

Personal account of John Green Skipper of S.T. 'St. Cuthbert'

On the 20th August, 1914, we sailed from Grimsby on a fishing voyage, which in ordinary circumstances would have taken eight or nine days, but with fate or the Huns, or both against us, this voyage turned out to be a much longer one, as we did not see Grimsby again until the 28th November 1918.

We had been away from home five days, and our trip showed every sign of being a most successful one, from a fishing point of view, when at 10.30 on the night of the 25th, my son who was on watch at the time came down to tell me it was hauling time, also that a boat was being pulled towards us from a Torpedo Boat, which was laying just off our port quarter. It was a matter of seconds for me to get on deck after hearing that I can assure you, and I had not been on deck many minutes when the boat came alongside, and even then I did not realise they were Germans and I ordered my crew to continue their task of paying out the trawl, but as soon as they, the Germans, jumped on board, and I heard the ominous clicking of revolvers, and the guttural foreign talk, I began to have doubts.

The officer in charge was quite a young fellow, and spoke English fluently, but as he seemed a little excited, I spoke first: 'Do you want me, Sir?' I asked, and he replied: 'Are you the captain?' and as I answered him in the affirmative, he simply flooded me with excited questions: 'Have you guns?', 'Have you wireless?' I simply answered, 'No Sir, and should not know how to use them if I had'. I pointed to the fish on the deck and told him that was our living. He then asked for the ship's papers, and I took the lead to the cabin and as we were going aft, I asked him, 'Are you French, Sir?', 'No, German', came the answer with a smile. 'That is damned bad for me', I exclaimed. He said he was sorry, and then asked for the ship's papers, which he examined and then put in a leather case. He then asked how many compartments the ship had, and on being told six, he said, 'Four will be enough'. I then asked him 'Are you going to sink the ship?', and the reply came 'Yes'. In the meantime, the Torpedo Boat came steaming towards us, and we were ordered to get towards the rail in order to get on board. I asked if we had time to get our clothes and was told to hurry, but we had no sooner got below than the commander hailed us, and the officer, who stood on our deck answered, but as they spoke in German, we could not understand a word of what was passed, only the last two words which were very clear, 'Five minutes.' The officer then turned to me, and said 'Get your clothes', but as I was not allowed to move, the result is obvious. The Torpedo Boat came alongside immediately, and we had to go on board straight away, and thus we salvaged nothing when we might have saved everything. There is one incident I should like to mention before continuing: - We had a dog on board at the time which belonged to the Mate, and as we were leaving the ship, the dog looked at me so pitifully that I asked the officer's permission to take it. At first he said he was sorry, but I pressed him again, and he asked the Commander, who gave him permission. I mention this incident as I wish to be fair.

When we got on board the Torpedo Boat, the Captain came to us and said, 'Englishmen! You go below, do not attempt to light a pipe or speak until given permission, or you will be shot'. We were then taken below, and after two hours we were allowed to smoke, and coffee was brought to us. During that night three more trawler crews were taken on board, but we did not see them until next morning when

the Captain sent for me, and enquired if I knew the whereabouts of our fleet, and when I told him I knew absolutely nothing, he asked me if I was surprised to see a German ship, and I told him I was. 'Ah well', he said, 'you knew war was declared and you decided to take the risk'. He then gave me five marks to get some tobacco when we got ashore, and the other three skippers got the same. We were then taken to Cuxhaven, and on the whole, our treatment on board that vessel was as well as could be expected, excepting the food which was bad, as the Torpedo Boat had been out a considerable time, and they had run short of almost everything. As for our ships, they were sunk by bombs, but we did not see them go.

