

Canadian Convoy

Peter Taylor

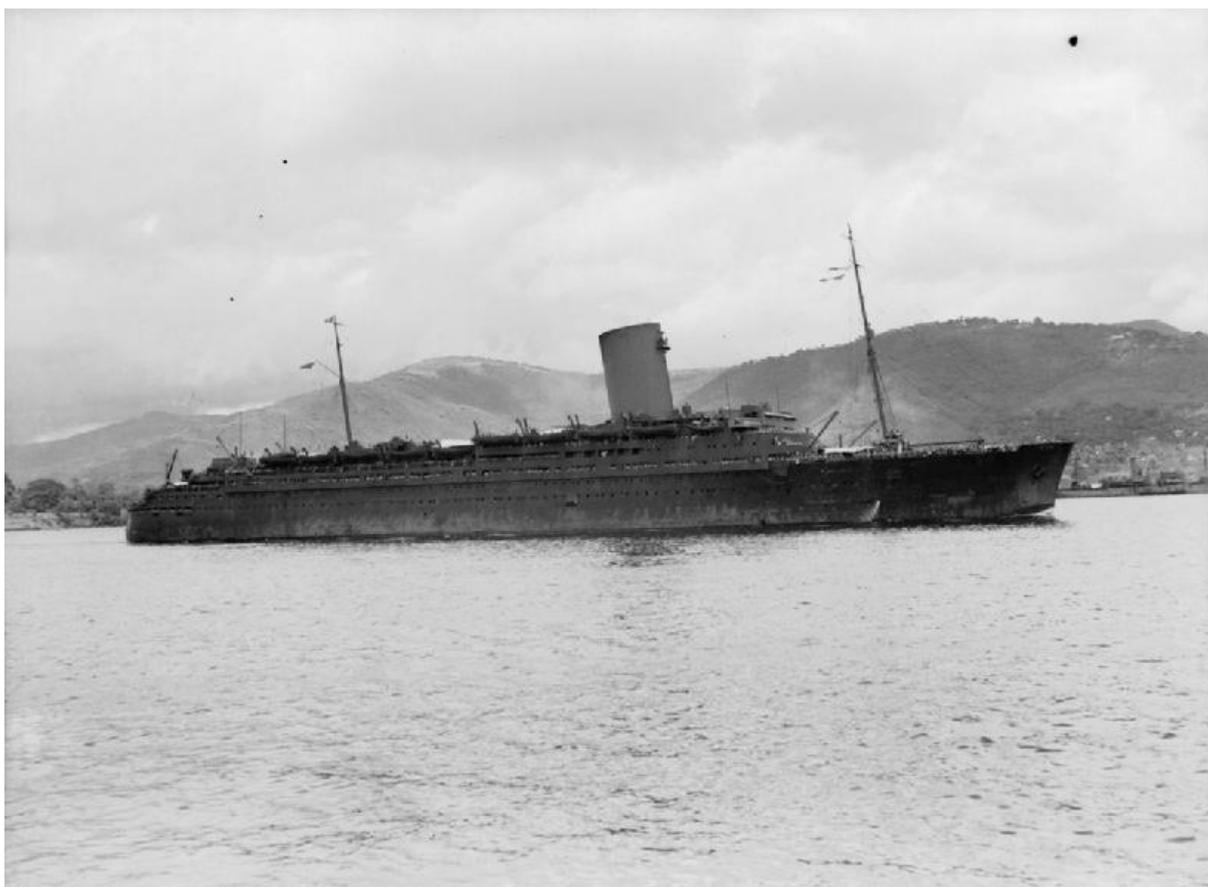
During our childhood, growing up in Bitterne in the late forties and fifties my brother and I were often told tales by our mother about her wartime experiences. Words such as, blitz, convoy, bombing were often mentioned which to my regret I did not take too much notice of. However, after sorting through some papers and diaries I managed to piece together some information on what it was like for both parents during the war.

Harold Taylor and Barbara Kelsey were married on 2 Nov 1940 at Highfield Church. They were supposed to have been married at St Barnabas Church, (on the corner of Rose Road and Lodge Road) but on 24th September of that year it was completely destroyed by a German bomb. As the Taylor family only lived just over 100 yards from the church they decided after the wedding to evacuate to the peaceful area of Colden Common followed soon after by the by my mother's family.



