

BEAUTIFUL Princess Marguerite in better days.

# Princess Marguerite Went Down in Flames

By T. W. PATERSON

*Victoria lost an old friend  
Aug. 17, 1942.*

*Although residents did not know until two years afterward, due to wartime censorship, they mourned a familiar and gallant ship when told the beautiful British Columbia coaster, Princess Marguerite, had been sunk by enemy torpedoes in a foreign sea.*

Built in 1925 by the famous Scottish firm, John Brown and Company, the 5,875-ton younger sister of Princess Kathleen gave de luxe passenger service on the famous triangle run between Victoria, Vancouver and Seattle for 15 years. The speedy sisters were well known to all who travelled between Pacific Northwest ports in the years before the Second World War called them to duty far from home waters.

Both proved invaluable to the Allies; only Kathleen came back.

It was the Princesses' high speed which prompted the hard-pressed ministry of shipping to use them in war service, fast ocean-going ships then being at a premium.

Now with the B.C. Pilotage Authority, Captain Anthony V. Appleyard, 1070 Moss, was third mate of Marguerite when she and Kathleen were called to active duty. "Marguerite," he recalls, "was converted at Yarrow's, and the Kathleen simultaneously at Victoria Machinery Depot. At that time, they were to be used for supplying personnel and aviation gasoline to aircraft carriers.

"The scuttles forward were removed and hatches put in for loading the petrol, and the necessary conversions made. We sailed from here Nov. 7."

The crews were British; the seamen had been sent to San Francisco to man two ships purchased there (the United States still was neutral). These vessels, however, had not been completed; the sailors boarded Marguerite and Kathleen instead. The skippers, navigating officers and engineers were Canadian Pacific coastal veterans.

Rescue ship had best water polo team in the fleet and they went over the side like flies to rescue men from the torpedoed Marguerite.

Among Marguerite's officers were Victorians: third mate Appleyard, third engineer Edward E. Stewart, 512 Northeast; sixth engineer William B. Harris, 109 St. Andrews; and H. J. Tumilty, 1712 Hollywood Crescent.

Final orders were delivered to Capt. Richard Avery Leicester, of Marguerite, and Capt. L. C. Barry of the Kathleen, as the ships lay at anchor in Royal Roads. At 4:35, Nov. 7, 1941, the sleek steamers set course for Honolulu. Princess Kathleen had embarked on her most glorious chapter, Marguerite on her last . . .

The voyage was not entirely uneventful. Squalls and gales of hurricane force battered the sisters throughout. Speed was reduced to less than the normal cruising rate; both ships suffered from heavy spray. Marguerite's after quarters were flooded, "necessitating moving the engine room crew to upper deck rooms."

Beyond Honolulu, the weather moderated, but trouble erupted with the British seamen, who were of very low calibre. After having cautiously evaded Japanese warships when that nation entered the fray by bombing Pearl Harbor, Captains Leicester and Barry determined to change hands at first opportunity.

Fortunately, the company's Empress of Russia then was paying off her Chinese crew, enabling the skippers to renew theirs with long-service, trusted CPR employees. Sixteen years later, Capt. Barry confided that the night of the exchange was the first since beginning the voyage he and his officers "had slept without clubs under our beds!"

Third Engineer Stewart remembers the Britons, too. "We found out, on leaving Honolulu, Suva, that this crew had an aversion to working the ship out of harbor, some of them not returning to duty until next day. Which meant the engineers had to handle all operations below, firing, oiling and handling the controls and auxiliary machinery . . ."

Port Moresby shattered an old—and universal—belief. Said Stewart. "A native family in an outrigger canoe came alongside to exchange souvenirs for food and clothing. The daughter, about 15, made quite a thing of whipping off her

bushy grass skirt and diving for money, replacing the skirt each time she came out of the water.

"Close examination of the skirt (not when the girl was wearing it) revealed the fact that the Hula is not a dance, but the incessant squirming caused by the wild life harbored in the grass, the whole action eventually set to music to give it rhythm!"

"On arrival at Alexandria," recounted Capt. Appleyard, "the ministry of transport officers came aboard and found both ships totally inadequate for what they had been fitted out for, and we therefore laid at anchor for a period of three weeks with absolutely no use to anyone.

"Fortunately — or unfortunately, as the case may be—two cross-Channel ships came out at the time as troop transports. On their arrival, it was found they had been cut down and were flying the White Ensign as armed merchant cruisers.

