

Christopher Dennison Hammett

Chris Hammett was born on the 10th of March 1921 at Newcastle upon Tyne. His parents were Richard Charles Hammett and Christina Thompson (née Balmain). Nothing further is known about his family background or about his joining the Marconi Company.

When Chris joined the Merchant Marine service he was living with his parents at 37 Torrington Road, Greenford, Middlesex. He was 19 years old, stood 5 foot 11¾ inches tall, had a fresh complexion, grey eyes and dark brown hair. His first ship was the *Indora*, a 6622-ton ship built in West Hartlepool in 1938. She belonged to the British India Steam Navigation Company and Chris joined her at Swansea on the 28th of August 1940 as her Second Radio Officer. After leaving Swansea on the 7th of September the *Indora* sailed via Milford Haven (9/9) to Durban (12-15/10), Penang (3-15/11) and Calcutta, where she arrived on the 20th of November. Chris was paid off the next day. The *Indora* went on to be sunk by a Japanese cruiser in the Bay of Bengal in 1942.

Chris remained in Calcutta for ten days before joining the *Gogra*, an old 5190-ton ship that had been built in Belfast in 1919 as the *Tomtit*. She also belonged to the British India Steam Navigation Company. Little is known about the ship or the voyage. Chris joined her on the 1st of December 1940 and was paid off at Calcutta on the 9th of June 1941. She too was sunk, this time torpedoed by a German U-boat north-west of Lisbon on her way back to Southampton in 1943.

A day after arriving back at Calcutta Chris joined the *Monte Piana*, a ship on which he would spend three voyages. The *Monte Piana* was a 5890-ton vessel built in Italy in 1926 and managed by the British India Steam Navigation Company. Chris was again her Second Radio Officer. By then he was twenty years old.. Where she went is not known but Chris was paid off at Rangoon on the 9th of July 1941.

The next day Chris joined another ship, the 2798-ton China Navigation Company's *Hoihow* built in Hong Kong in 1933. She went via Bassein (11/7), in the Irrawaddy deltas, to Calcutta (15/7), where Chris was paid off on the 17th – a short journey. The *Hoihow* further illustrates the dangers of being in the Merchant Navy during the Second World War. She was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat (U 181) in the Indian Ocean in 1943 on her way from Mauritius to Tamatave (Taomasina) in Madagascar.

Back in Calcutta Chris had a month off before rejoining the *Monte Piana* on the 19th of August 1941. He sailed on her to Dundee but nothing is known of the voyage. Although signed off on the 16th of December Chris is shown as rejoining her the following day, so he probably didn't even give up his bunk. However, he did have some time ashore as the ship did not sail until the 30th. Did he have Christmas in Dundee or did he go home? We shall never know.

For his last two voyages on the *Monte Piana* we know that the First Radio Officer was P.J. McKeon, a thirty-nine year old Irishman from Dublin. The Master was, and probably had been for the three journeys, W. Hunt. Where the *Monte Piana* went to is not known but Chris' record book states that she was 'coasting'. She berthed at Victoria Docks in London and Chris was paid off on the 23rd of January 1942. The following day the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen issued Chris with his National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939 Certificate of Registration [held by the museum] from the Mercantile Marine office in Victoria Docks.

It may well be that Chris went home to Greenford since it was nearly a month before he again signed on. This time he joined the 6259-ton *Empire Reindeer*, an old ship built in New Jersey in 1919 and owned by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company. Chris joined her at Tilbury on the 20th of February. She had just returned from Halifax (N.S.) with a general cargo as part of Convoy SC 83, arriving at Liverpool on the 23rd of May 1942. Her master was H H McFadzen and the First Radio Officer was E Dalton. There was also a Third Radio Officer named Hawkins. *Empire Reindeer* did not leave Tilbury until the 24th or 25th of February 1942 and went Greenwich where she remained for until the 3rd of March. On the 26th of February

Dalton was signed off at the request of the Marconi Company and the following day E R Le Gear, an Irishman from Co.Limerick, joined as 1st RO.

The ship left Greenwich on the 3rd of March and sailed to North Shields (9/3), Newcastle (9-12/3), Methil (13-18/3), Loch Ewe (20-21/3), Halifax N.S. (6-18/4) and St. Johns N.B. (20/4) where she remained a fortnight. During that time the master reported a number of cases of absence without leave but these did not involve any of the Radio Officers. The ship left St. Johns on the 5th of May and returned via Halifax (7/5) and Belfast Lough (22-23/5) to Newport (Mon), where she arrived on the 25th of May and Chris was paid off.