St Barnabas Church, September 1940

My father was conscripted into the RAF on 13th February 1940 as a driver and in November 1940 he received the news that he was going to Canada. He arrived in Canada on the *SS Pasteur* a French ship taken over by the British Government and placed under Cunard- White Star management.



SS Pasteur in wartime colours

Pasteur made her crossings alone and not part of a convoy, due to her speed. The ship sailed from the Clyde on the 27th November and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 5th November 1940. He then travelled by train to the RAF base in Kingston, Ontario, a journey of approximately one thousand miles taking just under thirty-six hours.

The sea journey was mostly uneventful although in his notes he states.

Thurs 28th November

“Reached open sea. Fairly rough. Two destroyers plus *Capetown Castle* with us now. Engines stopped at 2:30pm. Destroyers and *Capetown Castle* leave us and go back. Sunderland flying boat sighted. Drops two bombs in sea. U boat sunk, maybe. Sailors tell us, had a close shave. Off again at 4pm. Reduced speed, one engine broken down. Destroyer gone. 4pm lifeboat drill. Clocks back 1½ hours.”

Fri 29th November

Good night, but not feeling so good. So’ton bombed. Seasick. Eating nothing but biscuits and apples. Making fair headway. Clocks back one hour.

Sat 30th November

Slept ok. Still feeling groggy. Seas very rough. Seagulls seen for first time since leaving England. Seas like mountains. Clocks back another hour. Played cards.

Sun 1st Dec

Good night. Feeling a bit better, getting over sea sickness. So'ton bombed. No meals yet, still biscuits and apples. Went to church at 11pm. Getting colder. Clocks back ½ hour. Played cards.

Wed 4th November

Sighted land for the first time. Snow everywhere. Very cold. Docked 1:30pm. Trip seven days and 5 hours.

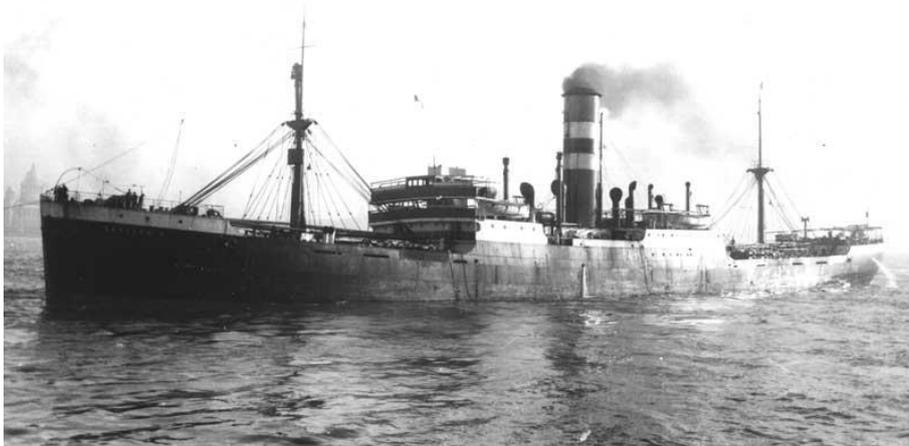
His life in Canada seemed very relaxed. His diaries tell of football, cricket, table tennis and card games. In between he did mention his work which involved driving a host of vehicles including, fire engines, ambulances and on occasions picking up remains of crashed aircraft which some unfortunate pilot had pranged. (The RAF term for an unsuccessful flight I believe). I remember a relative telling me that my father had a good war. I bet he would rather have been at home though.

At some point they must have thought it would a good idea for my mother to join him in Canada although it must have worried him after his journey across the Atlantic. At least it was a summer crossing for her.

So, at the age of twenty-one on the 12th of June 1942 my mother, left Southampton for Liverpool to begin her journey across the Atlantic to Canada. That evening she boarded the *SS Settler*, a small cargo freighter, bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. The following day the ship left Liverpool docks to join convoy ON 103 that was being assembled off the Lancashire coast for its onward journey to Canada and beyond. As German aircraft, submarines, and surface ships reached further into the Atlantic, ships were formed into convoys sailing from Liverpool and escorted all the way to Halifax Harbour. These convoys began sailing on 26th July 1941 and continued until the 27th May 1945.