"Due to an Italian frogman attack in Alexandria Harbor, they were employed as escort vessels, and we in turn fulfilled their role."

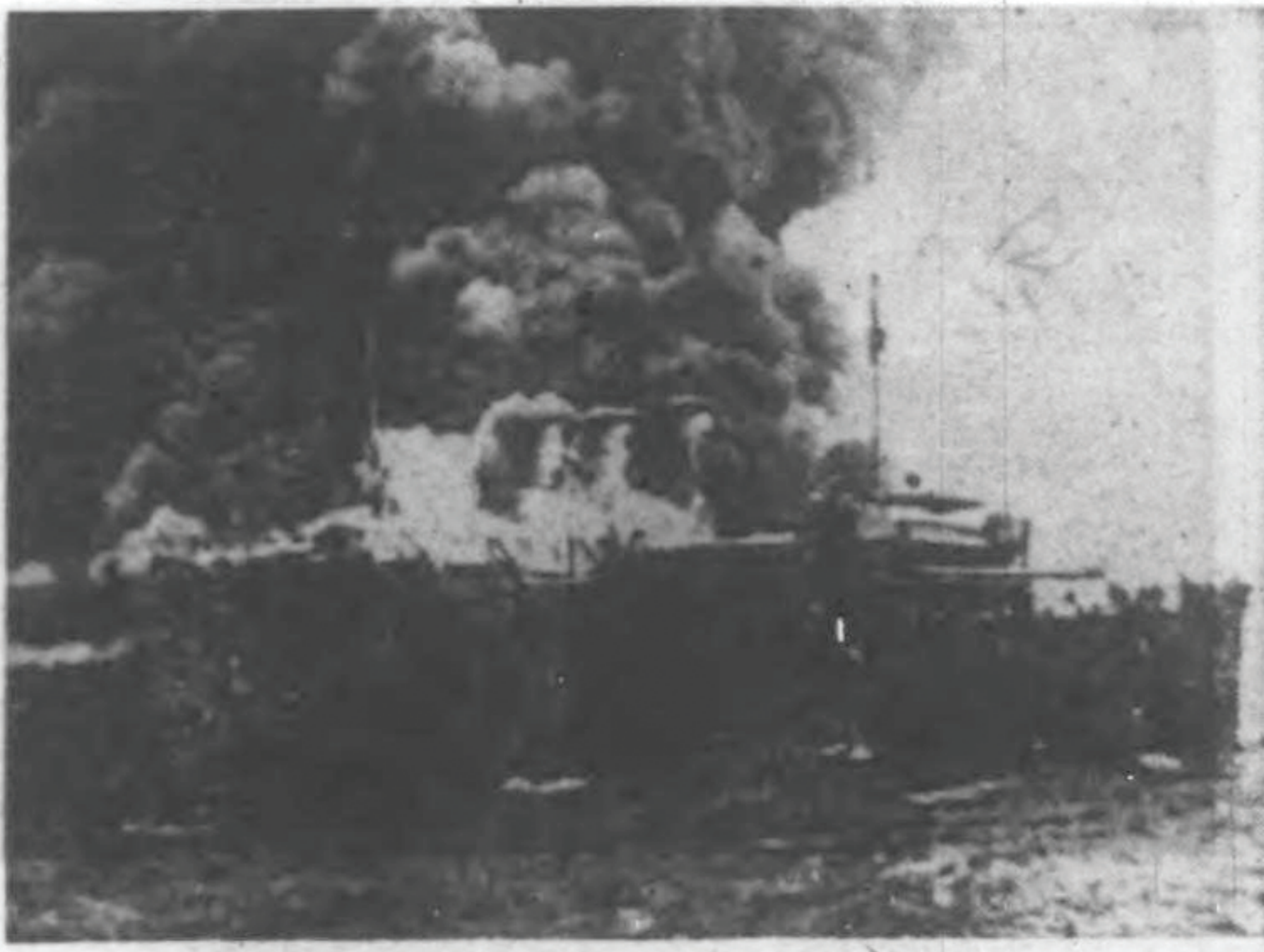
Subsequently, the Princess transported troops through the Suez Canal to reinforce General Wavell's force.

When Rommel's great thrust almost overran the Canal, Marguerite embarked the British and Maltese administration's families, which had been evacuated from beleaguered Alexandria. With her precious cargo of women and children, she slipped down to Suez and lay offshore.

