The Sinking of the H.M.S. Prince Leopold. 29th July 1944.

An account by a survivor: sub-lieutenant K.G.F. Sewell.

Prologue.

The crowded troop decks had been stuffy and the cool calm of a July night in the English Channel had lured many of the soldiers into making their beds on our wooden upper deck. Their amorphous shapes had lain in silent, still ranks undisturbed by the rumble when we weighed anchor in the small hours of the morning. The chill of the dawn had wakened many of them early and those who had bedded themselves on the quarter deck were chatting to our off-watch stokers who had come to absorb the sparkling acidity of salt air and sea as a relief from their mess-deck and engine and boiler rooms. In the galley under the deck on which those men were standing the cooks were hard at work preparing breakfasts, but even they must have glanced out of their galley scuttles and admired, if only momentarily, the serene beauty of the morning. For all those men then, gathered on and beneath the quarterdeck that morning, their last glimpse of this world was one of natural perfection and their death was mercifully speedy. Their lives dissolved before the clanging roar of the torpedo explosion had died away; before the swift ripple passing outwards from our ship had itself faded into nothingness.

Those of us left behind had been lucky for if the torpedo had struck a few yards further forward it would have exploded under the mess decks crowded with hundreds of soldiers. Ours had always been a lucky ship.

Assisted by the force of the explosion I quitted in some haste my upper bunk where a second before I had been most peacefully and contentedly dozing. Royal Naval discipline and tradition clearly demanded that any subsequent actions on my part should be calm and dignified, especially since I was being watched with some justifiable anxiety by the Army officer who had occupied my lower bunk during the night. I fear that my own private effort that morning to uphold the Nelson tradition must have been slightly marred by a hasty scramble, first into my life jacket, and secondly into my trousers. Pausing only to encourage my army friend by advising him to blow up his lifebelt securely, I left my cabin and doubled aft past the ranks of dazed soldiers on the upper deck. The staggering fact that the entire stern of our ship was now flung to a crazy angle pointing to the sky was encompassed without concern – human casualties were the dominant thought at that moment.

The first casualty I met was a soldier stumbling up the ladder from the troop decks. Blood ran in crimson rivulets down the hands with which he clasped his scalp. Here was a badly wounded soldier in a torpedoed ship – his first words to me were to crack a joke, a conventional Service joke, just as his bravery was conventional. Both were what might be expected from a private soldier of the British Army. Some hours later when, by sheer coincidence, I helped drag him from the sea after our ship had sunk, he was still cracking jokes.

When a torpedo strikes a ship, quite apart from the human casualties it can produce, the physical damage it can wreak is immense. The hole torn in the ship's side, usually completely below the waterline and with unarmoured ships, can be big enough to drive a lorry through. To limit the inrush of water thus produced, the ship is intersected by walls of steel, the bulkheads, which are designed to confine the flood to the immediate vicinity of the hole, or in other words to act like a new ship's side. Often, however, the force of the explosion is great enough to warp and twist bulkheads and

doors so that the massive pressures of sea water against them will tear them asunder or cause leaks beyond the capacity of the ship's pumps. Our torpedo, in addition to doing these things, had destroyed our powers of locomotion since the propellers and their shafting had been twisted to fantastic angles.

Immediately after the explosion the Chief Engineer had mustered his Damage Control Staff, all engineers and stokers, and unerringly went into action – shoring sagging bulkheads, plugging holes and rigging pumps – anything to slow or stop the inflow of sea water – anything to give the ship a chance of survival, at the most, or at the least to give us all breathing space before the ship sank. A combination of sound ship-building and the professional skill and great courage of our engineers won us hours – hours without which we who were saved would otherwise have been drowned.

While our engineers were thus engaged in their struggle against water, a destroyer came alongside and took off all our unwounded soldiers. They gave us a cheer as their new ship cast off – they gave another cheer when they saw their course was being directed back to England instead of the beaches of Normandy to which place they were originally destined.

Also engaged in a grim struggle, through against less tangible forces, was our Surgeon. Our sick-bay lay aft and was now a shambles of broken glass and twisted metal. In its stead an emergency substitute was rigged in the Wardroom which had escaped damage. The carpeted deck soon became covered with the forms of suffering men; the air which the previous night had been filled with the reek of tobacco smoke was now laden with the smell of antiseptic. Words were spoken in a hushed undertone – the night before we had gathered round the piano and sung lusty songs in lusty voices.

