

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK

COLIN ARMITAGE, SURVIVOR



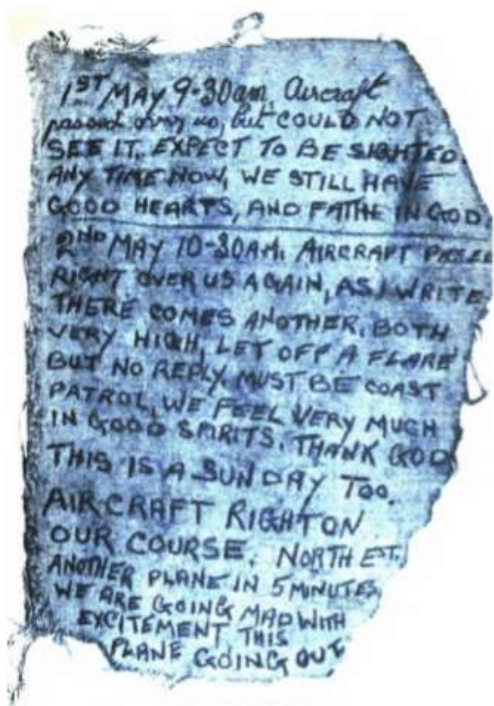
Image : Hull Daily Mail

The Armitage family from Melton, East Yorkshire, did not have a good war. In June 1941, Stanley Armitage lost his life aged 20 when his ship, the S S Trevarrack (or Travarria in one source) was torpedoed about 600 miles East of St John, Newfoundland. The entire crew of 44 men was lost. Then in October 1942 his brother Frederick, Second Officer on the S S Scalaria, survived being torpedoed in Egypt. And in the early morning of Friday 19th March 1943 a third brother, Able Seaman Colin Armitage aboard the S S Lulworth Hill was also torpedoed, this time off the West coast of Africa. This

is his extraordinary story.

The Lulworth Hill was making its way back to Britain via Cape Town having delivered a cargo of bombs and aircraft engines to Alexandria. The torpedo which hit her was fired by an Italian U-boat, the Leonardo da Vinci. It split the Lulworth Hill in two and she sank within around 90 seconds. Out of a crew of 47, only the First Officer, Basil Scown, and 13 others made it to a small, cramped life raft. They included Armitage, aged 21, and the ship's carpenter, Kenneth Cooke, from Bridlington. Scown knew that they were nowhere near the shipping lanes where they might have hoped for rescue. He calculated that it would take about 30 days to reach the safety of the African coast 800 miles away and allocated each man a daily ration from their meagre supplies - one ship's biscuit, one ounce of pemmican, four malted-milk tablets, three squares of chocolate and six ounces of water. The first few days were spent frantically scanning the horizon in the forlorn hope of spotting a ship, the mood being lifted only slightly and fleetingly when they occasionally managed to catch a fish. It wasn't long before mental torment was followed by physical torment as tongues swelled and turned black. The effects of salt water on open wounds must have been agonising. The feet of one wounded man turned gangrenous. Sharks started to circle the liferaft. Inevitably, extreme heat, dehydration and starvation took their toll.

The first death – that of Scown – occurred on day 19. We know this because Kenneth Cooke – the carpenter – remarkably kept a log written on scraps of torn sailcloth. Cooke and Armitage removed his wedding ring in the hope that one day they could give it to his wife. They had no choice but to abandon his body to the sharks.



Images of Cooke's log and the rescue : Shipwrecks and sea dogs

There was no let up in the men's suffering.

The strongest man on the raft went mad, locked two other men in his arms and jumped to the sharks. More men died. Some went mad after drinking sea water. Others simply jumped overboard, apparently preferring a quick and excruciatingly painful death to a slow and excruciatingly painful one.

Extracts from Cooke's log bring home the horror of their situation:

April 12: May God help us; we need Him now

April 22: "Eight more have passed on to God. Things look very bad for us. Only two left now out of 14 (the two were Colin Armitage

and Kenneth Cooke)

April 25 (after 40. days) : Nothing to see but water. Looking for a ship or plane any day now. Many birds and sharks around us. We are getting very weak. Can't stand up now but we'll stick it.



On the 47th day a US plane sighted the raft, and dropped five packages, but the men were so weak they could pick up only two of them. Three agonising days later – day 50 – HMS Rapid appeared on the horizon having been guided by the planes. The dramatic rescue is recorded in a photograph taken from on board HMS Rapid. Cooke and Armitage were taken to Cape Town to recover from their harrowing ordeal. They were later awarded the George Medal and the Lloyd's Medal for bravery at sea. Mrs Scown did get her husband's wedding ring back.

Of the two men it was Cooke who made the better recovery, even going on to write a book about his experience – *What Cares the Sea?* (Also known as *Man on a Raft.*) Armitage returned to Hull, got married and had three children. But he suffered badly – had frequent nightmares and couldn't talk about what had happened to him. Nowadays he would probably be diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. He was only 28 when he died of a heart attack in 1950.

Colin Armitage's granddaughter, Louise Beech, never met her grandfather, but has written a book and a play about him and his heroism called How To Be Brave. She used his story to encourage her own daughter through treatment for illness which required her to show some of her great grandfather's amazing bravery and resilience. The play alternates between scenes on the liferaft and scenes at Louise and her daughter's home in Hull. The theatre group Other Lives Productions are touring it from 22nd October 24 to 16th November 24, including two performances at Hull Truck theatre on Friday 1st and Saturday 2nd November, and five at East Riding theatre from Tuesday 12th to Saturday 16th November. For further details go to <https://otherlives.org.uk/blog>

Don Knibb

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