircraft during the voyage and another while in
Murmansk. She returned in QP11.

In October 1942, she sailed independently from Iceland in
Operation FB, but returned.

In December 1942, she went yet again to Russia, in JW51A,
returning in RA52.

In 1946, she became the British GARDENIA (flag line)

In 1964, she became the Panamanian AIS NICOLAS

In 1969/70, she was last listed as such in Lloyd's Register
of Shipping

S.S. BRIARWOOD

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| 23/6/1941 | CARDIFF | Signed on: 2nd Radio Officer |
| | MILFORD HAVEN | Anchored |
| | LISBON | Ashore. Visits to ESTORIL and CINTRA |
| | GIBRALTAR | Anchored |
| | NEW YORK | Ashore |
| | SYDNEY, N.S. | Anchored (2) |
| 7/10/1941 | BELFAST | Signed off. Leave |
| 8/10/1941 | GLASGOW | Signed on: 2nd Radio Officer |
| | REYKJAVIK AND | Anchored (2) |
| | HVALFJORD | |
| 1941 / | MOLOTOYSK | Ashore |
| 1942 | SEYDISFJORD | Anchored |
| | KIRKWALL | Anchored |
| | METHIL | Ashore |
| 5/2/1942 | SOUTH SHIELDS | Signed off. Leave |

My week's leave over, a telegram from Marconi instructed me to report to the Cardiff office; there I was told that s.s. Briarwood would be signing articles at the Shipping Office at such-and-such a time. I knew that the Master, Captain Lawrence, was there himself; he would have a word with each of us signing on. The Shipping Master or his representative would witness the formal agreement, so I became the second radio officer — only two of us could be provided in those lean days — until the vessel next returned to the United Kingdom or, alternatively, upon the expiry of two years abroad. I was told where the ship was lying, and one of the other officers took me for an out-of-hours drink at the local Conservative Club. What a lot young men have to learn, drinking out of hours indeed!

Briarwood was a general cargo ship, but, having a gyro compass fitted, had possibly been built with the iron ore trade in mind. Such ships often "tramped" from port to port picking up what work they could. When I found her, and my memory ^{associates} Cardiff docks with a complex system of foot bridges, she was either loading coal or taking on coal bunkers. In those days, and to those who lacked experience in such matters, a merchant ship alongside and working cargo would represent an utter chaos of noise and confusion. On the quay, lorries, sometimes goods trains, would be delivering great mounds of cargo. Dockers would be everywhere, packing bales, cases, barrels, even vehicles, into slings or on to

platforms for the shore-side cranes or the ship's own derricks to hoist aboard, and then send rattling down into the holds, there to be stowed by the gangs working down below. Delivery men, crane men, winch men, tally men, foremen, bosun, deck officers, shipping agents: all would be watching, giving instructions, doing this or that, knowing just what was going on. If the cargo were coal, it would be loaded at a special quay where there were chutes, and a layer of black dust would cover all. No wonder seamen were always glad to cast off the mooring ropes and get the ship back out to sea; there, cleanliness and order would be restored.

The First Radio Officer's cabin was an outside one. I knocked; if there was a voice from inside, it was lost in the general din, so I pushed open the door. Two startled faces, his and his wife's, looked at me from his bunk; so I made a hasty retreat. Later, when we met more formally, nothing was said of course, but I sensed that the humour of the thing had appealed to them as well as to me. Atkinson was a tall, lightly-built man, affecting a goatee beard. He had been a teacher before the War and had that quiet assurance and imperturbability that good teachers often have. From the north-east — as were most of the ship's company — he had served in Briarwood for some time and had seen action in her. The sense of distance between the man-in-charge and his junior was always present, of course; but he took it for granted that I was competent, and I enjoyed showing him that such was indeed the case. Working watches of six hours on, six hours off, we saw a

good deal of each other: changing of the watches, meal-time reliefs, Rugby Radio transmissions, stand-by if we were called to action stations, and so on. I liked him very much, and have often wondered if he survived the War.

The Master, Captain W. H. Lawrence, was a vigorous and capable man. Probably in his thirties, he was in his element both as a ship's master and as someone determined to make that ship equal to any task given to her; and if an opportunity for personal distinction should come his way, he would earn that too. Certainly, when I joined her, *Briarwood* had seen something of the War, but how long he had been master in her I do not know.