Three decks above the wardroom, on the bridge, the centre of report and command, stood the figures of our Captain, the First Lieutenant and the Navigating Officer. They had already worked out the arithmetic of our ship's chance of survival or death. The known factors in this vital sum were:

a) distance in miles to the nearest beach in the Isle of Wight – a dark line on the Northern horizon,

b) speed in knots at which a destroyer friend was towing us – the speed of a leisurely stroll on a hot day.

Unknown factors, the x's and y's:

a) number of hours that our bulging bulkheads would remain firm, their sag indicated the tons of green water straining to tear steel from steel,

b) number of hours that our engineers could continue the fearsome task of locating and plugging holes and cracks. Those which let in hissing streams and spurts of water – visible and audible – could swiftly be dealt with. It was the gapes invisible beneath the black depths of water swilling around in store holds through which the sea was silently, sinisterly welling that taxed even our engineers.

c) the rate in tons per minute that our portable pumps could return to its proper place the sea that had already made sacrilege in our hull.

Thus was the sum set that fine July morning in 1944 – the grimmest of parodies on the hoary Algebraic problem involving taps pouring water into a bath which has its plug left out. This was a

simultaneous equation on the solution of which depended the fate of a great ship – the happy home of many men. The sum was written down, solved, checked and produced no satisfaction.

The minutes passed, for some they were moments of desperately unremitting work, for others they meant only waiting. Down below the only reminders of the fresh air and blue sky of life outside were the unheeded distant depth charges, the sounds of which came clanging and rumbling round the deserted flats and lobbies.

The minutes passed and each one bore us, in turn, a memory, some of which would pass within the hour, some of which engraved themselves on the mind for a lifetime – the expression on an engineer's face as he appeared on the upper deck for a brief rest – the hand of a dead man embedded with splinters left exposed by the cape which covered the rest of his body – the steam hissing lazily from the base of the shattered quarterdeck capstan – the tears in a man's eyes as his friend died.

Lunch was alfresco – mostly chocolate from the N.A.A.F.I. store distributed ad lib – an act which provoked ribald comment from the sailors! Lunch was eaten, or not eaten – and forgotten.

The sun was now past its highest point – our destroyer friend was still towing though the speed of the tow had slowed to a pathetic limping crawl. Our seamen had made all the preparations they could for our eventual demise and were now sitting about in the sun talking in undertones. At about 2pm the ship decided to lean gently onto its starboard side. The Captain's Secretary scooped all of the ship's Treasury notes into a canvas bag, which he secured tightly, enveloping the whole in a cork life-jacket. Secret Signal Code books, bound in their lead covers, were dropped one by one into the sea. And then by a strange quirk the ship, seemingly tired of leaning on one side and eased itself back into an upright position. A little later our surviving landing craft were lowered into the sea, one promptly sank, but the other six with their crews took up station on our quarters – a most comforting sight to those of us remaining on board.

An hour passed by and the ship started to heel over again, this time on her port side. At about this time I was ordered to report to the bridge. There I was designated Captain's messenger, a post reserved for me presumably as the youngest and most useless executive Sub Lieutenant left on board. The honour left me, I fear, a trifle ungrateful.

Now it was that we began to feel the ship dying under our feet. That is no meaningless or high-flown metaphor – to those who live in them, ships are not inanimate, impersonal constructions of steel and wood. Instead they are creatures with a will and personality all of their own. A small ship in bad weather will roll, pitch, slide and vibrate in every conceivable manner. To quote the sailor: "they close all the hatches and crash dive!" She will roll until the sea breaks in smooth green shoals over the gunwales – she will pitch, alternately burying her nose in the yielding mass of a great wave and the next moment breaking clear, triumphant, to the skies. But in a sound ship every twist and turn will produce its complementary and compensatory movement and she will return to harbour after weeks of storm as sound as when she first got under weigh. But our ship was dying. The slight swell that was running produced a heavy leaden heave – the list to port, although it was not, as yet, more than might be experienced in a moderate gale was nevertheless terribly steady and, as the inclinometer showed us, was slowly, minute by minute, increasing.

It became my duty, every few minutes, to make my way aft from the bridge and downwards to our damage control men who were still toiling between decks. From them I collected the latest report on the flooding situation and conveyed it thence to the Captain. Every time I had to return with news of further slight retreat of the forces of air and dryness.

