AWM 65

[2919]

JONES, TREVOR JOHN
411699

See ~~460 sq. file encl. 121~~

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE. missing 31-8-42

OFFICERS AND AIRCREW MBK. 11-10-43.

P Dead 11-4-44.

The following Biographical details are required for use at R.A.A.F. Overseas Headquarters, LONDON, :-

Surname....JONES..... Number....411699.....

Christian Names.....TREVOR JOHN.....

Air Force Rank and Mustering..SERGEANT AIR GROUP 5.....

Degrees, Decorations, etc.....

Present Appointment and Location.....3. R.R.S.....

Date of Birth..2/8/22..... Place..AUSTRALIA.....

Educated...NEWCASTLE CENTRAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL.....

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Date of Entering Service..24th MAY 1941.....

Previous Service Experience.....

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Places of Training..3.I.T.S. SANDGATE No2 WAGS PARKES...

No.1 BAGS EVANS HEAD.....

Civilian Career and Activities..GROCERY ASSISTANT.....

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Clubs, Recreations, etc.....

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Father..JOHN JONES 14 FULLERTON ST STOCKTON NEWCASTLE AUST

Wife.....

Children.....

Home Address..14 FULLERTON ST. STOCKTON NEWCASTLE NSW AUST.

Signature S J Jones

Date 26/8/42

Date Embarked 16/6/42

Destination 24/8/42.

Jones.

1124.

SECRET

12.7.43.

He was on No. 2 I.T.S. course at Ballarat Wireless School and at Evans Head. He left Australia on 7.1.41. on the Memnon, a seven thousand ton cargo vessel, in company with two other wireless air gunners, Aus. 407104 Sgt. V. Lewis of Waikerie and Aus. 407101 Sgt. C. Fort, and three straight air gunners Aus. 407036 Sgt. J.L. Rollins and Aus. 407029 Sgt. E.T. Hensel, and another.

The Memnon travelled round the Cape and up the coast of West Africa. Three days out from Freetown, on 11 March at a Latitude of 20 degrees North, 21 degrees West she was hit by a torpedo fired from a German submarine and sank almost immediately.

"We had no warning at all" F/O. T.S. Jones said "I was asleep in the cabin and the rest of our party were playing poker in the smoke room. I was thrown off my bunk by the explosion and landed with a crash." The Australians who were well practised in boat drill rushed to their stations but the seamen were unable to release most of the boats and were diving overboard. "In two minutes from the explosion the gun decks aft were awash" Jones said. "Of the boats they did manage to get free one sank immediately on hitting the water. Out of eight boats on the ship only two got away."

Three Australians were taken into the first mates boat which was successfully lowered. The captain called Jones, Rollins and Hensel up onto the bridge and they were lowered in his boat. The rest of the crew, apart frm one British and three Chinese deck hands, were all picked up out of the water.

"There was a heavy sea running" Jones said. "We were lucky it happened in daylight. The submarine had surfaced by the time we were on to the water and while we picked up the remaining seamen it cruised round getting on the windward side so as to make it easier for us to get them out. The crew appeared to be taking films of the sinking ship.

In an hour all the seamen were on board, forty in the first mates boat and twenty two in the captains boat. It was decided to remain in the same area as the wireless operator had sent out an S.O.S. before abandoning ship.

"We drifted around for two days hoping for an answer" Jones said "Then the captain who knew we were quite a distance from the coast decided to set course due South then due East hoping to hit Bathurst.

"The rations on board the boats were simply shocking. We had twenty-two gallons of water in all, having taken an extra water breaker from the boat which sank; we had 8 tins of bully beef, and two dozen tins of condensed milk. In the next thirteen days our staple diet was an egg cup of water morning and night and sea biscuits spread with condensed milk. You have no idea how delicious that can taste."

There were eight Chinamen in the captains boat and the rest were British seamen. They were all clad in shorts and shirts and had practically no shelter. The boat was leaking badly and had to be constantly baled. The Chinese deckhands cracked up after two days baling and had to be driven to work. Jones gives high praise to the third mate who, he says, never lost his head and made sound decisions throughout. The men were scorched in the tropical sun which beat down relentlessly, and grew gradually weaker as the days wore on. They had separated from the first mates boat, which was faster, after two days sailing.

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Owing to a miscalculation in the strength of the current they eventually sighted land 100 miles North of Dakar instead of South, and drew in close to the coast off St. Louis. Here a large ship passed them out to sea but the captain refused to sail out to it as he feared it was French. He set course due south and they sailed for three more days. Many aircraft passed over them at this time but appeared not to observe them. On the third day they encountered a native fishing fleet and one of the natives came on board and piloted them into Dakar.

When we got ashore several of us could still totter, "Jones said, "But four men in the boat were to weak and sick to move. Our faces were a horrible sight from the burns.

On arrival at Dakar the men were taken to a large military hospital where they were extremely well treated. "Our first meal was steak, chip potatoes, fresh crusty bread and gallons of red wine" Jones said. "We had a marvellous feed.

"We had wonderful treatment all the time we were in the hospital. We discovered a spot where we could get through the railings and we used to slip out and go into the town and sit and drink at the cafes and do our shopping. It was on one of these walks that we discovered there was a road leading South and decided to try to reach Bathurst by it.