The *Empire Reindeer* next voyage was to prove very eventful. She sailed out of Newport for Montreal in June and returned as part of convoy SC94 (36 ships) bound for Liverpool. Between the 5th and 10th of August the convoy was involved in a battle with German U-boats. Initially a pack of eight boats carried out the attack but these were joined by nine more. The allied support was a destroyer and five corvettes subsequently increased by the arrival of a British and a Polish destroyer and an air support squadron. During the battle two U-boats were sunk and two damaged. The convoy lost 11 ships sunk and three abandoned. *Empire Reindeer* was one of four ships sunk by U-660 on the 10th of August 1942. Her crew of 56 (plus 8 gunners), including First Radio Officer E R Le Gear, survived and was later landed at Liverpool. Thus four out of Chris' first five ships were sunk during the war. His next ship would join that list.

Whilst the *Empire Reindeer* was sailing to her fate Chris had joined the *King Arthur* on the 2nd of June at Cardiff. She was a 5224-ton ship built in 1928 at Harland and Woolf's shipyard in Belfast and owned by Dodd, Thomson and Company. She had arrived at Barry from the River Plate on the 14th of May and had undergone repairs. She was anchored in the Roads when Chris joined her as 2nd WTO on the 2nd of June and she sailed on the 11th. Her master was Angus Mac Neil and the 1st WTO was Thomas Law Coughlan. Her journey initially took her via Milford Haven to the River Clyde and Glasgow. There she picked up 7500 tons of coal for the military. She left the Clyde on the 22nd and sailed for South Africa arriving at Durban on the 30th of July. She continued via Aden (19-20/8) and Suez (28-29/8), Port Said (30/8-4/9) to Alexandria (5/9), where she offloaded. She then loaded ballast for the return journey.

Chris had nearly a fortnight in Alexandria before the *King Arthur* left on the 17th of September. She retraced her outward journey via Port Said (18/9), Suez (19-21/9) and Aden (27-8/9). She reached Port Elizabeth on the 14th of October before continuing on her journey to Trinidad the following day. She never reached the West Indies. At 0420 hours GMT on the 15th of November 1942, at 10.30 N - 59.50 W, she was hit by a torpedo and sunk. The U-boat responsible was U 67 commanded by Günther Müller-Stöckheim. He later reported hitting six ships on his three-month tour of duty three British and three Norwegian. The *King Arthur* was the fourth. Her position was off the West African coast. The entire crew was rescued.

What exactly happened to the crew is unclear from the entries in Chris' record book and the Official Register of Seamen. The record book has an entry that reads "Fort Nashwaak Prov" with an engagement date of the 16th of November 1942 at Vancouver and discharge at Garston on the 1st of May 1943. Chris was shown as 2nd RO. The entry in the Official Register of Seamen reads: 'Can poolout "Fort Nashwaak"' on the 27th of January 1943 at Vancouver, 'OCA Montreal' and discharge at Garston on the 1st of July 1943. The confusion is added to by the fact that the identification document was issued in New York and dated the 8th of April 1943. Fortunately the Official Log Book was completed later and has survived. This not only has Mac Neil's description of what happened but also letters regarding the sinking and subsequent return to Britain of the crew.

'M.V. "King Arthur" was struck on port side by four torpedoes in quick succession between 00-20 and 0029, this time being four hours slow of G.M.T. All L.S.A on the port side were smashed leaving only one serviceable lifeboat and two small rafts on starboard side. All hands (excepting the Chief Officer who was blown into the sea by the third torpedo blast) got away with difficulty in the remaining lifeboat and rafts. The Chief Officer was later sighted by the red light on life saving waistcoat and taken into lifeboat. Ship's position was radioed six times before abandoning ship. We stayed in vicinity of wreckage until daylight and

radioed our position by lifeboat emergency transmitter twice at 0930. We set sails and proceeded towards Trinidad. At 1030 we were sighted by a U.S.A. aircraft.

At 1120 same aircraft returned and dropped cask of water and slabs of chocolate. We then waited in the vicinity for arrival of a possible rescue vessel. At midnight the men on raft which was being towed were taken on board and raft cast adrift. We then resumed our course and with favourable wind and weather conditions made good headway.

On the 16th at 0530 we sighted land ahead. At 1105 plane number 7482 circled us and returned half an hour later. At about midday we sighted presumed rescue vessel. At 1225 we were taken on board U.S.N.R. vessel P.C.567. At 1740 we arrived at U.S. Naval Base, Trinidad.

Medical attention and accommodation was arranged by Naval Authorities and Red Cross Society.'