I have no memories of any of the others apart from the bosun. He was a small, twisted monkey of a man who fell from one of the cross-trees and had to be left in hospital at our first port abroad. We left him for nearly dead, but heard later that, now twisted more than ever, he was back at sea in another of the company's ships.

Somewhere in the early days of the War I had some training in the handling of a machine gun, and this may well have been at Cardiff. A Royal Navy team would arrive in a van and set up school on the quay-side. The two guns I learnt about were the Hotchkiss and the Browning. One — the Hotchkiss, I think — fed in the rounds from a metal slide to which they were clipped; the other had the rounds in loops on a fabric belt. If the prongs on the metal slide were

out of true, that gun jammed; if the fabric belt were worn or frayed, the other one did likewise. We were taught how to clear such faults and how to maintain the gun generally. Model aircraft were used to teach us aircraft recognition, and also to show us how to estimate the speed of an attacking plane and position it correctly on the ring sight. I remember that when I fired, the tracer — the rounds were loaded in a sequence of tracers, armour piercing, ^{incendiary,} and soon — curved away far wide of the target. But can this have been in Cardiff, or am I mixing it up with somewhere else? In Briarwood, machine guns were on either side of the mid ship housing; what chance such weapons would have against an attacking aircraft was a matter of doubting conjecture in most of our minds. Also, on each wing of the bridge, Briarwood had steel shelters for the navigating officers, and rocket devices which fired into the air a steel wire which would then be supported by a parachute — but more of these later. Most important of all, however, was that the ship had a high-angle, anti-aircraft gun which fired explosive shells. This was a Swedish Bofors which the ship had acquired in Narvik, I believe, before that port fell to the Germans. It was mounted aft, near the anti-submarine gun, and was manned by three army gunners, one to traverse, one to elevate, and one to feed in the clips of shells. The rate of fire was, I think, one a second.

My cabin in that ship was an inside one, the porthole not all that far above the waterline. There were two bunks, one above the other, so, of course, I had the lower one. For a day or two, it felt strange to have the

sea just a metal plate away from where I slept, but that soon became an accepted part of life, and I enjoyed having the place to myself. To get to the radio room, I went up a companionway to the main deck, then up another companionway to the boat deck. The radio room bulkheads had been strengthened with steel plates, and the door had become massively thick and heavy. The handle was a great two-bladed affair made from a flat steel bar two or three inches wide. When the door was closed, the blade on the inside slotted into a bracket inside the jamb; similarly, when the door was open, and swung back against the bulkhead, what had been the handle on the outside then engaged a bracket there, the blade on the inside now acting as handle. The method for using the door was to wait until the ship rolled to port — the radio room was on the port side — and to disengage the handle so that the door swung out; when the ship reached the extent of its roll, the door was gently guided so that, as the ship rolled to starboard, the door swung back on itself against the bulkhead and was there secured. Whether Atkinson and I ever discussed the matter I don't know, but it must have been clear to both of us that, should the bridge housing sustain damage in an attack, this door could become a problem, particularly so if the ship listed to starboard. A thing that occurs to me now, all these years later, is the way in which such matters were accepted with scarcely a second thought; what was, was. Mind you, experience was teaching us all that, when something did happen, it usually had a character all of its own anyway.

My record shows that, having left Cardiff, we anchored in Milford Haven, this suggesting that we sailed in convoy. This would be a small group of cargo ships in the charge

of perhaps a single corvette, perhaps a couple, and we would have this escort at least until we were clear of Northern Ireland and possibly all the way to Portugal, where we were bound. When we were off Lisbon, we entered the Tagus and anchored out in the river. Lighters were used for landing our own cargo and to bring us our new one. And what we loaded astonished me: cork, the strips lashed together into great bales. They filled the huge holds, then the tween decks, and were lashed in place as deck cargo. They were for the U.S.A., obviously useful to them, and helping us to pay for our much needed war supplies. At least, we thought, we wouldn't be easy to sink! Because we were free of watch-keeping duties when in port — in a foreign country, the transmitters were always sealed by their officials — Atkinson and I were asked by the skipper if we would act as tallymen for the incoming bales — for extra pay, of course. So while the barges, looking like something out of Greece for Troy, came towards the ship, sails filled and a mountain of bales on their decks, we sat in the sun performing our small but profitable task. My count was well out with that of the corresponding Portuguese tallyman, and when our captain and the shipping agent came to question us, this took them back a bit. But off they went to the Old Man's cabin and soon emerged full of smiles: it would take more than bales of cork to disconcert either a ship's agent or the master of a British tramp steamer.

