

LUFTWAFFE DESTRUCTION OF THE MAID OF KENT

by
Richard Thwaites

Early in 2005, I interviewed **Mr. William (Bill) Warman**, He explained to me that he was a widower. I noted he was a typical retired sailor; he was fastidiously clean and his house was immaculate. We became quite friendly. **Bill** was serving as an Able Seaman aboard the **Maid of Kent Hospital Ship No.21** when it was destroyed by enemy action in the **Hospital Base of Dieppe** on 21st, May, 1940.

This was clearly one of the most flagrant acts against the Geneva Convention in the Second World War.

Bill Warman was an eye witness to the Luftwaffe attack and described some of the following events.

Early in 1940, **Stanley Mark Baker**, just 18 years of age, lived with his parents in Dover, later to be known as, "**Hellfire Corner.**" He joined the **Southern Railways Ferry the SS Maid of Kent** as a Stewards Boy. He was very proud for his father **William Baker** was a Dover Marine Porter and his brother, **Ron Baker** a Bosun in the Merchant Navy. **Bill Warman** knew the boy. He said, "*He was a very nice lad, eager to please and a hard worker.*"

At the beginning of the Second World War both the **Maid of Kent** and her sister ship, the **Isle of Thanet** were requisitioned and converted to hospital ships. The **Maid of Kent** became **Hospital Ship no.21** and the **Isle of Thanet** became **Hospital Ship No.22**. They were painted white with a green band running completely around them. Dominantly displayed upon both sides were two large red crosses and their funnels, too, had red crosses on either side. Another clear indication that they were non-combatant was the bright green lights all around them which clearly illuminated and identified them for what they were.



Able Seaman William (Bill) Warman



Stanley Mark Baker, Steward's Boy

Stanley was proud to be a member of the crew of **the Maid of Kent** which had been sent to **Dieppe** under the command of **Captain Leonard Addenbrooke**, to pick up wounded servicemen being evacuated from France. However, thirty minutes after the **Hospital Carrier** arrived on the 18th, May, 1940, the harbour was attacked by the **Luftwaffe** in a well planned bombing raid.

Little did **Stanley** realise that he, himself, was soon to become a casualty of war.

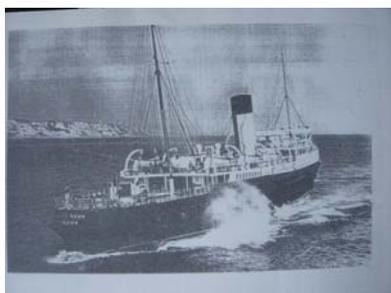
The Maid of Kent and her sister ship, the **Isle of Thanet** were both built by **William Denny and Bros. Ltd.** of Dunbarton for the **Southern Railway Company** at a cost of **£190,000 each**. They were designed for short sea routes across the Channel, Dover to Calais; Folkestone to Boulogne.

Their engines were Parsons type twinned single reduction geared turbines, with five Babcock-Wilcox patterned water-tube boilers. Burning fuel oil they worked at 200lb pressure.

The Maid of Kent was 349.5 feet long and 45.1 feet wide. Her gross tonnage was 2,693. Her awning deck was completely enclosed. She carried six 28 foot lifeboats and two of 26 feet. She had crew quarters for 63 and could take 1,000 first class passengers and 400 second class.

Launched on the 5th, August, 1925 and trials completed, **The Maid of Kent** was delivered to Southampton on the 26th, October, 1925. She took up her duties, Folkestone to Boulogne on 6th, November, 1925.

The Maid of Kent continued her ferry runs until her conversion at the beginning of the Second World War to ferry wounded troops.



Maid of Kent before requisition



Maid of Kent as Hospital Ship No.21

Bill Warman, aged 88yrs. said to me, *“At night the whole thing was lit up like a Christmas tree.”* **Stanley** would have been very proud as **the Maid of Kent** entered the totally undefended **Dieppe Harbour** and as they stopped beside the quay he would have seen where a large area of lawn had been cut away and had been spread with white chalk, upon which, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, a large red cross had been sprayed.

