



Research Report:

The WW2 Merchant Marine career of

James (Jimmy) Scott

Client: Monica Scott

Background

I received information regarding James Scott born 1926 in London, who had served in the Merchant Marine during WW2.

Aims & Objectives

I was requested to investigate his seaman's career during this period.

Search Variations

From the information received it was clear a fair amount was already known about James's movements during WW2. This meant that I did not have to broaden any searches with regard to name variations, etc.

Ships Served On

As mentioned above it is known that James joined the Merchant Marine in 1942 when he was employed by the General Steam Navigation Company.

From the documents supplied it was established that James's longest service would have been on the SS Sammex. However, he was first seen in crew list documents aboard SS Auk on 24 June 1942.

SS Auk was built in 1921 on the Clyde by Bow, McLachlan and Company.



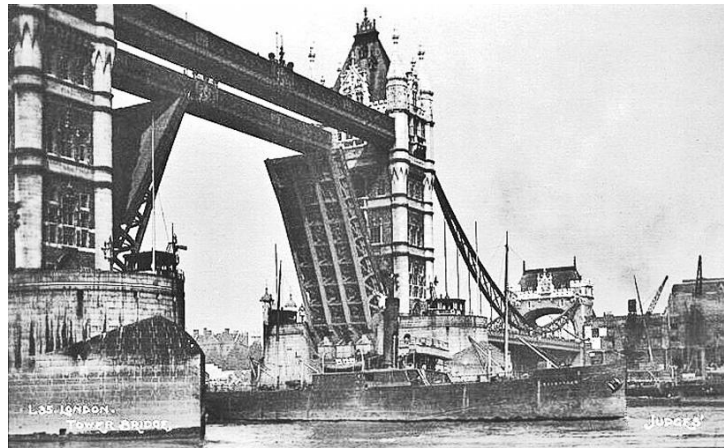
SS Auk (1921)

The 'movement cards' created by the Ministry of War Transport show that Auk had undergone repairs in Leith, Scotland that were completed on 22 June 1942. After that date until the end of a journey that finished in London on 23 December 1942 the movement cards show that Auk left the port of North Shields, on the River Tyne, on 1 July with James on board and sailed to Gravesend, then to Leith, Aberdeen, Liverpool, Belfast, Liverpool, Bristol, Liverpool, Gravesend, arriving in Hull on 16 October. It followed a similar route before arriving in Gravesend on 22 December 1942, where James's first trip ended.

The crew list and ship's log show that Auk's next trip began just a couple of days later, on 24 December 1942 although the movement cards show that it didn't leave Gravesend until 5 January 1943. As per the previous journey it visited ports in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England before returning

to Gravesend in June 1943 where James left. After this date Auk was sailing further afield and was eventually sunk by a mine off Italy in 1944.

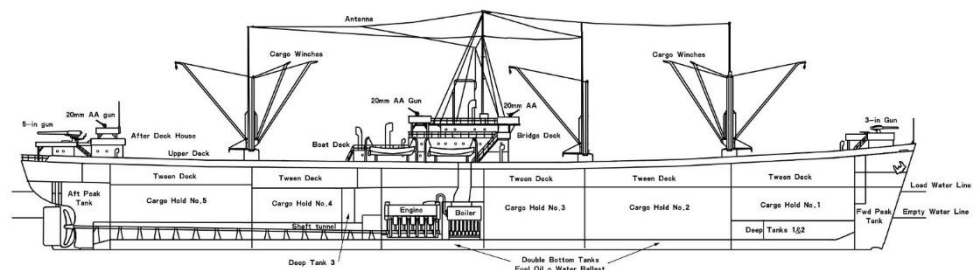
After his time on Auk, James was on SS Leeuwarden, which spent nearly all its time sailing between Belfast and Liverpool. Leeuwarden is given as James's previous ship when he signed on to SS Sammex.



