

Local History County Yarns

David Arnold would like to hear from readers of *County Yarns* who have stories and illustrations about Sussex to share with us. Email david.arnold@me.com or write to him at 14 St John Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2QE.

Peril at sea and in the skies for Lewes school Old Boys

They sound like they've come from the pages of "Boy's Own". Except that they are authentic and wholly true to the spirit of their time. Once again I am drawing on the pages of "The Fifty Five: A Story Set In Stone", my book about the Memorial Chapel in the grounds of Priory School, Mountfield Road.

The book has a section called "They Also Served" that concerns former pupils of the Lewes County Grammar School who joined the armed forces and were fortunate to survive the war.

One of these was Cyril Kelley. He had the following story published in the school magazine, "The Barbican":

"While on watch one morning in November 1940 on the destroyer 'HMS Arrow', we knew something unexpected had occurred when we suddenly changed course and increased speed. We made landfall at Achill Head off Ireland and turned into the calm of a bay. There we came upon an oil tanker - 'MS San Demetrio' - badly damaged and low in the water. We didn't know it then but her name was to become symbolic of the fine seamanship and bravery of British merchant seamen.

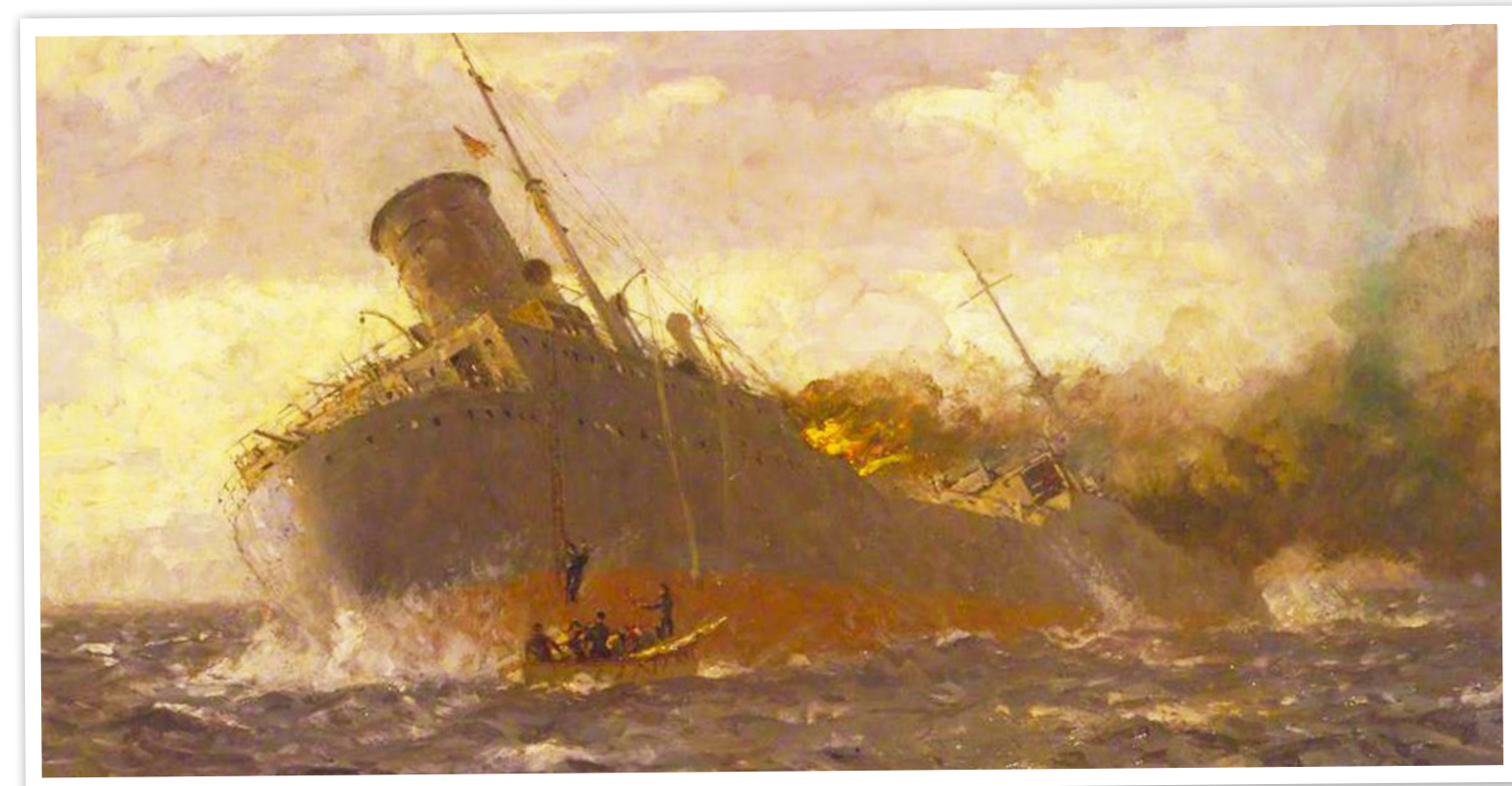
"The tanker's crew requested food and rum. The whaler was lowered and a delivery duly made. A call went out for some of our engineers to assist in repairing the ship's engines. An officer and six seamen, myself included, answered the appeal. "San Demetrio" was in a bad way. The crew had painted "SOS HELP" to attract the attention of patrolling aircraft. By far the most urgent repair was to block a hole that had allowed about 50 tons of seawater to flood a hold.