Stanley would have been amazed that the **Luftwaffe** bombing raid took place only thirty minutes after their arrival, and that their ship was not damaged. The **Germans** came again the next night. The ship was untouched. The following morning a lone **German aircraft** circled overhead but did not attack.

Stanley and the crew would have felt sure they were going to get away safely for the ship was due to leave for England at 9.30pm.

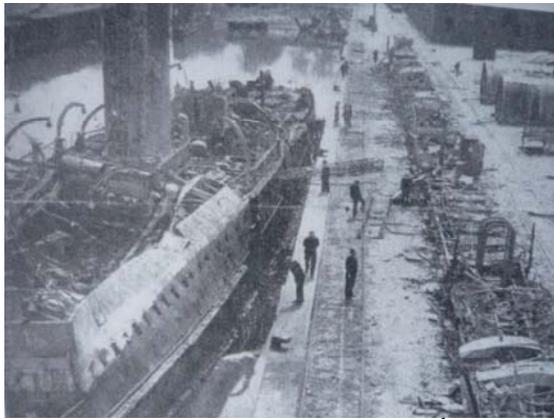
Wounded servicemen were beginning to alight from a train that had pulled up alongside the **Maid of Kent**. Stretcher cases were being laid along the quayside waiting to be loaded onto her. The wounded servicemen were soon to embark they were all going to go home.

Bill Warman had just finished washing and shaving; he said he was hungry and ready for his tea. **Stanley** was working with **Fred (Spud) Murphy and Ted Hubbard** in the crew’s galley.

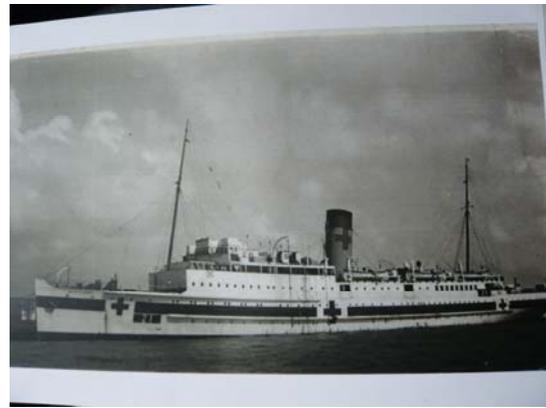
Bill said, *“There wasn’t a warning, the air raid siren didn’t sound.”*

On Tuesday, 21st, May, at 5pm the **Germans** attacked again. The five bombers in the first wave caused havoc about the harbour. **The Hospital Ship** was not touched.

Bill said, *“At this time she had a large white canvas awning, displaying a red cross, stretched between the stern flag and the mainmast. This could clearly be seen from the air.”* He went up on deck to see what was happening. He wore a pair of light French sandals and had a towel around his neck. There he was joined by **Fred (Bisto) Pilcher**, a cook from the officers and passengers galley. They watched as the second wave of bombers came and dropped their bombs. *“We judged where they would land and ran forward as fast as we could. We ran below decks to the first class passenger lounge below water level. A bomb dropped straight down the funnel, another through the engine room skylight. Two fell onto the afterdeck, one of them ploughing directly into the crews’ galley, yet another fell between the quayside and the ships portside. When the water began to rush in, we ran back up and on to the quay.”* **Bill** continued, *“The Hospital Ship was completely ablaze within three to four minutes. The mainmast had fallen and at least one engine had exploded. The people below decks didn’t stand a chance.”*



*The Maid of Kent – morning of Wed 22nd May
A gangway can be seen almost level with the funnel, whilst to the right – the remains of the burned out train.*



Maid of Kent photo taken by R.E. Marks (Cherbourg)

Whilst the raid was in progress, **Bill** saw a fishing boat at rest beside a quay, and a number of Belgian refugees who had arrived in it nearby. *“Some were wounded or killed. One of their women, carrying a baby, was blown into the water. She swam to the other side with her child where both were pulled out by a group of sailors.”*

