



(left) Robert Lavack and Plane

Robert Lavack:
sometimes war
chooses you

Wars, such as the War of 1812 and WWII, are fought by individuals. They are started by leaders and governments, but fought by ordinary people. I am one such ordinary person and this is how I got involved in WWII.

I was a child of the Depression and like many young, and old, people of that time, I was concerned about employment. When I reached the school-leaving age of 15, I had the opportunity to go to sea as my older brothers Ross and Gerry had done. My brother Gerry had gone to the Swedish Merchant Marine and Ross went to sea in the Norwegian Merchant Marine. Only one ocean trip determined for them that a life at sea was not the career for them. In my case, WWII made decisions for me.

In June 1936 a crew vacancy occurred on a British merchant vessel in B.C. when a British seaman jumped ship. My mother was a friend of the Harbour Master's wife and saw this as her chance to propel her youngest son to sea.

I took the ferry from Vancouver to Nanaimo and the bus from there to Chemainus where I saw three ships loading at the dock. I wondered which one was mine. Then I spotted this old rusty black-hulled ship loading logs on its well decks. Oh my god, I thought, that's mine! Maybe I should go home? But, the shame of going home was too much and I walked down towards the harbour and boarded the *MV King Arthur*. It sailed the following day for Sidney, Australia and then worked the China coast for the next three years.



King Arthur

<http://uboat.net/allies/merchants/2428.html>

Photo Courtesy of Library of Contemporary History, Stuttgart

During those three years I had my first experience of war. The Second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945) started while my ship was working cargo on the Yangtze River and other Chinese ports. In 1937 I spotted many bodies of murdered Chinese floating down the river from Nanking and I also heard shooting on shore. I had risen from Deck Boy to Able-Bodied Seaman but even with this rank and at the advanced age of 18, it was a bit much for me to see the headless corpses.

In June 1939 we sailed from Australia to the UK with a load of corrugated iron sheets for civilian air raid shelters. When refuelling at Dakar, Senegal we heard that WWII had started. That meant we'd have to run the German submarine blockade off England. It was early in the war and as a result protective convoys were only just getting organized. It was dicey reaching England but we did it. I continued to traverse the seas with war cargo, dodging dangers until my date with destiny February 15, 1940.

The *SS Cornfield* on which I was serving as an AB left the safety of the convoy in which it was travelling because its deck cargo had started to shift in stormy cross seas. It was early morning when a torpedo from a German U-boat hit us. I was at the wheel when several explosions took place. The second mate sent me to the port wing to release a Carey float stowed there while he released the one on the starboard wing—that's the last I saw of him. I went over the side in just what I had on—without a life vest. It was winter and the water was cold but I swam over to the Carey float. In the burning light of the wreckage I saw a life boat that had been blown clear with part of the deck on it and one passenger—a dazed ship's cook. The cook pulled me into the lifeboat.

We searched for survivors in the light of the flames from the wreck and from oil burning on the surface of the water. We picked up another five survivors. Having

been the helmsman at the wheel I knew that the ship was roughly 300 nautical miles from Ireland. How were we going to get there? I was the only seaman in the lifeboat; the rest were the cook and engine room men. Fortunately the cook and one other person had small boat sailing experience, fortunate because I had none. So, at 18-years-of-age, because I was an AB seaman, I was given my first command. I held the highest rank in the boat.

It was obvious we needed to sail towards the nearest land which I knew to be Ireland. To help us get there we managed to rig an oar with a piece of canvas that had covered the lifeboat. We hoisted that oar and tagged on tattered canvas to be our sail. With a compass heading and a following wind, I set our craft on a course for Northern Ireland.

The ship had sunk with such speed that we hadn't put out an SOS. We seven were on our own on a cold, cold sea. After four nights and three days a British Royal Navy frigate on patrol picked us up. By then we were only five. The other two we'd had to bury at sea. Another survivor died later. Of the 32 member crew of the *SS Cornfield*, four survived.

During our ordeal at sea we'd been over flown by what must have been patrolling RAF aircraft that hadn't spotted our wee raft in the choppy seas. I'd made a deal with "higher orders" that if I survived I'd join the RAF. I'd make sure that poor sods like us weren't over flown! During my survivor's leave I joined the RAF.

For the next five years I was a combat pilot. I did 84 strategic night bomber raids from the UK, Italy, North Africa and the Middle East—over 700 hours in aerial combat.

And that's how I got involved in WWII. It wasn't ideals; it wasn't enlistment; it was fate that made me walk up the gangplank of the *MV King Arthur* in Chemainus on Vancouver Island on June 13, 1936—well, maybe a little push from my mother helped!

To children 200 years from now, I say, "You never know where those first footsteps out of school will lead you and if they lead into war, how that will affect you. But, you should know that war is about people like me.