Lisbon was a lovely city. As in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, I was like a man using his eyes for the first time. Again, there were the classical squares, the wide boulevards, the tall houses, windows

shuttered against the heat, the trees and shrubs arranged to give areas of shade and freshness, and, in the cool, late evening, the people — best clothes on display — strolling, sitting, eating, drinking, and, of course, talking and laughing in an uninhibited way new to me. One day, in a secondhand bookshop, I bought some English essays, the book having a foreign imprint; it seems childish now, but I thought myself quite the cosmopolitan. We did not know it then, of course, but the huge momentum of the British Empire had been running down for years and was almost spent, and we — my generation — were enjoying something that really belonged to the past. Wherever we went ashore there were always people proud to show us that they spoke our language, and our English pounds commanded the kind of respect — and good exchange rate — that was to transfer to the U.S. dollar once the War was over. One evening, four of us made a party and took the local train to Estoril. There, we hired a taxi for the evening and went up to Cintra, to one of the good hotels. I still remember both how happy we were, and the sweet served with our meal: pineapple rings sprinkled with brown sugar and soaked in a mixture of their own juice and port wine. The whole evening cost us just one pound each! When times like that happened it always troubled me a little because of how badly off they were at home; but that was how it was during the War.

And so to Gibraltar, through the very waters where Nelson — one of my finest heroes — had fought and died. Gib. I remember little of though it must have meant much at the time. The idea was that we would join a convoy bound for the U.K., and that they would send us on our way when we reached the appropriate latitude. We were hardly out into the Atlantic

before a Focke-Wulf picked us up, flying round and round in a great wide circle, out of reach and seeing all. It was easy for him, of course, with now-occupied France so near. After a time, another Focke-Wulf would take over to do his stint. Down in the convoy we all knew what we were in for: he would be calling up the U-boats. The escorts fussed about: keep closed up, keep station, don't straggle; and we men kept our lifejackets and emergency packs handy. Lifejackets in those days were blue and stuffed with kapok, and each had a battery light and a whistle clipped to the shoulder. I also had a sharp clasp-knife tied to mine. The emergency pack was a private affair: I had a haversack in which were my discharge book, my radio ^{"ticket"}, some chocolate and some malted-milk tablets, a pullover, a balaclava helmet, and a metal flask of brandy.

Aboard our ship, we felt quite sure that, because of the aeroplane, we would be taken close to home and then handed over to a convoy bound for the States. However, to our astonishment, when it was growing dark on the evening scheduled for our departure, the destroyer, corvette, whatever it was in charge, rushed up alongside and hailed us with orders to be gone. A Dutchman — a ship which had avoided capture when Holland was occupied, and which was now based in the U.K. — was to be off too. We crammed on all speed. Chief Engineers are notoriously reluctant to run a ship's engine at full speed — it sends up fuel consumption and rattles everything loose — but there were no reservations that night: we went flat out. The Dutchman was not quite as fast — not that you could call our nine or ten knots a Blue Ribbon speed — and he fell away astern. Just before midnight his SSS call came blasting into the headphones. Atkinson was on

watch and I was with him in the radio room — there was nowhere else to be at such a time. He got out the first part of his message, then there was silence. He had been torpedoed, and must have gone in a minute or two. Someone said that he had been carrying iron-ore, but whether they really knew was another matter; there was always talk about such cargoes as iron-ore, ammunition, oil, aviation fuel — ones that gave the crew so much less chance. We waited for our submarine; why he did not come we never knew — perhaps he hadn't the speed, perhaps he hadn't a torpedo left, perhaps there was only one in the area. Next morning we were still belting on, thick black smoke pouring from the funnel, the whole ship quivering like a living thing from stem to stern. Then the Focke-Wulf picked us up. He took his time, flying round slowly in great circles. We did not know whether he was calling in submarines or whether he would do the job himself. The klaxon had sent us all to action stations, of course. I was sitting on the floor of the radio room, behind Atkinson, both of us very still, just waiting. I was not frightened really, but sad and quiet at the thought of leaving behind the people I loved at home, and wanting to say good-bye. We were quite ready: the main transmitter was running, and I was in place to start the emergency one should it be needed. Atkinson's hand was by the key (i.e. the morse key) and in front of him was a note of our position (latitude and longitude) recently acquired from the bridge by way of the voice pipe. Either it would be an SSS or an AAA, torpedoed or bombed. Elsewhere, the Captain had joined the Third Mate on the bridge; the other deck officers were at their stations — for example, the Mate and the Boson ready to deal with structural damage if that were suffered; astern, the guns' crews had