Every time that journey was made I found my legs wanting to disobey their controlling brain, making the outward, downwards journey always slightly faster than the return, upwards to the bridge. Three ladders down from the bridge to the upper deck – that was all right! Three more ladders from the upper deck down to where the engineers were working. Not so good! The ladders had become difficult to climb quickly since their vertical angle now had a sideways diagonal angle of 20° added by the ship's list. Rubber boots slipped awkwardly on the rungs. I took to calculating what would be the least time I would take to make the climb from the lowest deck to the freedom of the upper deck if the need arose for me to do it more quickly. The results were so depressing that I took to wondering how much leave, if any, would result from the day's activities. A rather more nebulous line of thought but more soothing to a troubled mind!

Because of the increased list the occupants of the bridge were, by now, finding difficulty in standing upright. The Captain, hugging the binnacle with one arm, received my reports with an assortment of non-committal grunts. Looking aft along the ship, in which direction all eyes on the bridge were turned, we could see a ring of small ships and boats edging in towards us. Beyond them steamed the workmanlike form of a destroyer escort guarding all of us against further submarine attack. Overhead, clear against the blue and white sky, droned heavy bombers on their way to Normandy intent only on their own particular war.

And still the sea sparkled in the July sun. Sensible people ashore would be thinking in terms of four o'clock tea – in the Isle of Wight there would be children playing on the beach to which we had first directed our course – their feet were being gently splashed by the same sea that was soon to ravage our ship – their sands would not be defiled this day by the ugly shape of a wrecked ship.

The hands of the chart desk watch crept around and below, as salt water welled in, the ship's life was fleeting. The ripples crept higher and higher on our port side as we listed more and more. Eventually, instead of sending me on my usual errand, the Captain told me to convey the order to the Chief Engineer to clear all men from between decks onto the upper deck. I carried out my role of messenger with considerable celerity.

All hands were now mustered on the starboard side of the upper deck – that side opposite to the one onto which the ship was subsiding. Carley floats, lifebelts, loose timber, everything that could float, was unlashed and cast onto the waters. Our tow rope was cast off. Ropes' ends were let down over the side and made fast inboard. The casualties whom we still had on board were passed down into rafts.

Now were the First Lieutenant and the Navigating Officer sent down to the upper deck, to help organize the preparations. This left the Captain and myself alone on the bridge. Uncomfortable thoughts occurred to me of certain traditional practices concerning leaving sinking ships. The trouble was that the Captain appeared to be quite oblivious of my presence – not that I felt any resentment as I was fully aware of my acute insignificance and uselessness during such great events – nevertheless I felt worried. I could recall nothing in my training of experience which helped me decide what was the proper procedure in a case such as this. Although there was nothing, as far as I

could remember in the book of rules about junior Sub-Lieutenants being expected to remain on the bridge of a sinking ship, I could not think of a suitable method of bringing this to the attention of my Captain without making it appear to him that I found his company obnoxious. Should I cough or, perhaps, hum a popular song to remind him of my presence? These thoughts (and thus do frightened men think) mingled with the underlying effort now required to keep upright on the drunken deck.

My quandary as to the correct Naval Procedure was resolved for me as, with his back still turned to me, the Captain told me to give the order 'Abandon Ship'.

By this time all the men on the upper deck had completed their tasks and in the last minutes were standing still and silent, all eyes turned towards the figure of the Captain on the bridge, waiting for the next order. The two words I uttered in this drama seemed unnecessarily loud as I called them from the wing of the bridge. The crowd below broke at once into swift, purposeful activity, boots were cast off with any cumbersome outer clothing, and, quite coolly and quietly, one at a time, waiting their turn, they went over the side hand over hand, down the lines dropping off the ends gently into the water.

Having broken the tension I turned to the Captain, mustered what I fear must have been a very shaky salute and with a rather foolish flourish asked for permission to carry on. The Captain had enough tolerance of my youth to smile as he gave his consent.

The three ladders down to the upper deck were taken in my stride. I scrambled into my cabin which I had quitted in such haste earlier in the day. With a mixture of mercenary and romantic interests I stayed only long enough to ram into the pockets of my life jacket my wallet and the leather framed picture of my current girl-friend – alas! The contents of both were but transitory possessions.

Having groped my way up to the starboard guard rails I started to kick off my sea boots. Already the sea seemed full of men swimming away from the ship and I had no desire to be anywhere but right now down there amongst them. By me and also taking off his boots was our Boatswain – a man in his forties who had been in ships since a boy. "This is the fifth bloody time I've been sunk – the first time was in the Spanish Civil War". He spoke bitterly as if tired of the futility of a business which condemned men and ships to premature graves.

