

Bizarre, Fascinating, and Wacky World War I & II Secrets. Zam Zam Zunk

He was a pitiful little light brown skinned Egyptian man almost 90 years of age. His eyes were full of terror, as he shook his head, and his frail voice quivered as he spoke. "Zam Zam zunk! Zam Zam zunk!" He kept repeating this phrase over and over again, for he was obviously in deep shock, "Zam Zam zunk!" while he was squatting at the ship's rail, and staring out into the ocean. During World War One, England built many Oxfordshire class passenger ships to carry troops. These were called Bibby Line troop transports, and one of these was named the HMS Leicestershire. Later her name was changed to the HMS British Exhibitor. Then she was sold to the country of Egypt. This ship became the largest ship in the Egyptian Merchant Navy. And it was named for the third time. This time it was named after a holy well in Mecca, which is the chief holy city in Saudi Arabia. (Yes, you guessed it, the SS Zam Zam!)

The time was April 17, 1941, and the place was the south Atlantic Ocean (off the coast of the southern tip of South Africa. The Zam Zam carried a crew of 129 merchant marine seamen, most were Egyptians. Only the skipper, Captain William Gray Smith, and his chief engineer were British. The Ship also had 202 passengers, 94 men, 73 women, and 35 children. And 138 of these passengers were Americans. At this point in time in World War II, Egypt was a neutral nation. Her ships were supposed to fly the Egyptian flag, and identify that they were Egyptian. But the Zam Zam was flying no flag, and had no identifying marks anywhere. Only the word "Misr" painted on her funnel. So some of her crew and some of her passengers jokingly called her "The Misery Ship." The Zam Zam was also sailing without any lights at night, and kept complete radio silence. Because the ship was

loaded with a contraband destined for England. She had received direct orders from the British Admiralty to maintain a prearranged course, and follow the strict regulations. Even the skipper's request to have lights at night, for the women and children, was refused.

Dawn was breaking at 5:55 am, as a shell came whistling down and destroyed the wireless cabin. Now no "SOS" distress signal could be sent by the radio operator. The Zam Zam was hit five more times by six inch shells. This caused heavy damage along the waterline, and in the engine room. But amazingly enough, the shelling did not cause a single death. And only three people were injured. The Zam Zam was zigzagging at nearly full speed ahead, but now she stopped dead in the water. Then she began to lower her lifeboats, to abandon ship, because the Zam Zam was going to sink.

Not because of a Nazi submarine nor a Nazi warship. The Zam Zam had been stalked and shelled by one of the most dangerous weapons of the seas that the Nazis possessed. The allies called them, raiders, pirates, buccaneers, and even rattlesnakes of the seas. The name of the attacking ship painted on its side read HMS Tamesis (a British cargo ship). But the British flag was hauled down, and replaced by a Nazi battle flag. For this was the dreaded commerce raider. Ship number 16, the Atlantis. The skipper, Captain Bernhard Rogge, and his crew were masters in the art of camouflage. The Atlantis was the former German cargo ship the Goldenfels.

It was 500ft long, 60ft wide, and a 25ft draught (depth of water needed to float the ship when fully loaded). It took fourteen long weeks to convert the harmless cargo freighter into the heavily armed and deadly auxiliary cruiser (called a commerce raider). The Armament included the following: six 6 inch cannons, one 3 inch cannon, two 1.1 inch anti-

of the whole ship was changed. Some disguises used by the Atlantis: Norwegian ship "Knut Nelson", Russian ship "Kim", Japanese ship "Kasil Maru", Dutch ship "Abbekerk", Norwegian ship "Tarifa", British ship "Antenor" and British ship "Tamesis".

The strategy of the Atlantis was very simple. she would disguise herself as a

looked more like a gypsy's caravan, or an emigrant ship. The crew of the Atlantis were especially happy to obtain fresh eggs from the Zam Zam's galley. Some of the passengers had to come onboard bare footed and in their pajamas. Children shrieking, crying, or laughing. Many of them were highly delighted with this new adventure. But with the men and women it was very chaotic. For most of them had lost many possessions, and some had lost everything.

The German officers were bombarded with a multitude of questions from all sides:

"It is time for Susie to have her milk, where is it? Do you suppose I could find some nappies in sick bay, where is the sick bay? Do you have lifejackets for all of us? Can someone get my glasses and manicure case, I left them onboard ship in cabin 237? When can we get off this boat? I would like very much to have some iced orange-ade. What, you do not have some orange-ade? I could not last a week without it. Be a good boy, and tell me where I can get some iced orange-ade."

The German officer looked the lady straight in the eye, and used his best English. "Listen lady," he said, "I no longer remember what an orange looks or tastes like. On this ship we live on dried fish, dried potatoes, dried onions, and dry bread. The only wet things are beer, whiskey, and soda." "Oh really," she replied, "Do you expect we Americans will also have to live on food like that?"

