

Interviewer:

So this is Terry Ford interviewing Margaret Gunson on the 2nd of October, 2023 at South Shield's Local History Group at Cleadon Park, and we're discussing her father Douglas Gunson.

Margaret:

Douglas Rothery Gunson was born on the 28th of October, 1914 West Derby Lancashire to Harry Rothery Gunson, and Francis Annie Gunson nee Shepherd. He was baptised on the 21st of June, 1916 at St. Thomas's Seaforth Lancaster, England. He joined the Merchant Navy and in 1939 he was on board one of the first ships to be sunk in the Second World War Akenside. A steamer left port on the 8th of June, 1939 and was sunk the 22nd of September, 1939. Sunk by enemy action. All his sea papers were kept in a suitcase. He never talked about it. The 11th of November or the nearest Sunday, he and Uncle John Laney Matthews army would watch the armistice programme with very sad looks on their faces. One time when I was a child, I think the story went that the ship Akenside was sunk by a submarine, which came out of the water and gave them a lifeboat, and the captain of the sub pointed to his cap badge and their captain pointed at his.

But since this project started, I have found other details. Douglas continued going to sea during the war. I believe he was on the Arctic convoy and was on an armament ship during D-Day. Never talked about it. Never claimed any medals. After the Akenside was sunk, arrived back in Newcastle Upon Tyne the 29th of September, 1939, he did his tickets at the Marine School South Shields. In 1941, he married a South Shields lass, Grace Ann Matthews. Douglas became a captain. He later became the Harbour Master in Durban, South Africa for a number of years returning to England in 1961 to settle at Kingston. Upon Thames Surrey, he worked for Hawker Siddeley Kingston until his death in March, 1978, age 63 years.

He was very kind, known as a gentleman by his family in South s Shields. His life was spent growing vegetables in the garden, repairing his car, to building kitchen and furniture in the house out of scraps of old wood, he did one time buy a kit and did built in wardrobes in the front bedroom. He would help anyone with a repairing job. He was easygoing.

Interviewer:

That's brilliant, excellent, lovely Margaret, thanks very much.

Note Taker:

A-r-c-t-i-c. So he was sunk by a submarine, he was on Arctic Convoys, was there something else?

Margaret:

He was on D-Day, but he didn't say what beach. I did have a newspaper cutting, but God knows what happened to it. I think it was on, it's a short name, the Gold or the other one, Juno? Yeah, something like that. But I can't find the newspaper article, so unless I find it.

David:

So you don't know what he was doing on D-Day?

Margaret:

Just the armament ship? He was on a ship carrying bombs.

Note Taker:

Oh, right, I see. Yes. That's the best place to be, wasn't it? Blooming Heck! It's bad enough going ashore without taking all them bombs with you!

Newcastle Journal - Saturday 23 September 1939

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**NEWCASTLE
SHIP SUNK
OFF NORWAY**

**Crew of 26 Saved:
Landed at Bergen**

THE crew of 26 have all been saved from the British freighter, **Akenside** of Newcastle, which was sunk off the Norwegian coast yesterday.

The **Akenside** (2,689 tons), of Newcastle, was carrying a cargo of coal from Blyth to Norway.

The crew were picked up by Norwegian ships and arrived at Bergen last night.

"The ship was sunk after a warning," said one of the crew. "We had ample time to get into the lifeboats, but without our belongings. The ship sank in ten minutes."—Reuter.

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ERS CHEERED

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had lunched at another g and there was an eception for the

Birmingham Daily Post - Monday 25 September 1939

Image © Reach PLC. Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

Crew of **Akenside Safe**

News has been received by the managers of the Newcastle steamer **Akenside** which Reuter reported on Friday had been sunk off the Norwegian coast, that the crew is safe.

The **Akenside** owned by the Quayside Shipping Company, Ltd., of Newcastle-on-Tyne, was a vessel of 2,694 tons. She was carrying a cargo of coal for Norway.

The managers, Connell and Grace, Ltd., of Newcastle and London, stated on Saturday that they had received a telegram from Captain Nelson, the master, that he and the twenty-six officers and crew were all safe.

Shields Mate's Story Of Torpedoing German's Concern For Crew's Safety

"IT'S a funny war"—is a familiar remark these days. The sinking of the Newcastle ship *Akenside* by a German U-boat provided an incident typical of the kind which prompts people to call the war "funny."

While the *Akenside* was sinking the U-boat commander was anxiously inquiring whether the British sailors had sufficient food and cigarettes in their boats, and whether they felt certain they could make the shore!

The story of the sinking of the *Akenside* was told to an Evening News reporter by the first mate, N. Thurlbeck, of 25 Milldene Avenue Tynemouth, who arrived home yesterday, none the worse for his adventure, and now on the lookout for another ship.

