

## At Sea

And so it was after years behind me as a lad at home, I began my real adventure, as a man.

Eighteen RAF boys and I, following three weeks in holding barracks, left Liverpool docks setting sail for Halifax in Nova Scotia. Out into the Irish Sea, Ireland rose up in the distance, then slowly fell away as we headed into the Atlantic on my first ocean crossing, and one I will always remember. Our craft, the SS Carina II, built in Glasgow and owned by Elders & Fyffes, was a redundant banana boat, and having now been commissioned to carry troops to and from Canada, was to be my home for the next nineteen days. The Carina, at some four hundred and twenty-five feet in length and six thousand tons, ploughed through the waves, steaming in a 'fast' convoy numbering thirty ships and naval escorts. Its twin screws drove us on at about fourteen knots as its single funnel belched grey acrid clouds into the air which billowed, drifted, and sometimes in the wind, washed over the deck. I gazed day after day at the disappearing rim of land on the horizon; the waves' folds and furrows became almost hypnotic in their watching. Swirls of foam vanished just as quickly as they had appeared, magically created in that moment in time. At night the deep sky was speckled with glimmering stars whilst galaxies passed overhead: a heavenly tranquility which belied the turmoil here on earth. The sea stretched in every direction, broken only by the grey forms of other craft; nothing else interrupted this mighty mantle.

After five days out, we fought a different battle, this time against the sea; the waves, the currents, the drenching rain and the winds were our adversaries as our vessel tumbled downward then rose skyward, from trough to crest, forging on, creaking and groaning as she went. Our fragile boat balanced above miles of green seething ocean, whilst the overflowing of the waters spilt about our deck as the wintry storm bit hard. There was nowhere else for us to go. The passage of winds stirred the ocean again and again throwing itself at our tiny craft; gaining headway proved ever harder. The immense strength and hostility of this unfamiliar adversary was inspiring: this was my first real experience of such a duel with the elements. Hour after hour we soldiered on as conditions deteriorated; night fell, the full moon shone brightly on us but the wild spray obliterated any view of the other ships sailing with us, each helpless to aid the other. All hands stood in readiness holding firm as the cruel sea rose now straight up then under us, our bow lifted, we yawed then crashed, cutting into the swell. Again we were tossed high, then rolled, but held firm. The treacherous seas powered passed, breaking onboard with a deafening thunder. My muscles ached, trying with all my strength to cushion the blows and resist being thrown about.

We were to learn that near to these waters, some four weeks earlier, the SS City of Benares out of Liverpool, steaming from Quebec and Montreal was torpedoed. She sank within thirty minutes of being hit; over half the crew and passengers were lost, and seventy-seven of the ninety child evacuees on board fleeing the Blitz in Britain, were killed.<sup>18</sup> Surely the same fate did not await us?

After two more fearful days in the early hours of the morning, the storm abated, but only after all of us chaps had emptied our stomachs over the side. The calm returned as the winds died, exhausted, and the seas grew softer, passing by our hull like rippling blue-black silk. The peaceful majesty of the sea returned. Once again it was possible to admire the night sky, with the stars twinkling in the dark abyss overhead, lone shooting stars scribed bright paths across the heavens as they travelled on their way to oblivion. We steamed on, the days passing uneventfully.