

# Reginald Johnson MBE LWM

**O**n October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1935 the School Committee at Hull Trinity House Navigation School admitted 31 boys who had undergone three months probationary training. Among these boys were two former pupils from Goxhill Methodist School. The boys were Thomas Plumtree and Reginald Johnson. This article looks at the career of Reginald Johnson.

Reginald Johnson was born at Louth, Lincolnshire on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1922. He later moved to Goxhill and lived with his parents at "Glenora House," The Square, Goxhill. His father was a marine engineer employed on the Railway Ferry boats, plying on the River Humber from New Holland to Hull. It follows that Reginald would pursue a career in ships. Reginald left Trinity House on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1937, at the age of 15 years 9 months on being accepted as a cadet by J & C Harrison of London.

After passing examinations, Reginald was appointed as Third Officer on "S.S. Thursobank" This ship was completed by J. Readhead & Sons Ltd, South Shields in 1940. She was 5,575 grt for the owners, Andrew Weir & Co, London. Thursobank had taken on 7839 tons of general cargo, which included Martin Maryland light bombers destined for use in Middle East. The route "Thursobank was to take took her from New York to Alexandria via Cape Town. She was to sail unescorted with a crew of 55. There were seven DEMS gunners on board.

While sailing in Chesapeake Bay she was torpedoed by U-373 (Paul-Karl Loeser). The U-boat was part of Operation Drumbeat. It had been commissioned on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941 and was on its seventh sailing, leaving La Pallice on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1942, returning six weeks later. On this voyage U-373 sank SS Mount Lycabettus, a Greek ship of 4,292 grt which had left Baltimore bound for Leixoes, Portugal. This sinking took place on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1942. Five days later, U-373 had its second success, sinking SS Thursobank.

The U-boat struck at 05.09 hours. It required a second torpedo to sink the ship - this was fired at 05.35. The Captain, 21 crew and 7 DEMS gunners were lost and 26 crew members took to the lifeboat. These men were picked up by the Norwegian tanker "Havsten" and landed on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1942 at Halifax, Nova Scotia. The "Havsten" was on a voyage alone from Aruba with a cargo of diesel oil for escort vessels in Iceland.

Upon arrival at Halifax the Chinese crew survivors from the "Thursobank" were court-martialled. It was alleged that they threw away the oars, refusing to share food and warm clothing with the four British officers and placing them at the front of the boat.

Reginald Johnson was the Mate or Third Officer; he had just had his twentieth birthday. The Third Officer is a licensed member of the deck department of a merchant ship. The third mate is a watchstander and customarily the ship's safety officer, responsible to the captain for keeping the ship, its crew and its cargo safe eight hours each day. Traditionally, the third mate stands on "8-12" watch: from 8am to 12noon and from 8pm until midnight.

On watch the third mate must enforce all regulations, such as keeping the fire fighting equipment, lifeboats and various other emergency systems in good and working order.

A confidential statement made by Reginald Johnson dated 8<sup>th</sup> June 1942 reads:

1. We were bound from New York to Cape Town with general cargo of 8,600 tons, Eight aeroplanes in cases were stored on deck with one four inch, one 12pdr, 2 Hotchkiss, 2 Marlins, 4 P.A.C. We had a crew of 61 including 12 gunners, 5 naval and 7 army. Of these 27 are missing (including 3 naval and 4 army gunners).

2. We left New York on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1942, sailing independently and without escort I had no information about submarines being in the area, although I had heard that two ships had recently been sunk in that area. The sky was cloudy and overcast, but visibility was good, the sea was very rough and the wind south-westerly, force 7 We had just finished zig-zagging and making about 10 knots, our course being 141 degrees, I took over the watch on the bridge at 20.00hrs.

3. About 30 minutes later I noticed what appeared to be the wake of a torpedo crossing the bow from starboard to port, about 20 yards from the bridge. I called the Master who immediately came to the bridge and ordered the course be altered 39 degrees to 102 degrees true. As nothing further was seen we resumed our course of 141 degrees at 21.30. At 22.00hrs the Master went below. We proceeded without incident until 22.40 when a gunner at the look-out saw a torpedo approaching from the port beam.

4. Simultaneously there was a violent explosion on the port side of the ship abreast of the engine room. The ship shook and took a slight list to port. It was pitch dark and I could not see damage actually was but I could see damage actually was but I could see that the after port lifeboat had been blown to pieces on the boat deck. The Master ordered the boats to be lowered and all the crew assembled on the boat deck. The engines were stopped by the emergency stop valve from the boat deck.

5. The starboard lifeboats and the port forward life-boat were all lowered and the crew scrambled into them quickly and got clear of the ship. The second mate was in charge of one of the starboard boats but I did not see him at all after the incident. I believe that two men launched a raft and got away on it.

6. I was in charge of the Captain's starboard lifeboat; the captain insisted on remaining on the ship and seeing that all the crew were clear. He ordered me to get the boat away. I do not know what became of him - when I last saw him he was shining his torch into my boat.

7. When my boat was 20 yards from the ship I heard a much more violent explosion which appeared to be in the same position as the first one, and I did not see the ship again.

8. The wind was blowing a moderate gale so I thought the best thing to do would be to put the sea anchor out and to heave to. I burnt four red flares in order to attract any survivors who might be swimming about in the vicinity, but nothing happened. At dawn I saw the two men on the raft but was unable to reach

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