

Christmas at Sea in WWII

RMS Aquitania, a Cunard Ocean Liner, was known as ‘*The Beautiful Ship*’. She sailed on her maiden voyage in May of 1914. She was the sister ship of the *Lusitania*, and served as a troopship in both world wars. In WWII she carried a total of 400,000 soldiers, traveling over half-a-million miles, mostly in the North Atlantic, usually without escort in dangerous war zones. Between the wars she was the favorite luxury ship for trans-Atlantic travelers.

I have written for the Writers’ Group about the incomplete delivery of a B-25 Mitchell bomber from Montreal to Scotland in December of 1943. In Prestwick, the crew learned that we were scheduled to return to Montreal by troopship. A group of RAF Ferry Command crew members was bussed to Clydeside, Glasgow, and taken by lighter out to the *RMS Aquitania* waiting in the harbour. She sailed, unescorted, for New York on December 20.

The original first class deck on this famous ship, with most of her luxurious lounges, smoking rooms, and dining rooms, had been retained for military officers, civilian dignitaries, and celebrities. The next deck down was set up as a hospital with wards for returning soldiers being repatriated for medical reasons. The next two decks were mostly open areas lined with cots and hammocks for other rank, and had large mess rooms, kitchens, and public latrines. The lowest decks were near the waterline, and were set up, and heavily guarded, for POWs being transported to internment camps in the US and Canada. These German and Italian prisoners were the most vulnerable if the ship was torpedoed. Reportedly, German U-Boat captains had been told about this, and, if the ship was encountered, would not attack. On the return trips from the US to Britain the ship usually carried over 11,000 soldiers and the ship’s crew of about 1100 sailors.

As RCAF officers and civilian Ferry Command aircrew, we were assigned to the first class deck, but I recall that four of us were squeezed into a very small inner cabin with upper and lower bunks. We spent most of the time, however, in the lounges playing bridge, and in the dining rooms. Some of us would volunteer to sign out a pair of navy binoculars and spend time on the open deck watching for the periscopes of German U-boats. Some of the passengers were so stricken with sea sickness that they just stayed in bed.

We were two days out of New York on Christmas Day. In the first class dining room we were treated to a traditional Christmas dinner. There was no shortage of groceries on board the ship as it replenished its pantries during its regular calls at New York. We were served roast turkey and dressing, cranberry jelly, vegetables, mashed potatoes and gravy, but no pumpkin pie! Dessert was a pudding called plum duff. We were disappointed also that no liquor or wine was available. Many of the passengers did not show up for dinner as they were too seasick from the effects of the heavy swells of the wintery North Atlantic.

Two days after Christmas, we tied up at the Westside docks in New York City. US Army busses were awaiting us on the dock. We traveled to Hoboken, NJ in these sealed busses, across the Hudson River on the George Washington Bridge to trains waiting on sidings in New Jersey; We could see the bright Christmas lights of the city from the bus, but we had no opportunity to escape into the Big Apple. RCAF officers were assigned bunks on Pullman sleeper cars for the overnight trip to Montreal. This completed my one and only Christmas at sea. It was more interesting and memorable (and safer) than returning to base in Montreal on the Return Air Ferry BOAC Liberators. I was back in Montreal in time to spend the New Year holiday with my young cousins on the ski slopes in the Laurentians.

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Then it was back to RAF Ferry Command base at Dorval to learn what new adventure awaited us. Five more return Atlantic crossings by ship, (*Queen Mary, Ile de France, Queen Elizabeth I, Nieuw Amsterdam and Scythia*) were in my future, but none would be as memorable as the 1943 Christmas crossing on the *Royal Mail Ship Aquitania*.

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