

The Sinking of the *Arandora Star*

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On the afternoon of 3 July 1940, the Canadian destroyer *HMCS St. Laurent* docked at Greenock. The 868 passengers disembarked: bedraggled, exhausted, traumatised, but grateful to be alive. They were the survivors of one of the worst tragedies of the Second World War: the sinking of *SS Arandora Star*

After all he had been through in the last few weeks, Amilcare (*am-EEI-caray*) Cima, must have experienced a tumult of emotions to find himself back safe and sound in his home town, stepping on to the quayside within walking distance of his own café.



Gulf of La Spezia

Now in his forties, Amilcare had lived in Greenock for twenty-odd years. His place of origin was the village of Padivarma, high in the hills behind the port of La Spezia, an area which was home to so many of Greenock's Italian community.

Like all other Italian-born men living in Britain, Amilcare was taken into

police custody after Italy entered the War on the side of Germany on 10 June 1940. Italians, many of whom had lived and worked here for years, suddenly became enemy aliens. Some of the older men had fought for Britain in the First World War. Some had sons serving in the British armed forces. Some were naturalised British subjects, holding British passports. No matter, all males between 18 and 70 were rounded up and interned, following Churchill's infamous edict: "Collar the lot!"

Many, of course, had been running fish and chip shops, ice cream shops, and other businesses. Now it was mainly the women-folk who were left to look after things, no easy task during those years of the war. Due to sugar and milk rationing, it was impossible to make ice cream, so they had to try to survive by selling soft drinks and confectionery. Being ever-resourceful, they diversified into such popular delicacies as hot peas and vinegar. In many cases they also had to cope with vandalism



and looting of their shops by local hooligans after Italy's declaration of war.

Amilcare was unmarried, but family members arranged for a friend to take charge of his Esplanade Café.

The internees were sent to various holding camps around the country, before being allocated their final destination. A large number were shipped to the Isle of Man, where they were accommodated in hotels and boarding houses, which had been filled with holiday-makers in happier, pre-war times. This was not as comfortable as it sounds: they were surrounded by barbed wire, and all the furniture had been stripped out, so living conditions were spartan in the extreme.

Amilcare was one of the hundreds of men transported to Liverpool at the end of June. Many of them assumed that they too were headed for the Isle of Man. But when they saw the size of the ship awaiting them, they realised that this was a transatlantic liner. In her pre-war incarnation, the *Arandora Star* had carried passengers in luxury all over the world. But now she had been converted to a troopship, and had sailed on several successful missions in that capacity. Her next task was to transport several hundred Italian and German internees to Canada, along with a number of German prisoners-of-war.



Arandora Star looking formidable in her wartime livery. (Photo: Royal Navy)

In justification, it was claimed that there were fears of food shortages at home, and these were extra mouths to feed. But there was no justification for the fact that *Arandora Star* was not given an armed escort, and had no markings to indicate that she was carrying civilians.

To prevent any attempted escape, access to the lifeboats was obstructed by heavy barbed wire, and layers of barbed wire were placed between the decks. The ship was carrying more than three times her peacetime capacity, but the number of lifeboats had not been increased.

The captain, Edgar W Moulton, protested, demanding that the number of passengers should be halved, and the barbed wire removed. He was overruled.

When she left Liverpool, the *Arandora Star* was carrying a total of 1673 men: 734 Italian internees (200 of whom lived in Scotland);

479 German internees;
86 German prisoners of war;
200 military guards;
174 crew.

Kapitänleutnant Günther Prien was a hero back in Germany. As commander of the submarine U-47, he was responsible for the sinking of an impressive number of enemy ships. His most famous exploit was to thread his way through the “impossible” approaches to the main British naval base in Scapa Flow and sink the battleship *Royal Oak*. For this feat he was awarded the Knight’s Cross by a delighted Hitler. By the time of his death in March 1941 he had accounted for over 30 British and allied vessels.



Günther Prien (Photo: Bundesarchiv)

Around 7am on 2 July 1940 U-47 was returning from a successful patrol. She had one torpedo left, which Prien had not ordered to be fired as he suspected it was faulty. (In fact, the German submarine service was beset with problems with their torpedoes.) About 100 miles off the north-west coast of Ireland the *Arandora Star* came in sight, unmarked and unescorted, Prien took a chance, and let fly the remaining torpedo, not realising, of course, that the vessel was carrying hundreds of his own German and Italian allies.

The “faulty” torpedo functioned perfectly. *Arandora Star* was struck on her starboard side, just aft of the engine room and sank within an hour.

*“With no opportunity to have conducted a Lifeboat Drill since clearing Liverpool, combined with the unfamiliarity of the ship’s layout, the darkness, the severe ship’s list, and the fact that the majority of the internees on board were either middle-aged or elderly, chaos and pandemonium broke out as the large liner settled deeper in the water. Efforts to coax many of them to jump to the life-rafts that had been thrown overboard from the upper deck were to no avail, they simply refused and clung on to whatever offered them some support. The panic amongst the passengers severely hampered the ship’s crew in their efforts to let go and lower the lifeboats.”*¹

Added to that was the fact that most of the Italian internees were in the lowest part of the ship, and many were trapped by the layers of barbed wire. Men tore with their bare hands at the barbed wire which also impeded access to the lifeboats, and the crush on deck hampered the crew in their efforts to launch the boats. Two lifeboats were lost, and the rest were overcrowded “with swarms of prisoners who had either gone down side-ladders or the boats’ falls”.¹

Many who jumped from the ship had their necks broken by their lifejacket catching them violently under the chin as they hit the water. No-one had told them to hold the lifejacket down as they jumped.