"Each day was hotter than the last," says Stewart, "and we were plagued by flies. Every night an air raid alert would bring all our passengers out into the ship's public spaces with lifebelts, ready for the worst. Trying to fit a life jacket onto a four or five-year-old tot is quite a trick.

"Needless to say, at the end of a week everyone's nerves were frayed, what with lack of sleep and the constant fear of the consequences should one of the attacking planes have a hit, although they seemed to be dropping torpedoes and mines. And, we were screened each evening by empty barges; during the day they were used for hauling troops and supplies from the convoy in the harbor to shore."

Princess Marguerite, however, was fated to



PRINCESS MARGUERITE ablaze and sinking.



PALATIAL night ship begins death plunge.

five a few more months, and she was not hit during the raids. She did witness the death of another vessel, though, when a minesweeper was blown to pieces while clearing the harbor of aerially-dropped mines.

When Rommel retreated, the crisis passed, Marguerite serving "various purposes" during this time. But life was far from being slack for her crew. Capt. Leicester once reported: "As regards the Mediterranean, I have every confidence in saying that, of all theatres of war where merchant ships are employed, this is the toughest by quite a margin."

One of the problems encountered by Leicester was convincing authorities Marguerite's troop capacity was 800 men. He learned that when officials "find that 800 have been carried effectively, they are inclined to put 900 on board the following occasion, and then 1,000 and so on. There is no saying what the 'ceiling' was eventually going to be in our case . . ."

Many of the troop embarkations were harrowing experiences, occurring "at top speed in the darkness of moonless nights."

On the morning of Aug. 17, 1942, Marguerite took aboard her last cargo of soldiers, men of the 8th Army, bound for a rest camp in Cyprus. Her escort comprised three destroyers and the armed merchant cruiser Antwerp, formerly a fast English ferry.

The tragedy occurred on a beautiful, sunny day in the Mediterranean; the kind of tropical afternoon that would have been touted in advertisements, had Marguerite been there in time of peace . . .

It is thought perhaps the strong escort may have given her troops a false sense of security, as many neglected to remove their heavy regulation boots as instructed. This factor accounted for several lives when the order came to abandon ship.

The little convoy steamed in arrowhead formation, one destroyer leading, the others flanking Antwerp, with Marguerite following close astern. The official CPR history credits the unknown submarine commander as having been an "expert to be able to hit a ship zig-zagging at 18 knots."

Third mate Appleyard was lying down when the torpedo struck the 360-foot Princess with awesome force. Hurrying on deck, he found Marguerite already engulfed by the flames that would destroy her.

Engineers Stewart and Harris were at their posts in the engine room. Stewart had just checked the fresh water tanks when a "ferrific blast shook the ship." The engine room was plunged into darkness, and ruptured steam pipes filled the compartment with clouds of scalding steam.

Capt. Leicester was "flung across my room when I was just to sit down and work out an observation."

"I went on the bridge immediately, the officer on watch informed me we had been hit on the port side about amidships. He had already signalled 'stop' on the engine room telegraphs and was attempting to give emergency signals on the bells and the steam whistles. These, however, had been put out of action by the explosion . . ."

Somehow engineer Stewart worried his way through the blackness and debris to the emergency throttle. Reaching for it, he found Harris' hand already there. . . . The men brought poor Marguerite to her final halt. Their prompt action saved many of the troops already in the water. Had they not stopped her, she could have rined the swimmers with burning oil!

Meanwhile, on deck, the fire raged out of control, greedily moving astern, where those of the ship's officers still aboard were clustered on the boat deck. Also situated aft was the ammunition magazine.

Capt. Leicester had ordered abandon ship, but a gun crew remained at its station, should the submarine surface and offer them a shot. The skipper put his confidential sailing orders and documents into weighed bags and dropped them over the rising side.

Engineers Stewart and Harris had become separated in the maze of machinery below, but both eventually made it to the boat deck. By now the intensity of the blaze had turned Marguerite into a massive blister; her sturdy steel plates buckled, cabin doors blew off their hinges, and her list to port slowly increased.

Mate Appleyard saw to the Sikh troops. "We had a great deal of difficulty with them, even though they were well disciplined," he said. "They had a religious abhorrence of water, even to the point of washing their hair with oils. Because of this, so many were lost . . ."

Previously he had tried lowering the port boats. But they held fast in their davits. Only 10 of the ships 16 were launched.

Destroyer HMS Hero manoeuvred as close alongside as she could to pick up survivors.

