

65th Anniversary of the sinking of the Tilawa

Many South African Indians commemorated the 65th anniversary of the tragedy of the sinking of the SS Tilawa on 23 November 1942. Steam Ship Tilawa, with a cargo of 6,472 tons, 732 passengers, 222 crewmen and 4 gunners was torpedoed by the Japanese Imperial Army. Two torpedoes, from the Japanese submarine I-29, were fired in the dead of the night;

the second fatal one was fired approximately one hour after the first, resulting in the loss of some 280 lives.

The only known passenger liner to have been sunk in the Indian Ocean during World War II, the Tilawa was on route to Mombasa, East Africa and Durban, South Africa after having departed from Bombay (Mumbai) on the 18th November 1942.

The reason for the violent demise of this majestic ship has remained a mystery.

A well known survivor Moulana Cassim Mahomed Sema - founder of the Muslim college Darul Ulum, Newcastle, when interviewed some time ago, recalled having boarded the SS Tilawa when the sun was rising and rescued by the HMS Birmingham when the sun was setting.

What led to the sun setting on this 10 006-ton ship?

Maritime records confirmed a cargo of 60 tons of silver bullion. Moulana Sema speculated that the Tilawa was carrying an unknown quantity of gold bullion as well. Was it the silver (and gold) bullion the Japanese were after?

Only the British and Japanese governments can shed light on this mystery. After all, the SS Tilawa was a British passenger liner torpedoed by the Japanese during wartime. The ship's records are in the hands of the British and only they can explain what the probable motives of the Japanese Imperial Army were on that fateful night. In terms of the rules of engagement, did the Japanese have reason to believe that a passenger liner was a threat to their national security. (Correspondence attached)

In the same way, only the Japanese can adequately explain why they torpedoed an unarmed passenger liner. Was the Tilawa regarded as a naval or armed merchant cruiser? If this is true, why had the owners of the Tilawa registered her as a passenger/cargo liner? (Correspondence attached)

Nor is there any record of the Indian government expressing any interest in this matter. Nearly all of the unfortunate victims who perished that night were Indian nationals.

There has yet been no response from the British and Japanese embassies since June 2000. A communication is now being sent to the Indian High Commission to see if any success can be achieved in this regard.

However, Ahmed Essop Bobat, one of the survivors had requested some compensation or assistance from the Government of India on the 19th July 1943 and received a reply on the 7th September 1943 that there would be no compensation "as the sinking of the SS Tilawa was through enemy action". A copy of this response can also be viewed on the website.

Crewmembers of the rescue ship HMS

BIRMINGHAM and HMS CARTHAGE recorded the incident as follows: {After the first torpedo struck}... it started a panic among the 732 native (SIC) passengers.' and 'the explosion created great panic among the native passengers

These 'native' passengers were mostly migrant and the indigent Indian nationals en route to Mombassa, Maputo or Durban to offer their services, by plying their trade or seeking their fortune.

For 65 years now those who survived this tragic event having braved the Indian ocean for over 2 days and nights, witnessing the drowning of their fellow passengers and families and surviving random shark attacks, have had no solace to their anguish. For they lived with the memory of that fateful night forever wondering what were the reasons for so propounded an event overtaking their lives.

Interestingly, the current owners of the SS Tilawa have made no attempt to salvage her cargo. The rescue ships HMS Birmingham and HMS Carthage recorded the exact location of the ship's demise for posterity.

In fact, Mr. Len Thomas one of the crew on board the HMS Birmingham that went to the rescue informed us that they were given strict instructions to demarcate the area as the vessel was carrying 60 tons of silver.

Several other rumours and speculations have been made suggesting that the Japanese had suspected that there were arms and military personnel on board the vessel and that Captain Robertson had refused to allow them on board to inspect the cargo.

There are many unanswered questions and we need to get to them. For this purpose a new dedicated website has now been established for people interested in enquiring about this tragedy. There are several photographs and also a list of survivors and missing passengers. There is also an opportunity for the community to contribute any

information to assist in this research.

The primary objective of this research is to formulate the truth surrounding the circumstances on the sinking of SS Tilawa. Listed below are a few objectives of this research.

* To create awareness of this particular incident.

* To recreate a passenger list if one cannot be sourced from the shipping company. (A list of passengers has been obtained from the Suliman Nana family, to whom we are extremely grateful).

* To record any specific or exceptional stories that need to be told.

* To give recognition to those that were affected by this unfortunate event.

* To establish details of the ships cargo.

There are several local families who were affected by this incident and we have requested them to provide us with whatever information that could further assist this process.

Known Pretoria residents who survived:-

* Moosa Tar Mahomed - deceased 1983 (father of Dr. A.S. Moosa and Haroon Tar Mahomed)

* Malim Mohamed - (Laudium Hardware)

* Mohanbal Naratamdas Morar - retired primary school teacher

* Ummer Tar Mahomed - father of Faizel Tar Mahomed Civic Café

* Hassim Ayob - deceased 1961 - grandfather of Ossie Dawson

* Adam Salehmohamed - deceased 1994 (Dada Playfair) - father of Majid, Yusuf and Omar

Known Pretoria residents who did not survive:-

* Omar Tar Mahomed (listed as son of Moosa Tar Mahomed - was actually his younger brother - elder brother of

Joosub Tar Mahomed)

* Omar Ebrahim Mockaria - brother of Late Ismail Mockaria and also brother in law of Moosa Tar Mahomed

* Joosab Hassim - uncle of Ossie Dawson and also brother in law of Moosa Tar Mahomed