This particular convoy consisted of approximately fifty-five ships including an escort of eight corvettes and four destroyers. (Incidentally, one escort destroyer, *HMS Witch*, was built by Thornycroft's at their yard in Woolston. She was launched on 11 November 1919.)

The *Settler* was carrying around forty-seven passengers, fifteen females, twenty-three males and nine children. Most of the females were listed as being housewives and no doubt joining their husbands in Canada as was my mother. Most of the men onboard appeared to have occupations that would have been advantageous to the war effort. Among them were pilots, engineers, and naval personnel.



SS Settler 6,225 GRT, length 438.8 Ft, breadth 56.5 Ft and depth 29.6 Ft.

My mother had been given permission to travel to Canada at her own expense, to join my father, in Nova Scotia. The decision for her to travel to North America at that time, must have been a choice of staying in the Southampton area amongst the bombs or taking a chance crossing the Atlantic. I believe she would cycle into Southampton every day for her work in a shop in East Street.

Unbeknownst to her of course was that the raid on Southampton in June 1942 of more than fifty bombers was the last major raid on the town. The war in the Atlantic was still raging but the tide against the Germans was at last turning although June 1942 recorded the loss in gross allied tonnage higher than any other month in the Atlantic war. Convoy ON 103 managed to escape unscathed.

Twenty-two of the merchant ships in the convoy were of British origin, the rest coming from a variety of European countries plus one from the USA and two from Panama. Most were carrying only ballast although seven of the vessels were carrying what was described as general cargo. The final destination of many of the ships would be onward from Halifax to a variety of ports including New York, Boston and as far south as Aruba, Curacao, and Trinidad.

By the time she reached Halifax my father had moved to RAF Greenwood in Nova Scotia where they spent the next eighteen months or so living off camp. My father left Halifax around the beginning of 1944 when he had new posting in the UK followed by my mother in June.

Her route home was a lot more difficult than her journey to Canada. She was to board the *RMS Rangitiki* in New York which meant a roundabout route of approximately 1250 miles via Montreal. The *Rangitiki*, a passenger liner operated during the war years by Cunard White Star, had been converted to a troopship in the early part of the war. On this particular sailing out of a total of 767 passengers 688 were woman and children returning to the UK from Canada and the USA.

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Full-Rate Message	
Day Letter	DL
Night Message	NM
Night Letter	NL

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a full-rate message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.



CANADIAN NATIONAL TELEGRAM

W. M. ARMSTRONG, GENERAL MANAGER, TORONTO, ONT.

FORM 6122
 Exclusive Connection with WESTERN UNION CABLES Cable Service to all the World Money Transferred by Telegraph

