

THE RIDDLE OF THE SS TILAWA

On November 23 1942, a passenger ship en route from Bombay to Durban was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. PREGA GOVENDER spoke to some of the survivors of this Second World War mystery

APRETORIA businessman is desperately searching for answers to one of the mysteries of the Second World War — the sinking of a passenger ship by a Japanese submarine.

Haroon Tar Mahomed's father, Moosa, was one of the 678 survivors of the ill-fated British-registered vessel SS Tilawa, which was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine on November 23 1942.

The 10 006-ton vessel — apparently the only passenger ship to have been sunk during the Second World War — was en route to Mombasa and Durban from Bombay with 222 crewmen, four gunners and 732 passengers, as well as 60 tons of silver.

Mahomed's uncles, Omar, 13, Joosub Hasim, 20, and Omar Mockaria, 21, were among the 280 passengers and crew members who drowned.

So passionate is Mahomed about chronicling this intriguing tale that his search has led him to several of the Tilawa's survivors, including Ranjit Desai, 81, of Benoni, Bhoola Chhita, 80, of Johannesburg, Malim Mahomed, 74, of



OLDEST SURVIVOR: Moulana Cassim Mahomed Sema still vividly remembers the moments before the SS Tilawa was... Picture: M. GOVENDER

'Ulum, a Muslim college in Newcastle, said he had completed seven years of study in Dabhel, near Bombay, and had been anxious to return home when he boarded the SS Tilawa.

Sema, who still has vivid memories of the 59-year-old tragedy, was 21 years old at the time. He embarked with two trunks of religious literature which he had bought in India.

"Two companions, a Saloee from Meyerton and a Moola from Durban, shared a small compartment with me. Because it was war-time, we were given lifejackets which were made of thick material and which contained four large blocks of cork.

"One night I heard a loud bang. I instinctively knew it was a torpedo. I forgot my goods and my two companions who were sleeping nearby and rushed towards the lifeboats.

"I was dressed only in a lungi (pyjama trousers) and a vest. I could hear women and children screaming and my first thought was to pray. I managed to get into the third boat. A doctor and the ship's engineer also scrambled on board.

"While we were on the



NAVAL EXERCISE: Haroon Tar Mahomed is trying to track down more survivors of the SS Tilawa. He is seen holding a picture of one of the lifeboats. Picture: RICHARD SHOREY

"I was vomiting all the time. I had no strength. I could not even lift the oars to steer the boat. Because I was so sick, I thought that I would never make it to shore alive"

carrier were later assigned to mark the spot where the Tilawa sank, confirmed that they were told that the ship was carrying 60 tons of silver.

One survivor wrote at the time: "To my amazement, I discerned a small plane flying eastward. It was a Swordfish carried by the HMS Birmingham, and at 8.45 that evening she arrived on the scene and began her work of rescue. Never in my life have I seen such wonderful seamanship as that shown by the officers

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