closed up; seamen were at the machine guns; and the engineers and firemen (stokers) were sweating it out down below. Throughout the War, I never envied the engine-room people their job. What a place to be when a torpedo came through the side: moving pistons, turning shafts, furnaces, boilers, and pipes that, fractured, could send out a jet of superheated steam. There were some who hated going below, but most used to joke about it and say they were better off down there if bombs were being dropped.

And then the Focke-Wulf decided to attack. He went a long way astern, came down very low, then straight up the ship's wake. Atkinson and I saw none of this, of course, sealed in as we were behind our six-inch-thick door. The order came to transmit, and away went our message, Atkinson steady as a rock. His hand was barely off the key when Nantucket light vessel — situated at the entrance to New York harbour, and also a powerful radio station — acknowledged receipt. Then Nantucket ordered radio silence over that part of the North Atlantic — there were always neutrals, and the U.S. itself was neutral at that stage, doing their ordinary radio business — and repeated our transmission. And now the fearful racket started outside, the guns on both sides opening up and the bombs screaming down. I was terrified: I had been in the general bombings of our cities at home — unpleasant enough — but this was different, more immediate, more personal, and when it was all over I vowed that never again as long as I lived would I allow anybody or anything to cause me so much fear. It was as if I had passed through fear and out the other side.

When Capt. Lawrence saw that the bomber was committed

to his run, he ordered the wheel hard-a-starboard, and the ship had just begun to heel over in answer when the German let go his stick of bombs. They fell astern and alongside to port, but none struck directly. The explosions so close moved the ship bodily sideways, tore and buckled plates, but did no vital damage. His gunners, front and rear, hammered away with their cannon — one of the shells burst on the bulkhead by the radio room door — but these also failed to give us serious hurt. And our people were giving it back as hard as they could, the Bofors gun in particular sending up its stream of shells. The plane banked away over the port bow, and the voice-pipe from the bridge told us in the radio room to transmit the message: First attack beaten off. As before, Nantucket had it on the instant and re-transmitted to all ships.

But there was no second attack. The bomber continued to fly away. Part way to the horizon, he dropped his remaining bombs into the sea and then, further on, followed it himself. The Bofors had done its work. As can be imagined, we were delighted by our success, but cautious also that the Germans would let us get away with it. But they did, and sometime later we had a telegram to encode and transmit. To the British Consul at New York, it reported briefly, and requested arrangements for dry docking and repairs.

There were two sequels to these events, both minor. One was that in the midst of the attack, when the Third Mate pulled the lanyard to fire the parachute and steel-wire device, the rocket screamed into the air all right, but instead of the parachute opening to suspend the wire in the path of the plane, the whole lot

whipped astern, coiled itself around one of the army gun layers on the Bofors and knocked him off his seat on to the deck. It could have been tragic really, putting the gun out of action, but they managed somehow, and the whole thing became a matter of subsequent amusement both because of the performance of the Admiralty's wonderful device and because of the impression made by the gunner's language in describing it.

The other sequel concerned the fate of the plane. All agreed that it had given out a trail of smoke ^{and} that it had jettisoned its bombs, but a few were not quite convinced about its going into the sea. We cared little, there are always shadowy corners in war-time: the ship had survived, and so had we. In fact, the plane's destruction was later officially confirmed; Capt. Lawrence was awarded an O.B.E., the Third Mate had the British Empire Medal, and the Corporal in charge of the gunners received a Mentioned in Despatches.

A few days later was my twenty-first birthday. How they found out about it I have no idea, but some of the Engineers arrived — grinning like apes — to present me with a three or four foot long key made of heavy metal bar. It cost me a crate of beer on my slops bill with the Chief Steward!