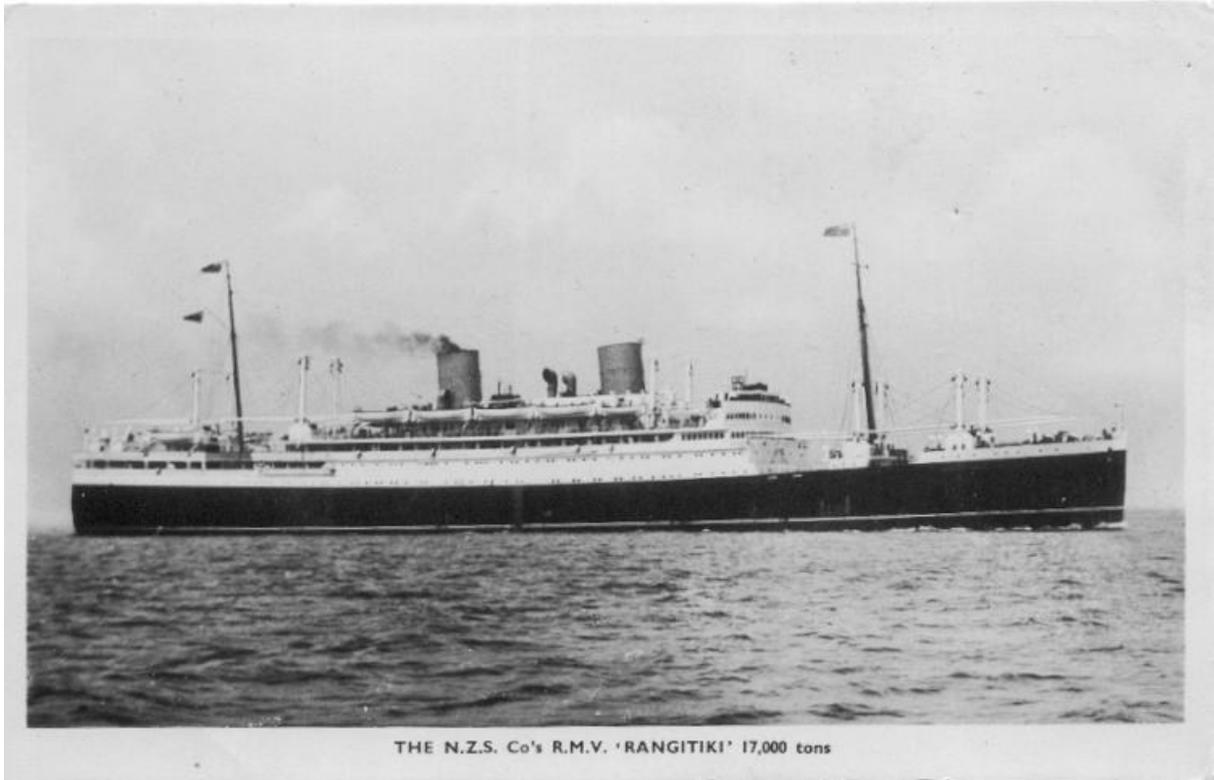
STANDARD TIME

✓ CHA V 666B 1 EXTRA
 HALIFAX NS 100AM MAY 31 1944
 MRS BARBARA M TAYLOR
 CARE HOWARD TUFTS APTS RR 6 KINGSTON VILLAGE NS
 P853 REPORT TO RAILWAY TRANSPORT OFFICE RCAF CENTRAL STATION CNR
 MONTREAL EARLY WEDNESDAY MORNING 14 JUNE REPEAT 14 NECESSARY YOU
 HAVE PASSPORT AND EXIT PERMIT IN YOUR POSSESSION ALSO SUFFICIENT
 FUNDS FOR MAINTENANCE ENROUTE AND 2 DAYS MONTREAL SECURE RAIL
 TRANSPORTATION THROUGH TO NEWYORK ROUTED FROM MONTREAL TO NEWYORK
 VIA CNR MONTREAL TO STJOHNS QUEBEC CVR WINDSOR B & M SPRINGFIELD
 NY NH & H NEWYORK IMPORTANT INSTRUCTIONS CONCERNING BAGGAGE WILL
 FOLLOW BY TELEGRAM STOP WIRE IMMEDIATE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AIRFORCE
 HEADQUARTERS OTTAWA REFERRING P853 YOU WILL REPORT AS INSTRUCTED.
 RCAF HQ OTTAWA

The ship sailed on 16th June 1944 as part of convoy CU28. This consisted of thirty-seven merchant ships and thirteen US Navy escorts. The majority of the ships were American carrying troops and war supplies such as vehicles and explosives.

Although Germany was now on the run the danger in the Atlantic was still there although greatly diminished. Submarines were of course the main menace but after June 1942 most months their losses were in double figures. In fact, from May 1944 until May 1945 German U-boat losses averaged an incredible twenty-five submarines a month the top spot going to April 1945 with fifty-three losses.

Convoy CU28 arrived safely in Liverpool on 27th June 1944. My mother presumably then made her way to Bitterne where her family had settled after returning to Southampton from Colden Common.



In 1946 my father was demobbed from the Air Force after six years and after residing at several addresses in the area they were eventually rewarded with a brand-new prefab off West End Road in Bitterne. Their first real home since they were married in 1940.

I wonder how difficult it was for anyone to settle into normal life after the war. Perhaps a great relief for many after those uncertain times, but for some maybe settling down to a 'normal' life must have been truly daunting after the sights that many of them had seen.