After a few days, the German supply ship Dresden arrived. The German Naval staff ordered everyone

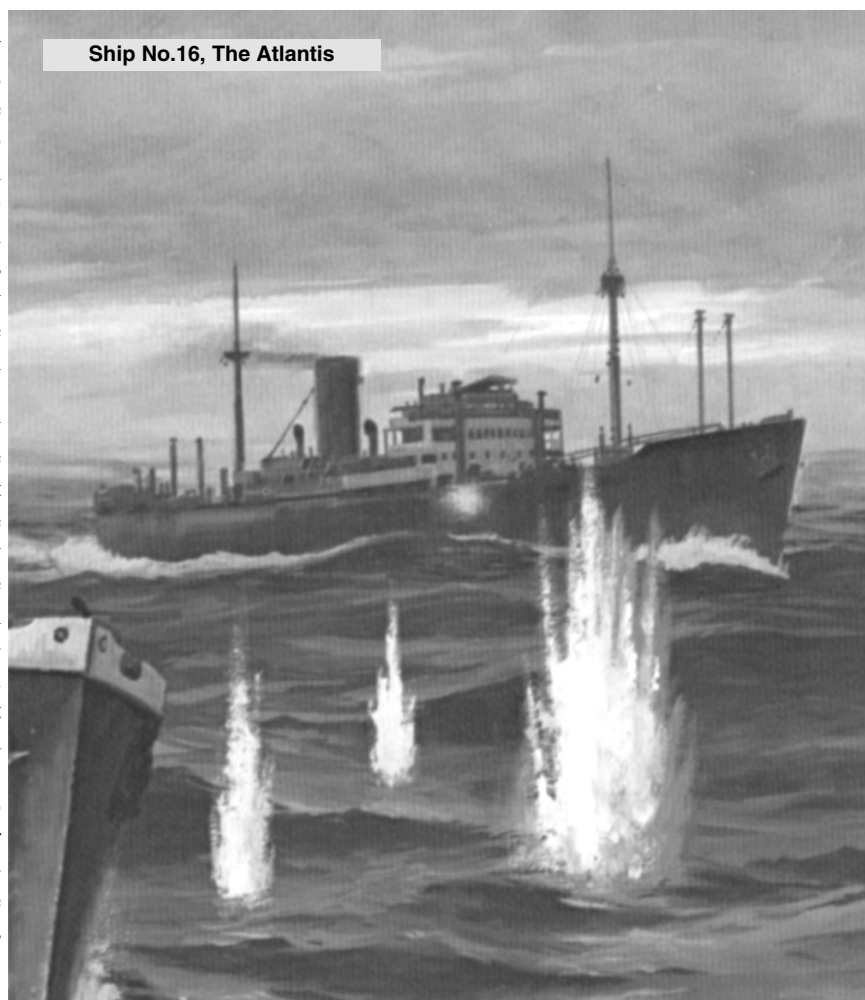


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transferred to that ship and taken to the port of St. Jean-de-Luz, France (4,860 miles away). It arrived safely after 27 days.

The Atlantis became one of the most feared ships on the seven seas. The entire British Navy was searching for the commerce raider. But it continued to elude every attempt to find it. In just one year and seven months, the ship traveled 110,000 miles and sunk sixteen ships, while capturing six more to keep as prizes of war. However, one day time ran out for ship number 16, the Atlantis. It was November 22, 1941, off the west coast of Africa, near the port of Freetown. The heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire, with Captain R.D. Oliver as skipper, overtook the raider. Thirty salvos were fired at the Atlantis, and it began to sink. The "rattlesnake of the seas" was no more. However, the skipper of the Atlantis, Captain Bernhard Rogge, and most of his crew escaped. They traveled 1,000 miles in lifeboats and four submarines. Incredibly they landed at the Port of St. Nazair, France on December 25, 1941. What a Christmas present that was. It had been 655 days since they had last set foot on European soil. Now what about our little 90 year old Egyptian man? He was last seen, still squatting by the rail of the Atlantis. He was still shaking his head and repeating, "Zam Zam zunk!" Which in his broken English simply means Zam Zam sunk.

Sources:
World War Two 4,139 Strange and Fascinating Facts by Don McCombs and Fred L. Worth
The History Channel The German Raider Atlantis by Bernhard Rogge and Wolfgang Frank



Ship No.16, The Atlantis

aircraft guns, four machine guns, two torpedo tubes, 92 magnetic mines, and two seaplanes.

The ship's complement was a crew of 214 seamen and 21 officers. It carried various materials and supplies to change shape, color, and nationality. A dummy funnel (which could be set up or stowed away hidden) the real funnel could be lengthened or shortened. Dummy masts, made from barrels, and the real masts could be raised or lowered. Huge empty crates, representing cargo, and false platforms. And dummy guns of different sizes. Also buckets and buckets of different colors of paint. Because sometimes the color

friendly ship or as a harmless cargo ship. Then she would get close enough to attack, without being detected. That is the reason the Atlantis was disguised as the British ship "Tamesis", when the Zam Zam was attacked. Before it sank, the raider acted in accordance with the rules of war. She takes onboard all of the Zam Zam's crew and all passengers. They also bring onboard all of the passengers luggage, all fresh food, crockery, mattresses, and blankets. Also found were 550 cases of whiskey, and 2 1/2 million Chesterfield cigarettes. As the last boat came alongside, it was crammed full of trunks and clothes. The raider's decks