Appleyard ended on the boat deck with Stewart and Harris, and they teamed to lower starboard boats and life rafts. The latter stripped to his underwear and dove over the side, Appleyard following. Stewart recalls: "I can still see Appleyard jumping off in whites, holding his life jacket down to keep it from ripping his ears off when he hit the water."

Due to Stewart's poor eyesight, he could not leave ship this way for fear of losing his glasses. He solved this problem calmly—he dropped a fire hose over the rail and slid down, safely reaching the water without so much as getting his head wet!

He had lost his own life jacket in the explosion and was wearing an "ill-fitting spare." Harris had no jacket but, fortunately, was a strong swimmer. Then, safely aboard HMS Hero, Harris returned to the water to aid five men having difficulties.

"But," he said, "you should have seen the men from the destroyer. They had the best water polo team in the fleet, and they went over the side like flies to rescue men from our ship." The result was that only 55 men of 1,200 were lost.

Stewart, Appleyard and Harris later were credited with having "helped about 100 men to safety."

By then the sea was a blazing inferno, as waves spread the leaking, burning fuel oil. Princess Marguerite, far from the Pacific Northwest waters she had plied for so many years, went under 40 minutes after the torpedo struck.

Capt. Appleyard reports the water was "quite balmy," and he swam about for 90 minutes, until rescued by the Hero. Stewart also had been picked up.

Newspaper reports of the incident, which appeared two years later, were sketchy and inaccurate. They said Marguerite had been struck by several torpedoes; there was but one. They also said she had been bombed—totally false. And Capt. Appleyard refuted the stories survivors had been showered by exploding ammunition, although some Oerlikon shells kept on the bridge did detonate in the flames, but caused no injury.

Capt. Leicester was deeply impressed by the courage and loyalty of his men. He remembered having ordered two officers overboard "somewhat peremptorily," as they refused to leave his side. He also commended mate Appleyard.

That evening, all survivors had been returned to Port Said. Each of Marguerite's crew was given "size 46 pyjamas, razor, soap, writing paper and pencil, and a chocolate bar . . . and the lot very welcome."

Next day, Capt. Leicester and other officers reported aboard HMS Arethusa for the preliminary inquiry. Leicester was incensed by naval insinuations his ship had been sabotaged, rather than torpedoed, due to "the lack of visual evidence . . . this in spite of a soldier survivor who said he saw the torpedo just before it hit the ship."

When all reports had been taken, Leicester and company were informed another inquiry would held shortly. But he received no further word and the hearing never came.

One day he and mate Appleyard, when swimming near an RCAF airstrip, struck up conversation with the airmen—and were pleased to learn Marguerite had indeed been torpedoed. One of the pilots had been flying cover for the sunken liner's convoy and had sighted the underwater missile's wake as it streaked toward Marguerite's flank. Thus, no further inquiry or accusations of "sabotage."

Finally, it was time for the CPR men to return home. Said Stewart: "After what seemed a lifetime of living in assorted accommodations—hotels, ships and club rooms—we were awakened early one morning and with our very meagre baggage and a handful of sandwiches, driven by taxi the 90 miles or so to the Ss. Oronsay."

"We eventually arrived home in Victoria—exactly one year to the day since we sailed."

This coincidence of dates gave Capt. Appleyard an uncanny experience. "We had signed for two-year hitches on the ships . . . My intended had visited a fortune-teller, who told her I would return in exactly one-half the time, which I did—to the very day. We left at . . . a.m. Nov. 7, 1941, and returned at 9 a.m., Nov. 7, 1942."

Part of the journey was by train through the U.S. Stewart remembers "the American customs tried to, and in one case succeeded, in charging us duty on our life jackets and tifty satchels!"

Tragically, some of Marguerite's British members did not reach home. From the Oronsay they had been transferred to the company liner Duchess of Atholl. She was torpedoed and sunk as she approached the United Kingdom.

Capt. Leicester was awarded the OBE, engineers Stewart and Harris each receiving the MBE. The engineers' citation mentioned "Conspicuous courage, coolness and resource."

The brave skipper's read, in part: "He showed great courage and presence of mind throughout. His excellent leadership minimized the loss of life."

Stewart joined the CPR in April, 1927, and served in most of the company's coastal vessels during his career. He retired as assistant superintendent of engineers in 1958, after suffering a serious accident during a labor strike.

Harris now is with the department of transport, serving aboard weather ships.

Today a modern Princess Marguerite again plies these waters; she has a gallant heritage.