A sizeable number went down with the ship because they were afraid to enter the water. For those in the boats, or trying to keep afloat in the water, the priority was to get as far from the ship as possible before she went down. But as she sank, many were sucked under by the huge vortex.

“As the commotion and swirl subsided, all that remained on the surface amongst an ever-widening patch of fuel oil was ten lifeboats, a small armada of life-rafts and the heads of many swimmers bobbing around amongst items of wreckage.”¹

Amilcare was a strong swimmer. His head was one of those “bobbing around amongst items of wreckage”. Eventually he heard his name being called. He had been spotted by a friend in a lifeboat. Although the boat was full, his friend insisted on hauling him in, covered with fuel oil, and exhausted after several hours in the water.

“With Coastal Command alerted through the earlier SOS signals transmitted by the stricken ship, an RAF Sunderland Flying Boat was on the scene by 09:30 hours and dropped first-aid kits, food and cigarettes in watertight bags, and indicated that help was on the way. The aircraft circled overhead until about 13:00 hours and the arrival of the Canadian destroyer HMCS St. Laurent, under the command of H.G. De Wolf.

“Over the following five hours, this valiant vessel picked up no less than 868 survivors, and although the people in boats were easily rescued, it was quite a different matter saving the many others adrift in the oil-covered flotsam or individually clinging to life-rafts, or items of floating wreckage. Few of the survivors could help themselves, being covered in oil and having been so long in the water, and sailors from the Canadian naval ship had to go into the sea themselves with lines to attach to these exhausted and half-drowned people so that they could be lifted on board their rescuer. It also required a fine sense of seamanship, judgement and skills to pick and weave a path through the mayhem on the surface without placing those in the water in danger. Including her own complement, there was over a thousand on board this brave Canadian destroyer when she had finished her work that evening and set a course for Greenock.

“The well-known British destroyer HMS Walker arrived on the scene later and carried out a final search of the area, but found no more survivors from the ARANDORA STAR.

“In this great disaster of WWII, the final reckoning of those who perished was as follows :

*“Captain Moulton together with 12 other officers and 42 crewmembers – 55 of the 174 crew
37 of the 200 military guard
470 of the 734 Italian internees
243 of the 479 German internees*

“Total Number Perished : 805.”¹



Capt. EW Moulton
(Photo: Daily Express)

Captain Moulton and his senior officers stayed with their ship till the last. As the *Arandora Star* started to go down they were seen walking off the bridge into the sea

Among those who were lost were, from Greenock, Giovanni Moretti (47) and Agostino Pardini (38); from Port Glasgow, Flavio Rossi (38) and Francesco Ferrari (40).

264 Italians and 322 Germans were saved.

When they disembarked from the *St Laurent* in Greenock, the survivors were not allowed to contact their families, although some of the local Italians arrived with food and clothes for them. Amilcare's sister came to the quayside looking for him, but was not allowed to see him. Fortunately she met a lawyer friend, who persuaded the police to let him through to deliver the things she had brought for Amilcare.

After a very short respite the survivors were packed off back to Liverpool and, with unbelievable callousness, put on the *Dunera* bound for Australia. They were badly treated by their guards, who thought they were dealing with prisoners-of-war. (No excuse!) They were punched and struck with rifle butts. Their belongings were looted or destroyed. They were subjected to tirades of abuse. Some of the guards were later court-martialled for their behaviour.

Just a few days out of Liverpool, they were torpedoed again. This time, fortunately, the torpedo really was faulty, and failed to detonate properly. Little damage was done, and the ship was able to steam on. But one can imagine the terror of her passengers for the rest of the 60 day voyage.

A good number of Italians stayed on in Australia, but after the War Amilcare elected to come home to Greenock, where he ran the Esplanade Café until his retirement. He returned to Italy, and lived out the rest of his life quietly in his beloved Padivarma. But he could never forget the *Arandora Star*.



Looking to the hills above La Spezia

Each year, to mark the anniversary of the sinking, commemorative events are held around the country, including a memorial Mass in St Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow. A plaque in the

peaceful Italian cloister beside the Cathedral records the names of the Scots-Italians who lost their lives. The inscription reads:

On the 70th anniversary of their death this monument was offered by the members and friends of the Scots Italian community as a symbol of peace and reconciliation and as a contribution towards the healing of memories. May the dead of the Arandora Star, and all who have lost their life in war, rest in peace.

Non vi scorderemo mai. (We will never forget you)



Laying a wreath in the Italian Cloister after the memorial Mass



Plaque commemorating Scots Italians who lost their lives

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With thanks to Liliana Medinelli for information about her uncle, Amilcare Cima.

¹*Quotations are from www.clydemaritime.co.uk*

Photos by the author unless otherwise stated.