We arrived at Cuxhaven on the 26th August 1914, thirty seven all told, and were marched through the town to Naval Barracks. We had amongst us, men of sixty-four, and boys of sixteen, and as we marched, an officer in front, and one behind, bluejackets on each side with fixed bayonets, the people themselves behaving in a disgusting manner: shaking their fists, and spitting at us all the way, and swearing at us I expect. An officer stopped them several times, and we were absolutely run down when we got to the Barracks, and our first greeting from the Barracks was: 'Now you swine Englander, how you like this?'. An order was given by the officer in charge of us, and they dispersed. We were then taken to a big room at the top of the building, a fine big place, with the German Eagle painted on the ceiling, etc. We were given bread, coffee, margarine, and told to help ourselves, and we consoled ourselves with the thought at any rate, they did not intend starving us. We were very hungry and had just started to do justice, when an officer came in and ordered us to have a bath, so we had to leave our food, and go to a bath-house, about as dirty a place as one could find anywhere, which by the looks of it, had not been used for months. I asked the officer where to hang our clothes and he pointed to the floor which was covered with dirt. A bucket of soft soap was placed in the middle of the room, and we were told to help ourselves. A sailor stood in the room with us, and we all got ready for the bath, but as no water was turned on we came to the conclusion that the water in the bottom of each receptacle was for the bath, so we all started to lather ourselves. One of our company, a Boston man, was a very hairy individual, and was soon covered with a thick lather, and as he was growling about the shortage, and giving his opinion of Germans, and things in general, down came the water, icy cold at first giving us all a shock but none so much as old 'Jack' as we called him, who jumped at least three feet, and then turned to the German and told him in rather too plain English what he thought of him. After the bath we were given singlet, pants and socks, and we went back to our tea.

After tea, I was sent for by the Commander, and something like the following passed. 'You are the Captain of one ship, Sir. There are three more ship's captains in that room, never mind them, where is your fleet?', 'I don't know, Sir'. 'You came here from Grimsby, was your fleet there?', 'No Sir!' He glared at me and I felt a little uncomfortable so I said, 'It has been very hazy at sea lately and we have seen nobody'. 'Don't talk too fast', he interrupted, 'I don't believe you! Listen to me, if you are told to work you must work, orders will be given to you, and you must give them to others', and he called the sentry, who on being ordered showed the bullet in his rifle, and turning to me again the Commandant said, 'Disobey, and you will be shot'. I was then taken back to the room which proved to be our prison all the time we were there. Why I was singled out for the position of responsibility I do not know, unless it was because of my size. Our work consisted of peeling potatoes, cleaning the

latrine, etc. 'Swine Englander' was a common expression, and, 'the war was going to be over and England no more by Christmas', it made me sick and tired to hear it.

A few of our boys were in the compound one day, and the Germans were telling them that they would be in London in a few days, 'Yes, but you'll be in tins', said one of our boys. I can assure you I was glad when we got back to our room as the argument began to get heated.

We were interned in Cuxhaven about a month, and then we were sent to the 'Hulks'; in Hamburg. Before we left we were given bread and cheese and were told that it would have to last us all day. Our treatment at Cuxhaven however was fairly decent, but the close confinement, and no communication with anywhere told upon us, but no matter how we felt we always had a smiling face to *them*. We marched to the docks (when we left) and went on board a launch. On the way, wherever we came into contact with civilians, they made us wonder what sort of maniacs we were dealing with. They were like a lot of savage dogs that were being kept away from a bone. At one place, the crowd, as soon as they got to know that we were English were almost frantic, and I was glad when the gates of *some place* opened, and shut us in from them, as I am sure they would have handled us none too gently. The *some place* proved to be the 'Hulk Siegfried' and old transport, and we were lined up facing it, which was literally swarmed with people, white, yellow, black and intermingled shades. The smell at that distance was sickening to us and the thought came into my head, that if the Germans were bad enough to crowd men together like that, they were bad enough for anything. After being subjected to the usual formula: - Name. Age, where from etc, etc, we were taken on board the ship and was given a 'Legitimation' Card, and three small cards numbered 1, 2, 3 respectively, breakfast, dinner and tea. Every night we were lined up with our Legitimation Cards and they were stamped, and three small cards were given to us for the next day. The food was abominable.