SS Leeuwarden passing under Tower Bridge

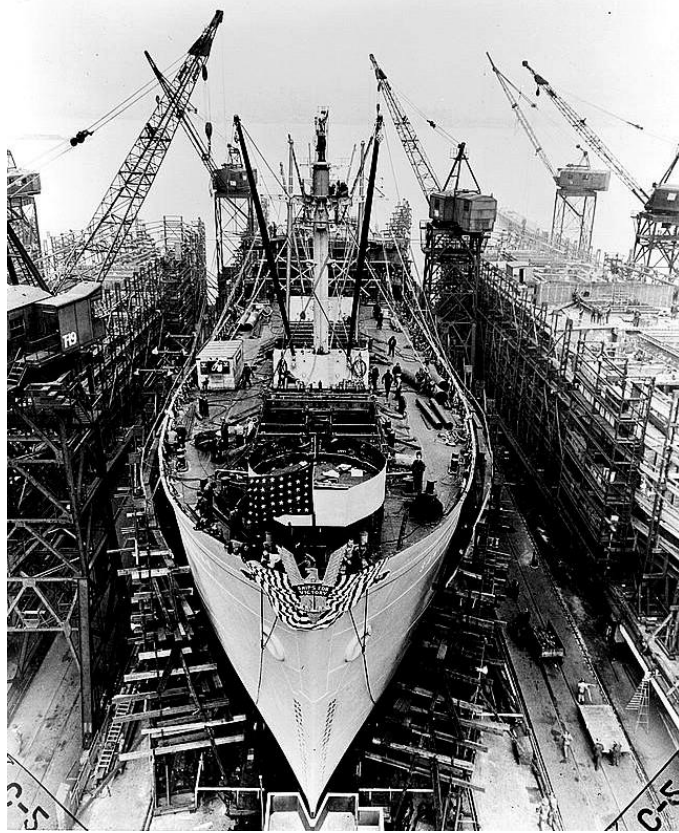
We don't know exactly when James left Leeuwarden but it's believed that he spent some time in Virginia, USA, probably awaiting the readiness of Sammex. Family lore has it that James sailed to the USA on board RMS Queen Mary or RMS Queen Elizabeth. This is very likely to be true as by this time – 1943 – both ships had been converted to troop carriers and were regularly travelling the north Atlantic route between the UK and the USA.

SS Sammex was built by the Bethlehem Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore, USA and was launched on 26 September 1943. She was one of a great number of 'Liberty ships' that were built in the USA using very fast construction techniques. Over 2700 ships were constructed in 18 American shipyards to replace British ships that had been lost.



Typical Liberty ship plan

They were all designed to carry cargo to support the war effort, and most were built to a similar design. Over 160 Liberty ship were given names starting with 'Sam'.



A liberty ship ready for launching at Bethlehem shipyard in 1943

The crew list and log book for Sammex's first voyage give the date of sailing from Baltimore as 20 October 1943 and its arrival in Leith, Edinburgh as 29 January 1945. The movement cards tell a fascinating tale of where she went during this time.

- Baltimore – Suez
- Suez – New York
- New York – Bona (Mallorca)
- Bona – Bari (Italy)
- Bari – Brindisi (Italy)
- Brindisi – Oran (Algeria)
- Oran – New York
- New York – Alexandria
- Alexandria – Port Said (Egypt)
- Port Said – Naples
- Naples – Toulon
- Toulon – Marseilles

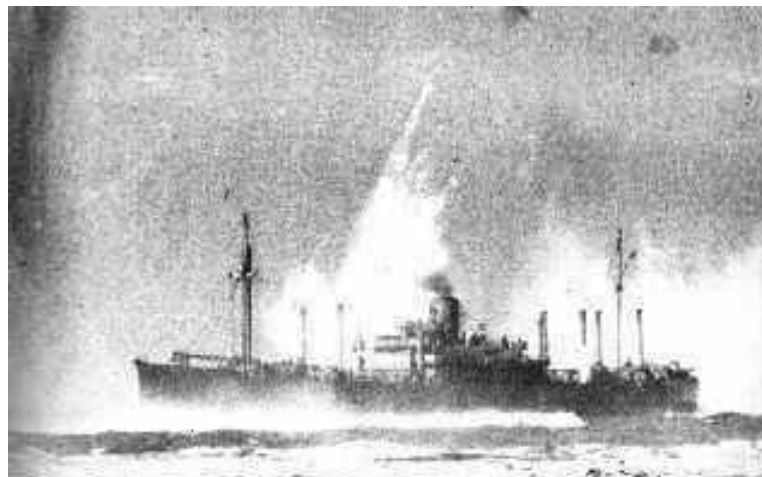
- Marseilles – Algiers
- Algiers – Naples
- Naples – Taranto (Italy)
- Taranto – Piraeus (Greece)
- Piraeus – Algiers
- Algiers – Casablanca
- Casablanca – Tyne
- Tyne – Leith

