

What a bloody letter

It's a long time since I wrote one this length. Hope you find it interesting.

1887546 Spr of W. Dale

159 Railway Construction Company

17th Formed Units Bttn

1st R.T.C

Royal Engineer

Songmoor

Buss, Hants

11th July 1940.

I didn't tell you I lost my police belt in the war.

Dear Vic,

Thanks for your nice letter, pleased to hear that you had a nice leave. It was of hard lines that ^{we} I couldn't get home together, but perhaps better luck next time.

Yes Betty is a lovely kid. Doris and I might well be proud of and we certainly are. I did see a difference in her. Doris told me her Uncle Vic gave her a ten bob note, that was very good of you.

Will you want to know a few of the details of our shipwreck. I'll try and give you it in story book form. It still seems a dream to us.

We didn't know hardly that there was a war on until the Saturday before we got home.

We had had our tea about 5pm and were

getting ready for a night out when the order came
 to pack up in full marching orders as we were
 on the move. Well that was it, in less than half
 an hour we were in lorries bound for St Nazaire
 (I think thats the way to spell it) Eventually we
 got there with no trouble. Well there was no
 boat for us so we marched back a hell of a
 way and slept on a concrete floor in a half finished
 aerodrome. There was thousands of troops there
 and lorries and they kept coming in all the
 time and slinging tons of fags and grub to the
 lads, of course it was of no good to them they
 had to give it away or leave it for the jerries.
 They came around bombing all day and about five
 o'clock Sunday evening we fell in and marched to
 the docks and was it warm we sweat blood. we
 hung about for hours and then we couldn't get on a
 boat so we had to sleep in the open that night.
 and jerry again paid us a few visits.
 we were woke up early on the Monday morning and
 after a few more hours hanging about with nothing
 to eat or drink we got on to a tug and were
 taken out to a big Cunard white Star liner
 the

Lancaster (the big boats couldn't get into
 St Nazaire harbour so they were anchored about
 four miles out and there were tugs fishing
 boats and a destroyer taking the boys out.
 There was also a big Orient liner the
~~Oregon~~ Oronsay and several smaller boats at
 anchor. We got aboard alright and just got
 settled down when over he came and dropped
 a couple on the Oronsay and blew her bridge
 away and cleaned off, the Oronsay then
 started loading up troops but kept on the
 move and we who were fully loaded still
 stopped at anchor (I was mad as I thought she
 should of got on the move as those liners are
 tidy big targets. Well again at two in the afternoon
 over he comes again and dropped two about ten
 yards off us, and away again and why. I don't
 know but we still stopped at anchor. Some of
 the lads jumped over board then silly buggers.
 At about four o'clock over they come again, some
 say it was four of them some say six and
 others eight. I didn't see any myself so don't
 know. They run around a bit and then one of
 them dived down in the run and dropped

one down No 2 hold and one down the funnel, it must of knocked the bottom right out of her, she immediately turned over with her port rail almost in the water. Hundreds jumped over. I couldn't make up my mind whether to jump or not. When the skipper gave the order to get on to the starboard side, which we did and she righted herself again. There were some terrible sights, chaps blown to pieces and the skin knocked off them with the blast and down number 2 hold there were chaps drowning and swimming about packed like sardines. in the fuel oil, it was honestly horrible. Only three boats were got away and one of them tipped up and there wasn't half enough life jackets to go around seeing she only carried about 1500 and at that time she had about 7000 aboard. (I was one of the lucky ones I had one) there were thousands trapped down below seeing she was right out of sight in fourteen minutes, it didn't give us much chance. When I jumped the port rail was nearly under. I never took my boots off so quick in all my life

As soon as I got into the water I started swimming straight out as I was afraid of her falling over on me. It was a rotten feeling as you seemed to think you were getting nearer the ship than getting away from it. Heaps of the boys were swimming in fuel oil then as it was pouring out of her. I don't know how I missed it, but it was pure luck. What a sight when I looked back at the ship she was nearly standing straight up on her port side and there were hundreds of chaps clinging on her shouting like hell for help (it was hideous). It was about then that he let them have it with his machine guns. He also dropped flares to try and put the oil fuel alight.

Well I kept swimming straight out and keeping on my own as much as I could as I didn't like the idea of perhaps half a dozen drowning blokes clinging on to me, it was an awful feeling, when your legs drag over a dead body you don't half get a move on then. After a bit I decided I should get on better if I took my trousers off, so off they came also my socks and believe me it wasn't too

easy a job. After a while when the ship was out of sight and I thought there was no fear of an explosion I began to take it easy and had a look around and saw I was only a couple of hundred yards from a froggy tug, so I made my way quietly towards her and eventually got there, and wasn't I glad when I got pulled up on to her deck and it was a great sight to see some of my mates there and didn't a woodbine go down grand then. All the clothes I had on were my vest and pants and of course they were soaked and no chance of drying them and no dry clothes about. Didn't I shower. After about an hour after this tug a couple more boats and the destroyer had decided they had picked up all survivors. The tug took us to the Oronsay (I should think the destroyer must of signalled to her to stop for us, she was a long way out. It wasn't nice going on her as we knew she had stopped a couple of bombs. Didn't we get a cheer when we drew along side. Somebody shouted up for a bag and then it seemed to rain packets of bags. It is surprising

how eager you are for a smoke at times like that. It was a pretty sight on the decks of that day, some naked and smothered with oil and others dressed in anything and some with nasty wounds and burns and there were a lot terribly injured and a couple dead. as soon as we got on the boat we were given a blanket and the ones of us who were able had to look out for ourselves, then it was no trouble to find clothes. The lads who were already on the Oronsay soon turned out their kit bags, it was just like a jungle sale, and the bags poured in by the bucket full. After we had cleaned up a bit and got the dry clothes on we were looking for a drink of tea and something to eat, by this time we were steaming away with a destroyer leading the way so it was time we had a bit of shut eye. All this time I hadn't once felt a little bit windy. But next morning when I heard the destroyer had broken down I was beat. I was scared to leave the top deck. I kept a better look out than the bloke in the crow's nest and I

could imagine submarines and mines jumping
 up all around her and try as I might I couldn't
 pull myself together. About ten o'clock all us
 survivors were all packed into one big saloon and
 it was the one that had knocked about. I thought
 that was very cheering. We were then told to
 stop where we were as the ship had to ballast
 and was likely to turn turtle if there was too
 much rocking about. I believe they were afraid
 that when the English coast was sighted everyone
 would make a dash to have a look at it and as
 you know that wouldn't of been any good. And
 it was a grand sight when we did see the
 shores of England, and was I glad when we
 dropped anchor in Plymouth and did we have
 a reception there. We were treated like heroes
 and all we had done was to save our own
 skins. We stopped two nights in Plymouth where
 we got a new suit and pair of boots each also
 socks and underclothes. We then spent a night
 at Borden and on the Saturday they were
 generous enough to give us that

lousy couple of days leave. Is it right that Navy men always get fourteen day leave after they have been shipwrecked? I should think altogether there must of been something like five thousand lost and drowned that day. They also got another boat just by us, that pilot certainly won an iron cross, but its no good to him as he got shot down.

It was reckoned to be a clever bit of seamanship bringing the Oronony home for as I told you her bridge was blown away and they only had the emergency gear to use and no charts.

Well anyway its grand to be back in this country again even if woodboxes are a tanner a packet. The navy is doing her stuff now alright.

Well I think I have just about written enough for this time so cheerio and all the best

Jack.

P.S. when you get a life jacket treat it as your best pal. I shouldn't be here now if I hadn't had one.