Other known passengers who survived:-

* Ahmed Essop Bobat - deceased - sons Yusuf and Imran - Johannesburg

* Moulana Cassim Mohamed Sema - deceased 2007 - Newcastle

* Bhoolabhai Chhita - founder of The Golden Era Group - Johannesburg

* Ebrahim Randeree - deceased - Randeree Jewellers - father of Yunus

* Ranjith Pragjee Desai - Germiston

* Omar Hassim Pagie - deceased - father of Iqbal & Basheer Hassim - Pietersburg

* Chunilal Navsaria - Port Elizabeth

* Moosa Saloojee - deceased approx 2005 - Roshnee

* Ahmed Essop Bhyat - husband of Rookaya Tikly - Johannesburg

* Parsoth Lalla - deceased 1980 - son Hitesh - Johannesburg

Other known passengers who did not survive:-

* Rookaya Tikly and infant - wife and child of Ahmed Essop Bhyat

* Sheikh Hussein Barday, wife Habiba and infant - grandparents of Ashraf Roomaney - Cape Town

* Dawood Bhaila - brother of late Ahmed Bhaila and uncle of Dawood, Roshnee

For further details please visit the website at www.sstilawa.com or feel free to contact Haroon Tar Mahomed on 082 77 88 660 / Imran Bobat on 082 82 00707 / Ashraf Roomaney 083 44 00 823



Haroon Tar Mahomed with a picture of a sinking life boat from the SS Tilawa. In the centre of the picture, clothed in white, is thought to be Capt. F. Robertson. (Picture courtesy of Sunday Times Extra)



The Late Moulana Cassim Sema one of the well known survivors of the SS Tilawa. (Picture courtesy of Sunday Times Extra)

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Many residents did not survive

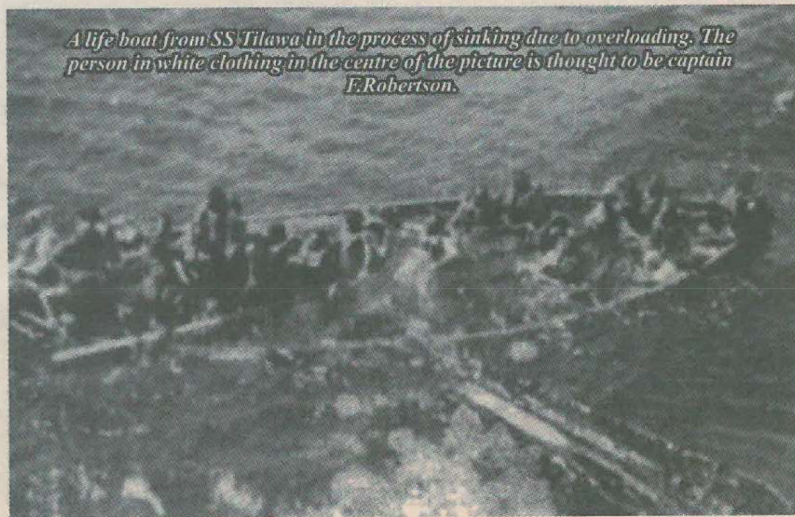


SS TILAWA

The 10,006 ton British India SN Company passenger/cargo liner (Capt. F. Robertson) was sunk by the Japanese submarine I-29 1,497 kilometres north-northeast of the Seychelles Islands while on her way from Bombay, India, to Mombassa and Durban, South Africa, with 6,472

tons of cargo. The explosion created great panic among the passengers who rushed the lifeboats causing many deaths. Some time after the torpedo struck and whilst the ship was still afloat some crew and passengers attempted to reboard the vessel when the second torpedo hit. The ship

carried 222 crewmen, four gunners and 732 passengers. Of the 958 people on board, 252 passengers and 28 crew were lost. The cruiser HMS Birmingham rescued 678 survivors and the next day the P&O ship SS Carthage rescued four Indian seamen from the ocean.



A life boat from SS Tilawa in the process of sinking due to overloading. The person in white clothing in the centre of the picture is thought to be captain F. Robertson.



Tilawa survivors aboard the HMS Birmingham - left back - Mr. Ibrahim Randeree

Local survivor still traumatised

Mohanlal Morar of Aquamarine Street, Laudium, said that after 65 years he is still experiencing the aftermath of the trauma that was the Tilawa tragedy.

"I was 15 years old when it happened and I am now over 80. To this day, I never got my drivers' licence. I don't want to drive, for fear of another accident. I don't like to swim and if I have to travel, I will travel by train or some other means. The incident was terrifying, and I don't ever wish to relive something like that again."

Shantiben, Mohanlal's wife, confirmed that her husband is still affected by the trauma that he had to endure as a teen. "Mohanlal's nature is not as is would have been, had it not been for the unfortunate boat bombing," she said.

Today Mohanlal, who retired as a teacher some 20 years ago is married with two sons and four grandchildren.



Retired teacher and survivor of the Tilawa shipwreck, Mohanlal Morar

Haroon seeks answers from British & Japanese Embassies

June 17, 2000

THE DEFENCE ATTACHE
BRITISH EMBASSY
PRETORIA

Sir / Madam,

SINKING OF SS TILAWA - NOVEMBER 23, 1942

I am in search of further information regarding the above maritime disaster.

The information that I have at present is that there were 732 passengers and 222 crewmembers on board the above liner, which left Bombay on about November 20, 1942 for South Africa. On November 23 at midnight it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine (I-29). It is reported that about 280 people lost their lives. It took approximately three days for the survivors to be rescued by the crew of the HMS Birmingham.

I lost three uncles in this tragic incident and my father miraculously survived after spending two nights and a day on a raft.

It will be greatly appreciated if you could assist me in finding further information such as passenger lists and details of cargo being carried, etc.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

H. Tar Mahomed

The copy of a letter which Laudium resident Haroon Tar Mahomed wrote to both Embassies.