For breakfast, half a slice of black bread and margarine, and a tin of coffee. The coffee was in a big tin which stood near the door of the galley, and as we walked past we had to dip our tins into it, and as the majority of the Russian Poles had not the least idea of cleanliness the result can be imagined. For dinner, Black bean soup, or crushed bean soup. For tea, perhaps the same as we had for breakfast, or just skilly similar to the stuff billposters use, and I am ready to take oath that it was no better. There was not seating accommodation for a third of us, so we used to stand about until we had finished our rations. During the whole time, not a piece of soap was given to us with which to wash ourselves, and the ship was practically covered with lice and other vermin. It was not an uncommon sight to see lice on the table and on the rails of the ship. How long some of the Russians had been there, I do not know, but the condition of the ship was heartbreaking, and try as we could we could not keep clear of the vermin, and we used to look through our clothes at night, officers and men side by side. Some of the men of the General Steam Navigation Company had a little soap with them, and they gave us some with which to wash ourselves, as long as they could, because soap was very precious, and very few had any at all. Whenever a squabble took place the German showed up at his best, as they carried about with them a piece of square rubber packing about 18 inches long (up their sleeve) and they were always on the look out for an opportunity of using it among the Poles. The Germans would rush among the Poles and lash out with this packing at their faces and bodies, and take great delight in causing as much pain and panic as

they could. My feelings at that time were such, that I am sure if I had been struck I should not be here today, and I believe that was the feeling of all our little company. The majority on board were Poles and 'coloured'.

Day after day, I had been trying to get permission to see the American Consul, and at last I was rewarded for my persistence. I went ashore to the Consul with one of the River Police, and after waiting a little while I was taken before the Secretary. 'Now Sir' he began, 'who are you please?' 'I was Master of the *St. Cuthbert*, sunk at sea by the enemy, and as we are destitute, I have come to see if you can give us any assistance'. I believe he then said there was a society trying to do something for us. I asked him if that was all he could do for us, and I told him I did not want charity, I wanted someone to represent us. 'Come in here Captain', said a voice, the owner of which I soon learned was Mr. Morgan, the American Consul himself. 'Compose yourself', he said, 'and tell me everything', and to him I stated my case, and told him the conditions in which we existed on the Hulk, and at the end I said, 'I should not come too close to me, as I know *some* are with me'. 'Now come' he said, 'have you not overdrawn it a little?', and I answered him, 'No Sir, and if you come with me, you will see for yourself that what I have told you is absolutely correct'. He then asked me if I had written home, and I told him I had but had not yet received a reply, so he handed me a sheet of paper and said, 'Now write home, say nothing about the war, just write a homely letter.' I did so, and I was pleased to hear later that they had received it at home. He then asked me what money I wanted, and I told him that five pounds would help us a great deal, and in answer to another question, I told him the name of our employers. 'I will let you have the five pounds in your firm's name'. I said 'They can hardly begrudge us of that', and he replied, 'I should think not'. Handing the money he said, 'Get what you can for yourself and your crew, and on Wednesday I shall come down to the ship and see you again, also the other men'. I asked him if he would see that I got permission to spend the money, and he called the officer who was waiting for me and said something to him in German, he then shook hands with me and I left. He was a human man, and I knew that he would help us as far as it lay in his power. When I got back, I was told I could spend the money on Monday, this was Saturday, but I did not seem to care, as life seemed a bit more cheerful now there was something to look forward to. I went ashore on Monday with the Policeman and bought soap, cocoa, etc., for myself and my crew and I went into a shop for a pair of boots for my son, and as I could only allow seven marks for them I had to take what I could get. The man in the shop gave the Policeman a cigar, and as we were leaving, he called me back, and flung a cigar on the counter towards me, so I picked it up and flung it back again telling him I did not want it. He said, 'You Swine', but the policeman hurried me to the door, and told me he would not be responsible if I did it again. I know it was a silly thing, but I could not help it. We got back to the ship, and although it was only a floating Hell, one felt safer than being in the streets. I gave my crew the things that I had bought for them, it was not much but they were very thankful. One thing they were sure of, they could have a good wash, and now and then a smoke, and they were a Godsend in those days. The Consul, true to his word, came to see us on the Wednesday. After he had been round the ship, he asked to see me. 'Did you get the things that your men wanted,' he said. 'Yes Sir, as far as the money would go, but one could get very little clothing, and as I told you Sir, the clothes we have got are practically what we stand up in'. 'I will see to that', he said. All the time he was aboard the ship he was besieged, everybody wanted him, and I can assure you he had a very busy time. It did not take him long to find out that what