When on the quay, **Bill** saw **Bellini**, the 4th Engineer crying for help from the ‘escape’ porthole of the blazing ship. Together with **QM Cecil Wyborn** he ran to help. They found a ‘gangway’ that had been lying parallel to the ship and turned it, pushing it into the ‘escape’ porthole, so bridging the space between the ship and the quay. Other men acted as a counter balance as the two men dragged the badly injured man from the ship to shore. **Bill** sadly shook his head as he remembered, *“His back was badly burned and he was taken to the hospital in Dieppe. I think he survived but I never saw him again.”*

Stanley Baker and his two workmates died instantly. Seventeen of the crew were lost, including the **Ch. Engineer, W. Hopper** and the **Second Engineer, Robert (Bob) Marks**, who was killed in the engine room having just returned there after talking with **Captain Addenbrooke**.

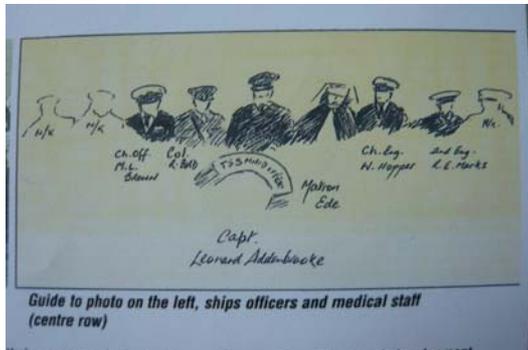
Of the 30 RAMC personnel on board, 19 were saved, 11 were lost. Some medical staff were already ashore assisting with the transportation of wounded personnel from the local hospital.

Bill said, *“Those stretcher cases and the walking wounded had been removed from the quay at the first sign of the enemy raid, none were further*

injured. The front half of the train had the bulk of the stretcher cases. A French shunter, who I do not think was ever recognised for his bravery, uncoupled the train about halfway along and then moved the front half, inland – away from the attack. He saved their lives. The rest of the train, which had been strafed by German aircraft, was burned out.”



Ships Officers and Medical Staff on "Maid of Kent"
Property of Wm Warman



Guide to photo on the left, ships officers and medical staff
(centre row)

Bill and **Fred Pilcher** had survived. Together with other members of the crew, they began to walk to **Le Havre**. Halfway there, they were picked up by other crew members who had with them **Ch.Steward, Fred Datlin** who spoke French and had arranged for the bus to be sent from Le Havre for them.

Once there, they caught the Southern Railway's ship **Normannia** and arrived back in Britain three days later.

During the raid, **Captain Addenbrooke** had been attending a meeting with the **Sea Transport Officer** (an English officer) aboard the collier, **E. Rose**. He had arranged for the departure of his ship at 21.30hrs. that evening.

He had quickly returned to his ship to find her completely ablaze. Satisfied that nothing could be done below decks and that no one else could be landed; he left his ship at 5.15pm. The official abandonment is shown as 6am, 22nd, May.

Having left his ship on 21st, **Captain Addenbrooke**, his **Ch. Officer, Malcolm Brown** and some of the crew were quartered in a French barracks. The French commandant requisitioned the Belgium fishing boat, No. 049 and **Captain Addenbrooke** and his remaining crew were transported in it to **Newhaven**, but first a pathway had had to be cleared through the parachute mines the enemy aircraft had dropped outside the entrance to Dieppe Harbour.

The collier, **E. Rose**, where the conference had earlier taken place, was also bombed and sunk.

Bill Warman received just £6.00 shipwreck money. **Jnr.3rd Officer, Leslie Bowley** survived to become the Ch. Engineer on the **Hengist**.

Human remains found in the **Maid of Kent** were buried in a communal grave just outside of **Dieppe**. All the men who died were considered as "Lost at Sea." Their names appear on panel 66 of the Tower Hill Memorial, London, to Merchant Seamen who have no known grave.

Mr. **Kenneth Ham, Stanley's** nephew (born ten years after **Stanley's** death) entered into negotiation with Dover District Council and **Steward's Boy Stanley Baker's** name was added to the Dover War Memorial in October, 2000.

Captain Leonard Addenbrooke was later awarded the **OBE**. He became the **Harbour Master** at **Folkestone** until his retirement in 1948/9 aged 70 years.