



## Reminiscences of the sinking of the S.S. TILAWA in November 1942

Written for [www.tilawa1942.com](http://www.tilawa1942.com)

By Mervyn Maciel

(Age 93, born May 1929. The only surviving son of Mr. M.J. Maciel who, with his wife and three children, perished on the S.S. TILAWA 23 November 1942.)

Although it will soon (23 November 2022) be 80 long years since the sinking of the ill-fated S.S. TILAWA, memories of the loss of my entire family and many others still haunt me.

My two brothers Joseph, Wilfred, and I, were studying at the popular Jesuit-run St. Paul's High School in Belgaum - a military cantonment in what was then, British India. My father was keen to take our younger brother, Wilfred, back to Kenya too. Joseph and I pleaded with my father to leave Wilfred with us. It was so fortunate that he agreed or else Wilfred too would have lost his life!

We said goodbye to my father, stepmother, two very young stepsisters, and stepbrother as they passed through Belgaum Railway station on their way to Bombay. This was the last time I saw my family. They then boarded the S.S. TILAWA for the onward voyage to East Africa.

We were rather surprised that my father was determined to return even after one of their trucks was broken into on the train journey from Goa to Bombay, and all of my mother's jewelry stolen. Because of this, my Uncle Ignatius and my father's Sister Mrs. Esmerealda Sequeira pleaded with him to postpone the trip and sort out the stolen jewelry incident. However, because he had already extended his leave on medical grounds, my father was not prepared to alter his plans. My family then set off from the docks at Ballard Pier, Bombay, on their onward voyage to Mombasa.

There was no news from my father. We thought this very unusual since he always wrote to us promptly after arriving in Nairobi. As usual, we wrote to him but were surprised not to receive any reply. Some time later we received the shocking news that the S.S. TILAWA had been torpedoed by the Japanese.

We feared the worst, and all three of us boys started sobbing uncontrollably. We were age 15, 13 and 10. The carefree world we had known when my father was around was no more. Too hard for three young and fear-ridden boys to comprehend. Our world had been turned upside down in a flash, and we wondered whether we would be able to continue with our education with no financial support whatsoever. But God did not forsake us! Quite out of the blues, our maternal grandfather S.M. D'Sa, a retired official of the Zanzibar government now living in Goa, came to the rescue. He asked us not to fear as he would support us in every way throughout our school lives. We had nothing to worry about school fees, uniforms, board and lodging and even our clothing. He

would meet our every need. God bless this saintly and caring grandfather of ours! For this we were eternally grateful to him since none of us would be here today were it not for his kindness and big-hearted generosity.

My late Uncle Ignatius Sequeira, a retired Kenya Government official and his two sons, Tony and Nabor, visited every hospital in Bombay as rumours were flying that my parents had survived. We were hoping against hope that this would be so until one day during their almost daily visits to various hospitals, my Uncle came face to face with my father's Cabin Boy (whose name I sadly cannot recall). He had survived but was being treated in hospital for injuries he suffered while trying to escape. It is he who told my uncle that our entire family had been wiped out when the second torpedo was fired by the Japanese. He had witnessed this sad tragedy.

My father, who after hearing the first torpedo, rushed down to the cabin to wake my stepmother and young children at the dead of night, found that when he arrived on the upper deck, all lifeboats had been occupied. When asked by the Cabin Boy to jump into the sea, my father's reply was - "How can I with these three very young children and my wife?" The rest is too hard and painful to even contemplate! Even then, rumours were afloat that my parents had been taken prisoners of war in Saigon. My brothers and I were in a confused state and badly affected by this tragedy. We appealed to the Red Cross and also the Apostolic Nuncio in India but there was no good news.

My paternal grandmother (who my father supported), his brothers and sisters, were devastated when they saw us and couldn't stop crying. There was wailing in our household almost daily during our holidays as various relatives and friends came to offer their condolences.

Although 80 years have passed since that fateful day, I must thank Mr. Emile Solanki, founder of the website: [www.tilawa1942.com](http://www.tilawa1942.com) for contacting me from his home in Toronto, Canada, and encouraging me to put my thoughts on paper for future generations to remember this tragic incident when so many innocent lives, including those of my entire family, were lost.

Thanks to the efforts of Mr. Solanki and his team, the memory of all those who lost their lives on the ill-fated S.S. TILAWA is being kept alive.



2.com

Mervyn Maciel, age 10, Belgaum India, 1939  
Josephine and Francis Maciel, Nairobi, 1941  
Mathias and Effegiana Maciel, Nairobi, 1940/41

**As per S.S. Tilawa Passenger List, Missing Persons:  
M. J, Maciel, Child and 2 infants**

Father's Name. Mathias Jose Maciel  
Age at death. 42

Stepmother. Effegiana Maciel  
Age at death. 40

Step children:

Josephine Maciel  
Age at death. 3

Francis Maciel  
Age at death. 1

Yvonne Maciel  
Age at death. 3 months

**Surviving sons (From father's first marriage)**



Mervyn Maciel  
Age. 13

Wilfred Maciel  
Age. 10

Joseph Maciel  
Age. 15



With His Majesty King Charles III, at the time HRH The Prince of Wales. The Overseas Service Pensioners' Association  
London Connaught Hotel, London  
8th June 2017



Invited to the Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, 23rd May 2017. Mervyn with his daughter Josey Maciel.



Family wedding in 2005. Mervyn with his late wife Elsie, 4 children, 8 grandchildren and 2 great-grandsons.

**In Memoriam of S.S. TILAWA**  
**Poem written By Mervyn Maciel**

*Composed 1 year after the sinking of S.S. Tilawa*  
*November 1944, age 15*

"My mother was snatched at too early an age  
My father soon followed that same old stage,  
And left us three brothers quite helpless,  
alone To bear the yoke that they had borne.  
My mother's death took place at home  
- Where all of us did weep and mourn  
But my father's was a death at sea,  
It tore our hearts and orphaned three!  
My Dad with step-mum and children three  
Was sailing to Africa full of glee;  
He smilingly said, "I'll come back soon,"  
But we knew not death would call so soon.  
So sudden God's summons,  
so quick the deep sea Did swallow them all,  
O Destiny, No time to say farewell,  
no time to say 'wait',  
Death's cold gatekeeper had opened the gate!  
And now that he's gone,  
we can murmur not  
But trust in God for that's our lot,  
And trusting in Him who reigns on high  
We'll patiently wait till the end draws nigh.  
Then Daddy and Mummy soon shall we meet  
When death has silenced our last heart-beat,  
Together then we'll live forever and ever  
In He'ven so beautiful,  
we shall part  
- no NEVER!"