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The sinking of SS *Nellore* by the Japanese in 1944

Patrick Bollen¹

Sixty-seven years ago, Joe Bollen was in SS Nellore when she was attacked by Japanese submarines. His son, Patrick Bollen, records his father's account of the resulting horror.

Having read in the June 2011 *United Service* the obituary² of merchant mariner, Jack Murn, who survived the sinking by Japanese torpedo of SS *Nellore* in 1944, I am reminded of my father, Captain Joe Bollen, Merchant Marine (Ret'd), who also was serving in *Nellore* when she was torpedoed. When I was young, Dad refused to speak about his wartime service. That was until 1983 when he produced a carefully maintained scrap book and a diary of events after he left Holland.

The Sinking

Some 67 years ago, on 29 June 1944, Joe Bollen, then aged 26 years, was the supernumerary (third officer) aboard the Eastern and Australia Lines SS *Nellore* en route from Bombay to Australia. At 2345 hours, *Nellore* suffered a shattering fate, going down on fire from stem to stern after being attacked by a Japanese submarine. She took two torpedoes and was then heavily shelled by the submarine's deck gun. Reports have it that three submarines took part in the attack.

Shortly after the first torpedo, Joe went to his cabin to collect his sextant and papers, but as he recalls: "All the lights went out. I went to the Port No. 2 lifeboat (passenger muster station) where 26 Javanese seamen had already assembled. I gave the order to lower the scrambling nets to the water and let go the boat lashings. A short time later, the Chief Officer gave the order to abandon ship."

The radio officer sent out a Mayday – "SS *Nellore* torpedoed – [position] – crew abandoning ship". However, the main aerial had snapped at the impact of the explosion – the message finally getting out on the emergency aerial. The radio officer then dragged on his uniform and headed to his lifeboat. Port Boat No. 1 was already in the water. Joe, along with the ship's apprentice and the bosun lowered Lifeboat No. 2 to the water with 61 persons aboard, including the doctor, stewardess and purser.

At 0145hours, the submarine surfaced to finish the job. Still aboard *Nellore* was her captain (Frederick Colvin of Mosman), the second officer and four gunners, all determined to have a shot at the silent enemy. As the lifeboats moved away in a thick, oily sea, another torpedo struck the ship sending up a huge shower of spray amid a pall of smoke. *Nellore's* gunners were helpless against the might of the Japanese submarine, but continued firing nevertheless.

The radio officer recounts: "Desperately we hoped as we watched from the boats that the Japs would be satisfied with their work and let the ship settle peacefully to the bottom. But they continued mercilessly shelling *Nellore* – we crouched low in the boats to avoid flying shrapnel and debris."

Three hours after the first torpedo, *Nellore*, fiercely ablaze, listed fully on her port side and sank in a sea of flames. Captain Colvin, the second officer John Northy from Victoria, a Lascar seaman and four gunners all went down with the ship.

Nellore had been eight days out from Bombay bound for Australia when she was attacked. Joe recalls: "As we watched our blazing ship go down in a boiling sea, we could hear the submarine quite close as she fired another torpedo. We remained in the area until daybreak, spotting three other lifeboats. We all returned to the place of sinking and picked up an Indian seaman who had survived the night with the aid of a lifebuoy. Shortly afterwards we all sailed away in a west nor'west direction."

Survival at Sea

With most of the 61 survivors seasick, Joe was forced to sail and steer lifeboat No. 2 himself. Later, Joe transferred the stewardess and five seamen to the chief officer's boat. This left Joe's boat still dangerously overloaded.

During the black of night of 30 June, the three boats lost sight of one another, but regrouped the next day. Radio Officer Bird, aboard the chief's boat recalls: "Our mainstay was just six ounces of water, each drop growing more precious by the day. By way of variety, glucose and chocolate were introduced to the bill-of-fare, but this made us thirsty."