QUICKLY OVERTAKEN

This is his story: "When the submarine was first sighted she was about one and a half miles distant and four points on the port bow, steering in a direction calculated to cut us off from the land. We immediately altered our course to starboard so as to put the submarine aft, and put on full speed. As soon as the commander of the submarine saw this the U-boat fired a shot, passing within 50 feet of us."

"The submarine was rapidly overtaking us and another shot was fired. We stopped and the commander of the German vessel—in perfect English—told us to leave the *Akenside*. The lee boat was lowered and I was in charge of the 19 men in her."

"We rowed about two ship's lengths away and when the starboard boat had been lowered and got well clear the submarine fired her torpedo, striking the *Akenside* on her port side by No. 3 hatch. This was at 2.55 and the ship sank in 12 minutes."

SIGHTED BY PLANE

"Before the submarine moved away the commander shouted to us asking if we had enough cigarettes and food and seemed anxious to know whether we could make shore."

"We said that we could. The submarine then turned off in a westerly direction and owing to the rough sea and the small height of our boat we soon lost sight of the U-boat."

"We set sail for Bergen and after about two hours an aeroplane from the direction of the Norwegian coast, came out and circled above us. Later the Norwegian torpedo boat, the Storm, came out and picked us up. The crew of 26 were none the worse for the adventure. There was no panic or confusion. We lost our personal belongings but got fitted up with more clothes over there."

FIRST - HAND information from seamen whose ships have been sunk by enemy submarine action is in a "War News Bulletin," issued by the Rev. H. T. Law, Chaplain of the Tyne and Blyth Stations of the Missions to Seamen.

One seaman from the Newcastle steamer "*Akenside*" related that his captain was ordered by the enemy commander to board the submarine, and take such stores as are contained in tins.

"And don't forget a bottle of whisky," the order was supplemented.

When these, with the ship's papers, had been delivered, the enemy crew "gave three cheers for British seamen," and "the Commander then sank the steamer by shell fire," after which the crew were told to follow the submarine in their boats, which they did for twelve miles, when help arrived.



SIGNED ON AGAIN

The seaman who imparted this information to the Chaplain of the Mission, upon his arrival at South Shields, immediately signed on another ship.

"What about your wages and personal effects?" he was questioned by the Chaplain.

"Oh," he answered, casually, "that matter can wait."

Ready and anxious to ship again after his experience, this seaman surely exemplified the highest and best that is in the spirit of the merchant marine—"especially," the Chaplain considers, "as upon cross-examining him I found he could not even swim."

With this example before us, Mr. Law suggests we shall do well to keep calm, and cool, and collected—"for there will always be an England with such men in the merchant service."



Name of Ship AKENSIDE					
Current Voyage & Cargo	Arrd. at Destn.	Intermediate Movements	Anticipated Movements	Prospective Cargo	
Year 1939					
Ghent 27/7 Tyne Tyne 2/8 London (COKE) OR 5/8 Tromsø Tromsø Narvik Narvik 18/8 Leeds Blyth - Bergen N.N. M20. Melk 20/9 due Bergen.	29/7. 17/8 24/8	Pa. Lodenjen 6/8 Pa. Lodenjen 16/8 220m E. Wick 22/8 Sunk by submarine in 60.07 N 4.37 E 22/9/39. (OU 6353/49)	Sleg Tyne/Tromsø Sls Tromsø/Narvik Middlesbrough or W. Hartlepool Due Middlesbrough 26.28/8. Hs. for White Sea. To load for Amsterdam.	COKE ore. ballast linker	OR 20/7 OR 5/8 O.A. 19/8.

The National Archives' reference BT 389/21/112

MOSES GAY					
VOYAGE	ARRD AT DESTN	MOVEMENTS		CARGO	OPERATIONS
	1944	INTERMEDIATE	ANTICIPATED		
Linda old 27/3 sd. 5/2		Sd. Southend 6/3			
Tyne 12/3 London	7/3	Pol up Southend 14/3			
London old 15/3 sd. 21/3	14/3	Pol down Southend 21/3			
Inveriglen	22/3				
Inveriglen 25/3		Sd. Humber 25/3 Pol up Southend 26/3			
London 26/3	26/3				
London old 27/3 sd. 28/3		Arch. Southend 28/3 Pol down 29/3			
Inveriglen	30/3				
Inveriglen 1/4		Sd. Humber 2/4 Pol up Southend 3/4			
Inveriglen 3/4	3/4				
Inveriglen 6/4	6/4	Pol down Southend 5/4			
Hartlepool 15/4	15/4	Arch. Ht. pool Sld 14/4 14/4 14/4			
Rochester 19/4		Arch. Southend 19/4 Pol down 20/4			
Middlesbrough 21/4	21/4				
On Special Service					
28/4/44					
80544-1 7,500 D/3 63 11/42 P R P					