With a fleeting thought as to the water's warmth or lack thereof I slipped down the nearest rope into the sea. It was after I had arrived in the English Channel, in the most decorous manner possible, that I received two unpleasant shocks. Firstly, the sea, which from the upper deck had looked so sparkling and calm, actually had a swell running which though quite harmless was, nevertheless, disconcerting to one who had never possessed any delusions as to his ability as a Channel swimmer. The other surprise was consequent on this feature. From the height of the ship, the sea besides looking quite calm had also looked comfortingly full of swimming friends and rescue craft. But when immersed in the sea up to one's chin one had the most unpleasant feeling of isolation and loneliness, since every wave completely cut off the view of all but the most immediate of one's surroundings.

One of our men swam into my little world and grinned at me, a trifle anxiously, I thought. "Presumably," I said, "this is the point at which we should sing 'Roll Out the Barrel" or some similar ditty". But as nobody else came to join what would have been a duet and as there did not seem to be any particular point in it we did not perpetuate this piece of popular press tradition. Instead our minds were diverted by the sudden invasion of our solitude by one of our landing craft which with a

swoop and a roar came plunging down in what to us was a most unnerving rush. The sailor and I added ourselves to the necklace of gasping, struggling bodies clinging to the lifelines looped round the sides of the craft.

Having made sure we were hitched, the coxswain of the boat went astern, away from the hull of the sinking ship, without troubling to get us inboard. This was a wise manoeuvre on his part but it provided the third unpleasant surprise. It was borne on me how surprisingly difficult it is to hang on to a rope whilst being towed through the water, especially when wearing a bulky life-jacket. In fact, the situation evolved into a grim struggle to force to one's will muscles and a mind that had both suddenly become very tired and apathetic.

The awful strain relaxed after what seemed hours and brawny arms reached over the side and unceremoniously hauled inboard our sodden and by now completely exhausted bodies. We collapsed, unheeded, into a pile of limp, wet, dejected manhood. Roused to assist with the rescue of more swimmers I was somewhat staggered to see blue sea stretching to the horizon where last I had seen the hull of our ship looming. Apart from floating timber there was nothing to be seen save the top of her foremast and radar aerial, quite vertical now which, even as we watched, slid downwards, noiselessly, out of our view for ever. It was incredible. Ships did sink! Our ship, we knew, had been sinking, but now that she had gone it was quite unbelievable. No words can describe the feelings we all had at that moment.

However, men were still in the water and there was work to do. Helping men, themselves helpless, was tough, hard work and left no time for philosophizing. The first swimmer to grasp my outstretched hand was the same soldier I had helped earlier in the day immediately after the explosion. The bandage which enveloped his head was streaming pink with blood diffused by sea-water.

Some time later, after a careful search had been made among all the floating litter attendant on a sinking, it was considered that everyone had been picked up. A frigate edged into our midst and, one at a time, the rescue craft went alongside and survivors were transferred to her more solid decks.

Having stripped off wet uniforms to dry in the boiler room, everyone found some corner of free deck, then slumped down and stared. Wrapped in a blanket, I subsided on the Wardroom deck in state of complete mental and physical apathy. It was all over, the ship was gone, everyone had been picked up. Casualties were being treated capably, the dead were dead, there was nothing more for us to do. We were now passengers in somebody else's ship. If we had had any strength of emotion left, we would, I think, have wept. As it was, nothing penetrated our blanket of depression and apathy.

In the centre of the Wardroom, suspended from the deckhead in a bite of rope was a stretcher – it was being swayed up and down like a see-saw. Strapped face downwards in it was a man, held over his face was an oxygen mask. He was 'apparently drowned'. They were trying to bring him back to life. I knew the man well. I had been talking to him only an hour before – and now it meant nothing that in all probability he was dead. Nothing had any meaning now.

Some hours later the frigate anchored in Portsmouth harbour. We went ashore in one of her boats. Climbing out of her onto the dockside we all looked as one man towards the open sea.

By naval standards the day's events were quite insignificant. The sinking was negligible. The ship could be replaced easily – the war was at such a stage that one ship more or less made little difference – we were not vital. The casualties were not great – only a handful of families would know tragedy as a result of the sinking. The survivors did not have a hard time – no long swim in the icy water – no agonizing wait or row hundreds of miles from land in open boats or on rafts. Ours was an unflurried, a gentlemanly departure. Yet to all of us gathered on the dockside that afternoon, the day's events were to each of us a personal and most bitter disaster. A smart and happy ship with an unequalled record had gone – shipmates had been killed – no longer would we sail together again. Already the sea had started on its unremitting task of rotting and rusting. Nelson had spoken of his captains as 'a band of brothers'. Without sentimentalizing we had been that. Now new ships and work awaited all of us – it was our last day together – our saddest day.