And so to New York. It must have been an exciting business to enter this famous harbour and to see for the first time such well-known landmarks as the Statue of Liberty and the skyscrapers that thronged lower Manhattan; but I was to visit a number of times in the years that followed

so that early impressions were lost in familiarity. But there was something for everybody, and much excited chatter as we steamed in. The docks were lined with ships, including some of the great liners that had competed so hard for the rich Europe to America passenger trade; this was the everyday world of the men amongst whom I was, and there were many eager recognitions of ships and shipping lines. We must have gone alongside somewhere to discharge our cargo — quite forgotten now; but I do remember going into dry-dock to have our damaged hull repaired. We couldn't use our own lavatories there because they discharged outboard, and the communality of the arrangements ashore, while spotlessly clean in the American way, proved something of a fiasco. Though I had been to a boarding school, the idea of sitting in a row of men all with their trousers round their ankles — one reading a newspaper here, two others chatting about baseball there — was more than I could take. I sought alternative outside the dock gates — as did most of us — and so encountered that splendid American institution, the place to eat: good food, quick and skilful service, low prices — and, of course, more private "washrooms".

To go ashore, we needed a pass. The immigration authorities set up a table in a shed by our gangway. We were all fingerprinted. Now being fingerprinted in Britain was a process reserved for criminals, not law-abiding citizens, and I was somewhat taken aback; but the kind of licence that the British had in so many countries — because of the Empire — had no validity here, so I rolled my fingers over the ink pad and stamped their prints as required. It was all novel,

interesting, exciting; and yet there were moments of sadness and depression. We had all been touched by the loss of the Dutch ship; good men, exiles from their own homes, had seemed to have their lives almost stupidly thrown away. When we went ashore, it was to busy, brightly-lit, prosperous streets, to the stir and bustle of a people happy with their own affairs, ^{and} seemingly indifferent to — indeed, unaware of — the fates of whole nations across the Atlantic. The contrast with what we had left at home was acute: the piles of rubble in the streets, the smashed ships in the docks, the shabby clothes, the rationed food, the blackout and the bomb-shelters, the husbands and sons away, the children from their homes. I went on the ferry-boat to see the Statue of Liberty, and enjoyed it, of course; but I saw the young couples — my own age — sitting together in their shared happiness, and I thought of Barbara, and I envied them.

We knew now, of course, that, whatever else, we would not lose the war. We were no longer alone, Hitler had made his fatal mistake. Even lowly people like us knew that he would lose his all in the vastness of Russia, as Napoleon had before him. But our own affairs seemed only to limp along. True, we had secured our island and were marvellously together as a nation, but we seemed to blunder and fail again and again. In Africa, for example, what victories there were seemed always to be followed by defeats. At sea — and this was throughout the war — none of us ever suspected the true, huge extent of our losses; but we saw for ourselves how few the escorts, how inadequate the equipment, and, beyond all, how absent the aircraft.

These feelings and thoughts must have been with me one evening when, headphones on, I sat in my cabin tuning over the local radio stations with a little set I had made. Suddenly I came across a strong, strangely-timbred voice and, as I listened, I soon realized that this was none other than President Roosevelt. He was talking to his people. Quietly, simply, as a good father speaks to his child, he was explaining to them what was happening in Europe, and how what was happening was of concern to the United States, and how that concern was such that, however great their reluctance, they must accept the need to be involved. It was most wonderfully done, and the words came to my troubled spirits like a benediction: there were people who understood, all would come right. When, towards the end of the war and with victory assured, news came of his death, I felt the sadness one feels for a personal friend.

What we loaded in New York I no longer know: wheat, perhaps, or war material. Whatever it was, we took it to Sydney, N.S., and a slow convoy home. And we had passengers: young Canadian flying-officers, quiet, straight-faced, serious. We noticed how thoughtfully they examined the dings left by the Focke-Wulf gunners upon our superstructure, but we did our best to make them welcome.

Our journey home would take two to three weeks. About two hundred miles out from the British Isles, the sea would change from deep blue to blue slightly tinged with green — the continental shelf, I suppose — and if the wind was from the east, you might even catch the smell of the land.

sea birds would appear, more and more each day. And then a large Sunderland flying-boat would be circling slowly, and the coast would lie in the distance. After a while the barrage balloons ^{would} hang in the sky ahead, the convoy warships would be fussing about, ready to take their leave, a pilot boat would appear, there might be tugs, and all the complex business of entering port would be underway.

I stayed with Briarwood. My record shows that I signed off in Belfast one day and signed-on again the next day in Glasgow; but it also says that I went on leave from Belfast and re-joined in Glasgow. What kindly fudge took place in reality — so that I could have the time at home — has long been forgotten.