I had told him was the truth. The officers and men of the Steam Navigation Company had to go to their respective vessels, and we thirty-seven fisherman were to be put on board the Gifford, another interned steamship. That was the outcome of the Consul's first visit. Shortly afterwards, his agent came round and fitted us up with clothes to the extent of two pounds or a little over per man. If this should meet the eyes of those who were made responsible for the time being I hope they will try and understand our position, filthy, hardly any clothing, badly fed, in fact in the hands of an enemy who did not care whether we lived or died. At last the day came round for the officers and men of the Steam Navigation Company to go to their respective vessels, and as they went away, I jumped on the rail and yelled out, 'England for ever', which I think they will remember for a long time. They were splendid fellows and we had been great friends, I suppose I was carried away at the parting, it was only when friends got hold of me and took me below, that I realised what a silly thing I had done. However, I heard no more of it, so I concluded that I was lucky, as the feeling at the time was beyond description. When they had gone, I took it for granted that our time would come soon, however, I was mistaken. Shortly after they were all put on board the Hulk again, not only them but those who had been on board their own ships all the time, had to come also. Why them men of the Steam Navigation Company were on board of the Hulks and none of the others that were interned up to now, I do not know, and as I am only writing what I have seen and experienced I must leave it at that. I heard various reasons why everybody had to be on board the Hulks, one was that one of the sailors or fireman of a certain vessel had shown the most tender part of his anatomy to the sentry on the quay, who promptly fired, the truth of which I cannot vouch for, as I do not think any of our men were so foolish as that, but it takes all sorts of men to make a world, and I give it to you as it was given to me.

The Consul was now allowing us four marks a week so we could get little things at the canteen. What we should have done without it I do not know, as the food instead of getting better got worse. The sanitary arrangement was absolutely disgusting. A floating convenience was built and lashed outside as the stench from the other was almost unbearable and when necessary, we had to come from all parts of the ship to this floating arrangement, at all hours of the day or night, and in all weathers, it can be better imagined than described, but try as they would they could not break our spirits. I have seen the Germans rush in among a crowd of Poles or Coloured men, lashing out right and left for the most trivial offences, and woe betide the poor fellow who was singled out for punishment. He was dragged to some place or other under the bridge, and the groans we heard were terrible, and gave us some idea of what he was going through, he would then be given two or three days cells, and bread and water diet. The things we heard and saw on board these Hulks made the blood swell in our veins, almost to bursting point, and this was the nation who were going to rule the world. Here we were a crowd of men, prisoners of war, civilians at that, and all we wanted was justice, not sympathy, instead we were made witnesses almost every day, of the most disgusting tactics that filled us with contempt deep and profound. Every day to cheer us up a bit, they would show us a newspaper one sheet on which would be printed how many thousands of Russians were captured, and if there was enough they would invariably finish up with telling us that Paris would soon fall, but they could do as they liked, they could not break our spirits, and I am certain that hurt more than anything. Just fancy, being woke up out of your sleep by a sentry who must have been half mad, daring anyone to move, or he would run his bayonet through them. What became of him I do not know, as he was moved the next

day. If my memory would serve, I could tell you many things that would fill all honest men with disgust, but I only want to give you some brief outlines of what it meant to be captured in the early days of the war.

At last the news came that we were to be sent to a place much worse than the Hulks. 'Well Jack', said one old seedy, 'if the place we are going to is worse than this, it will be plenty warm enough' and in my opinion he was not far wrong. The next day we were all lined up on the quay and marched to some cattle trucks that were drawn up in the siding, it was then about ten o'clock in the morning. Packed into these trucks like cattle, and we were quite used to it, as up to that time we were treated like nothing else, away we went to what proved to be Ruhleben. We were not allowed to leave the trucks for anything, and not given anything to eat or drink until the next day about nine or ten o'clock. As near as I could say, we were twelve to fifteen hundred strong, worn, tired and weary, through bad treatment, but when we were lined up in the square the night we got there, it made one proud to think that they belonged to such a race. Men over sixty, and boys in their teens stood as proudly to attention, as if they had been at a picnic, and had been having a good time. One old fellow, I shall never forget, when we left the Hulks he was laid in the bunk too ill to get up and should have been sent to hospital, but he was told to dress and come with us, and the dreary ride, and the only attention he received was from his comrades, was too much for him and he died soon after reaching our destination.