"When this was done and the engines made good, we were ready to sail. Having worked a miracle in bringing the crippled tanker to safe waters her crew were told to rest, while we Royal Navy boys set course for the Clyde.

"With the bridge shattered, steering was just possible from a position on the port side aft amidst twisted steel and burnt wood.

"Over meals we learnt of the ship's ordeal. She had been in the 'HMS Jervis Bay' convoy of 37 vessels out from Canada. When the German pocket battleship "Admiral Scheer" loomed up on 5th November 1940, the convoy was ordered to scatter. Then in a glorious but doomed action, the hopelessly outgunned "Jervis Bay" sailed directly towards the enemy. After a gallant struggle she was sunk with great loss of life.

"The sacrifice of the 'Jervis Bay' meant that the 'Scheer' was able to sink just five merchantmen. The 'San Demetrio' was hit and set on fire. With 11,000 tons of benzene aboard,



the Captain ordered abandon ship. Next afternoon the still afloat tanker was spotted from one of her lifeboats. An attempt to re-board her was successful. Steering by the sun and stars the crew brought the ship to the refuge where we found her.

"Her crew was British apart from one American, John Doyle. He declared: 'I have read much about what you British have been doing and some stories I doubted. But after seeing all that I have during this voyage, I must tell all my friends at home that now I know what you British mean when you say 'Go to it.'"

Old Boy Norman Hancock became an RAF Squadron Leader and won the DFC while flying Spitfires. He wrote in "The Barbican":

"On our first day in Cornwall I flew for three hours before breakfast. Never has a meal tasted more glorious to me!

"After incessant but boring patrols where we never saw any Germans, suddenly we received long-range Spitfires and shortly afterwards took part in the first great daylight raid on Brest. We escorted a crowd of Hampden bombers across and I caught my first glimpse of France from around 15,000 feet.

"It was all very exciting as it was my first offensive patrol. But the enormous barrage of flak rising up from Brest was not so thrilling! Down went my Flight Commander, having stopped a piece of shrapnel, and we all started to mill around while the bombers were unloading. Here I had my first encounter with a

Above: Norman Wilkinson's painting depicting the scene when the burning oil tanker "MS San Demetrio" was re-boarded by her crew who had abandoned the ship two days previously. With Royal Navy help the vessel made it to the Clyde and safety.

Below: Spitfires of 65 Squadron lined up and ready for action. Inset is Squadron Leader Norman Hancock DFC. He flew with this unit escorting bombing missions over Occupied Europe.

Me.109. We slung lead at one another wholesale; I was not hit but I hope he was.

"Next we started trips to the East Coast, a jumping-off place for Holland. Our first 'op' was to escort bombers returning from a daylight raid on Cologne. Our rendezvous was over the Scheldt near Antwerp. The timing was pretty good for we had to wait less than 10 minutes, during which time we formed a large defensive circle. This was grand fun as we were rarely above 200 feet the whole time. We joined up with the bombers and came home across the North Sea.

"From the end of August we

functioned as fighter escorts to Blenheim bombers attacking shipping off the Dutch coast. I have every admiration for their crews for their job was a truly suicidal one. They attacked at mast height and the concentration of fire against them was terrific.

"I saw far too many Blenheims go hurtling over a ship, drop their bombs and then dive straight into the sea."

Both the above stories - and others - feature in "The Fifty Five" book. Copies at £18 each are available from Skylark Books in the Needlemakers, Lewes, along with an excellent range of Xmas gifts.