By 2 July, with the main danger far behind, the survivors were able to concentrate on personal matters once again. Braving the sharks seen earlier in the

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²Keith Pryor (2011). Jack Trevor Murn. *United Service* 62 (2), 16.

morning, they swam in the cool Indian Ocean waters. By 4 July, five days after the sinking and, out of touch with one another, all boats were becalmed and, with hunger, thirst and fatigue now sapping the survivors' spirits, it seemed unlikely there would be any hope of survival.

Then, on 5 July, from lifeboat No. 1, the radio officer recalls: "Our first waking thought was whether this would be our day of rescue. All eyes were glued on the horizon. One thing that comes of associating with fellow beings in such close confines is that it brings out the best and worst in people. Never have I encountered such selfishness as that displayed by two survivors on our lifeboat. At times we were more or less divided into two camps. This was hard to account for considering we were all in the same boat in more ways than one."

Exhausted after six days adrift, on 6 July hope came out of the early morning sky in the form of a Catalina flying boat which dropped a message with a course to steer to Diego Garcia; and also informing Joe that a ship was on the way to pick up the survivors. "Full of good hope, we steered for Diego Garcia and issued another ration of water", Joe recalls.

On 7 July at 0130 hours, "the weather deteriorated badly – gale-force winds and big seas. We were hove to at 0930 hours. We hoisted a little sail and tried to continue our course, but to no avail. A reconnaissance plane flew overhead, but did not see us. Conditions were terrible, the bad weather continuing for two days."

On 8 July, Joe says that: "twice we spotted a Catalina, but again they did not see us. Nor did we see the other two life boats. I discovered that our water was being stolen. There was a lot of stealing going on; not only water, but also provisions. Usually the culprit was caught and duly dealt with."

By 9 July, as doubt and fear gripped some survivors, Joe recalls: "I altered course in the hope of finding one of the northern islands in the Chagos Archipelago, but soon gave up this plan. After taking careful stock of water and provisions and calculating daily rations, I decided to try and make for Madagascar 1500 miles away." From the log report to KPM Company, Joe recounts: "This day we experienced some welcome and tremendous cold driving rain enabling us to replenish our depleted stocks, but this did little to compensate for our shivering discomfort."

For the next two days Joe and his crew of 50 exhausted and weather-beaten Indian and Javanese survivors made relatively good progress under sail. "At approximately 1730 hours on 11 July, we were spotted by a Catalina – also saw land to port ahead. I decided to try and make landfall before sunset. I received orders from the Catalina not to land on the island as we would soon be picked up by a rescue ship which was on its way – also received water and cigarettes thrown down to us in 'Mae Wests'."

After 12 days, Joe and his crew were finally picked up at 1900 hours on 11 July 1944 by the British frigate, HMS *Lossie*, and received a great reception and

welcome aboard. Of the 50 men under Joe's command, 49 survived the 12-day ordeal. One, a Goanese steward, had become insane as a result of drinking seawater and disappeared during the night without trace. Four hours later, Radio Officer Bird's lifeboat was rescued. The third lifeboat made landfall on Madagascar nearly two weeks later. In that boat only 12 of the original 47 survived.



Joe and Sheila Bollen in Martin Place, Sydney, October 1944.

Joe Bollen

Joe Bollen commenced his nautical career in 1934 at age 16 at the Northern Training College for the Merchant Navy known as Abel Tasman at Delfzyl in Holland. After graduating, he joined the Royal Packet Navigation Company in the Netherlands East Indies. In 1939, he joined the Dutch merchant company, KPM, sailing out of Singapore. In 1944, as a result of crew shortages in Australia, Joe, along with several other officers and seamen, was seconded to the Eastern and Australia ship, SS *Nellore*. Following the war, Joe joined BHP's merchant fleet, rising to the position of senior master after serving in the *Yampi* and *Flinders*-class ships. Two of his commands before retiring in 1980 included BHP Big Ships *Iron Somersby* and *Iron Sirius*.