After this voyage Sammex sailed from Leith, around South Africa, all the way to Australia. Crew lists and movement cards for this journey were found but James was not part of this crew.

Conditions

While aboard Auk and Leeuwarden James was always close to the UK and individual parts of the whole journey would only have taken a few days. However, the North Sea was a significant scene of danger and action. The German Navy had to use the North Sea to gain access to the wider oceans and the German Air Force would easily have had enough range to attack vessels throughout this area. To make voyages even more hazardous Germany had started laying mines in the North Sea in 1939.

Bringing, for example, much-needed coal from the north of the UK to the south necessitated forming convoys of merchant vessels to try and add a measure of protection to their journeys. Furthermore, all the ports of the UK would have been likely targets for German bombing raids.



Merchant ship hit by German torpedo

As the war effort ramped up demand for resources increased massively. Many raw materials had to be imported, a great deal from the USA. Hence the need for the Liberty Ships, which, as already shown, included Sammex.

The German Navy utilised submarines in what was termed 'Wolf Packs' to hunt and sink merchant shipping. The German Air Force also had long-range bombers that could attack ships in the Atlantic. As can be seen from the movement cards Sammex sailed within the Mediterranean a great deal. The whole area was a hot bed of danger with military action in France, Italy, The Balkans and North Africa.



Naples harbour in 1943

With the voyages that Sammex undertook everyday must have carried with it the threat of bombs and torpedoes and ultimately a sinking. It can only be imagined what the crews of the vessels endured. Over 35,000 merchant seamen lost their lives during WW2.

Issues With Records

A couple of errors were noted among the documents that have been retrieved regarding James's career. Neither of these errors affect the findings though.

1. On the Discharge Card for Auk that is in James's Seaman's Pouch a 'date of discharge' of 25 June 1942 is given. This can't be correct as we know from the crew lists that he was on Auk after this date. Seeing as the card is marked 'copy' and is stamped 19 July 1943 I think the wrong date has been entered. I believe it should be 25 June 1943 as we know that James's second stint on Auk ended in June 1943 at Gravesend.
2. On the American document detailing Sammex's arrival in New York the date shown is 17 January 1943, but this date is before the date of leaving Port Said. Furthermore, the document is stamped 17 Jan 1944 and this date is reflected in the movement cards. 17 January 1944 is the correct date.

Further reading

In this report I've relied heavily on the crew lists and movement cards found at The National Archives. These documents are supplied to you via the download link sent via email.

While researching I encountered a number of books and websites that give further information that would give a deeper understanding of James's experiences.

A book detailing wartime life from a Merchant seaman's perspective

- https://www.amazon.co.uk/Merchant-Seamans-War-Tony-Lane/dp/1872568092/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0

I also found Sammex on a 'convoy list'. Below is a link to a history of an RN Commander who protected Sammex and others in convoy MKS76.

- <https://uboa.net/allies/commanders/225.html> (scroll down to a point near the end)

From other web resources I discovered that Sammex was in a number of different convoys as it progressed back and forth across the Atlantic.

- <https://www.convoyweb.org.uk/ugs/index.html?ugs.php?convoy=33!~ugsmain> shows Sammex as being in 4 'UGS' convoys

Wikipedia explains what the UGS convoys (and others) were:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UG_convoy

There is a wealth of information about the maritime convoys on the internet. This is a good article:

- <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/merchant-marine-worst-losses-wwii/>

Summary

Sadly, many individual's experiences will not be found in the records that exist, so we have to build a picture of what they went through. However, we have proven that James spent his time on Auk and Sammex in constant danger, which would without doubt have been a major factor in PTSD.

Andy Macdonald
My Past Family
January 2026