"Rollins, and an Australian seaman and I made a run for it on the Saturday after Easter when we had been in the hospital about six weeks. We left at eight o'clock one night when it was just getting dark and we got through Dakar with no trouble at all. We walked along the main road and no one took a scrap of notice of us till a couple of days later when we were 30 miles off the British boarder.

"We were having trouble with our feet by then and we were pretty tired after six weeks in hospital we were a bit weak. We were coming into jungle country and as we didn't know where we were we called in at a native fishing village to organize them into taking us the rest of the way. They took us back to a hut and fed us on a lot of greasy cakes and goats milk and told us to sleep."

While the airmen slept heavily some of the natives walked to a military outpost in the district and informed the Gendarmes. The airmen awoke to find the French already arrived for them. They were taken to the outpost where they were given a magnificent repast of chicken, eggs, fruit and wine. The Gendarme in charge was pro-British and told them he was very disappointed that they had failed to effect their escape. He said that the mistake they had made was in sticking to the coast, if they had moved in land they would have got away with it. He could not then free them as too many natives knew of their existence. He assured them that if he himself had found them they would have been freed immediately. He then rang the hospital at Dakar and carried on a long and heated discussion on the telephone.

We discovered later that he was very concerned as to who should pay for the dinner" Jones said, he was ringing Dakar to find out. That was the first intimation they had that we were gone. We sat back and laughed at the sight of him shouting and gesticulating on the telephone. He was at it for about an hour and his son listened in on the extension. Finally we had 50 francs deducted from the money he had taken from us with our personal belongings."

The airmen spent the night at the outpost then were driven into Dakar to the police station where they spent the night sleeping on the floor. The next day they were taken back to the hospital. Walks for the inmates were stopped from then on.

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After one day in the Hospital the three escapees were taken out to Fort Gamelin, ten miles out of Dakar where they were held for a fortnight as punishment. Fort Gamelin was a modern concrete fort sunk into the ground with what Jones describes as "a nice assortment of dungeons" on ground level. The airmen were locked in a twelve by eight foot cell into which the only air came through a tiny window set right up under the ceiling. They could only see the light through the top quarter. They slept on camp beds and were fed as French N.C.O's. which entailed more food than they could eat and an enormous quantity of wine. They were taken out for one hour every day and allowed to walk, but never at the same time. The guards were quite friendly and very talkative and told them that they were all very disappointed when the Allied attempt on Dakar failed. They said in their opinion it need not have failed but could have been carried through with practically no resistance at all.

"It wasn't a very severe punishment" Jones said. We just sat and smoked and drank and appreciated the good food and read a bit from the few books they sent down to us. We quite enjoyed ourselves."

They were taken from the fort at 5 o'clock one evening and back to the hospital where they found all the other survivors ready to catch the train to take them into the desert. They were sent to a permanent French army camp, situated between Bamaka and Timbucktoo on the Niger. The train journey out took three days. The men's rations for the journey were 2 boiled eggs, one loaf of bread, a small packet of biscuite, and what fruit they could buy enroute. They took all the water bottles they could collect. Jones contrasts this with the return trip when they were to be exchanged and were fed on chicken, eggs, fruit, iced beer and everything they could wish.

The British were put into the newly built part of the camp housed in mud huts divided into rooms with three men in each room. In the torrential downpours which occurred in the following six weeks the walls of the huts would wash away in the rain and come slopping down suddenly on the men. The huts were ridden with lice and dirty beyond description. They were set in a barbed wire compound guarded by native guards armed with machine guns and instructed to shoot if the men tried to break out.

"Not that we could have got anywhere in that awful country" Jones said. "It was hopeless. We just had to stick there for six weeks, all getting malaria and dysentry in turns, and eating and sleeping and drinking and getting on each others nerves." They slept on Bamboo stretchers and managed to improve the comfort of their huts by making other pieces of furniture from the Bamboo.

The food was very poor, consisting of camel flesh, rice, bread, and crude vinegarish red wine which the men were given in large quantities and encouraged to drink in order to stop them taking the malaria tainted Niger water. Jones says he doesn't know which was worse, the wine or the malaria. The camp had no medical supplies at all so were unable to combat disease. The Chinese and Lascars in particular went down with dysentry.

At first the men did their own cooking, taking it in turn to do the work, but they became tired of this arrangement and managed to hire a native from a nearby village as cook. They amused themselves by playing cards and chess and swimming each afternoon in the Niger. They started a debating club which proved to be a great success.

In the camp were twelve Fleet Air Arm Men, imprisoned after the attack on Dakar who remained behind when the others were released.

"We didn't know we had been exchanged when the order came for us to move "Jones said "At the end of May we were put on the train without any explanation. We had a chap with us who had been a district commissioner and he told us if we didn't change trains at a place called Colac it meant we were going back to Dakar. We decided to scatter and make a run for it if it looked as if we were. However, at three in the morning we got into

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Colac and they took us off the train and drove us to the boarder by truck. Here the exchange was effected - seven Frenchmen for one of us and two gallons of petrol per head.

The men were driven to Bathurst and flew from there to Freetown in a Sunderland. They travelled by boat from Freetown, arriving in the United Kingdom 4 July 1941. The three Australian airmen from the other lifeboat rejoined them at Freetown and returned with them.

At Bournemouth Sgt. Rollins and Sgt. Hensel were grounded and Sgt. Fort, Lewis and Jones went to "20 OTU Lossiemouth.