The Senior British Naval Officer at Trinidad telegraphed the Admiralty informing it of the sinking and the safe landing of the crew. Subsequently, on the 30th of April 1943, the Mercantile Marine Office in Cardiff informed the office in Garston that S.S.*Fort Nashwaak* would be arriving there the following day. She was a newly commissioned vessel (7134-ton), built at Vancouver, and, like *King Arthur*, owned by Dodd, Thomson and Company. She was probably on her maiden voyage to England. Quite where the crew joined her is not clear.

Just over seven weeks after arriving back in England Chris went back to sea. On the 16th of June 1943 he signed on at Birkenhead. The ship he joined was the 7443-ton *City of Delhi*, built at Sunderland in 1925 and owned by City Line. The master was Thomas V Burkett and the First Radio Officer was R. R. Gell, a 42-year-old Mancunian. Chris was by then 22. The *City of Delhi* sailed via Malta (8/8), Bizerta (19/8), where she suffered an air attack in which one man was slightly wounded, Taranto (27/9) and Alexandria (26/10) to Port Said (22/11-3/12), where she stayed ten days. She reached Colombo on Christmas day and arrived at Calcutta on the 20th of January 1944. Chris was paid off a week later. The *City of Delhi* survived the war and was scrapped in 1956.

Chris joined his next ship the following day. She was the *Binfield*, an old 5180-ton ship built at Middlesborough in 1919 and owned by the British Steam Navigation Company. She appears to have spent much of her time in and around India. Chris travelled between Calcutta and Madras a number of times during his period on board. His service record shows that he signed on the day following being signed off on two occasions. This meant that he was on board from the 28th of January until the 8th of December 1944, starting and finishing at Calcutta.

From the ageing *Binfield* Chris moved to a modern vessel, the *Ocean Viceroy*, a 7174-ton ship built in California in 1942 and owned by Cayzer Irvine. Despite being nearly new, she had been torpedoed in 1943 and salvaged. Chris signed on the day after leaving the *Binfield*. The *Ocean Viceroy* had left Leith on the 15th of March with N. Macfadyen as her master, C. Q. Marks as First Radio Officer and two younger men as Second and Third Radio Officers. When she reached Calcutta Marks, a Liverpoolian living in Glasgow, remained on board and the other two were paid off. In their place Macfadyen signed on D Barber, a Yorkshireman, and James McShane, an American. Before the ship could leave McShane was arrested by the military police, on suspicion of being involved in a theft on shore. Chris Hammett was signed on in his stead. He was paid off on the 3rd of February 1945 at Glasgow.

At this point an entry in his Official Register of Seamen record shows that he had to return to the Marconi Company at once. It would be seven weeks before Chris went back to sea. As his Certificate of Proficiency in Radiotelegraphy (Second Class) is dated during that period (10th of March 1945) it would appear that he had to return for training and to obtain the qualification.

Chris next joined *Errington Court*, a 4913-ton vessel built in 1925 in Belfast and owned by Haldin and Phillips, as her First Radio Officer. He was now aged 24. Her master was Gerald F West and Chris joined her on the 26th of March at Glasgow. He had an Ulsterman and a Scot as his 2nd and 3rd ROs. The ship appears to have sailed on the 30th or 31st of March and headed for Nova Scotia. He then spent the period between July and November shuttling between Sydney (NS) and Port au Port with occasional journeys to Wabana. He finally left Sydney on the 9th of December and went down the coast to Portland, Maine (15-

22/12), before going to Halifax (24-28/12) and returning to London (12-18/1) and South Shields (19/1). Chris was paid off the following day. His record shows that he again had to go back to Marconi.

By this time the war was over and Chris settled down to a comparatively uneventful life of peacetime sailing. His next ship was the 7219-ton *Samdel*, a new ship having been built in California in 1943. Ellerman's Wilson Line owned her. George Hodgson was her master. He joined her on the 22nd of February, just over a month after leaving *Errington Court*. She left the LNER Dock at Middlesborough on the 26th and sailed to the Far East via Port Said (10-11/3), Suez (11-12/3) and Aden (17/3) arriving at Singapore on the 31st of March. She left the following day and went to Saigon (4-8/4) before returning to Singapore (10-14/4). At some point the chief engineer went missing. After an investigation it was believed that he had undergone a nervous breakdown and had jumped overboard and been eaten by sharks. From Singapore *Samdel* headed for Australasia where she called in at Freemantle (25-27/5), The Bluff (11-19/6), Dunedin (21-25/6), Lyttelton (27/6-5/7) and Wellington (7-11/7). From there she sailed to America via the Panama Canal calling in at Balboa (11/8), Colon (12-14/8), Curacao (19/8), New York (27/8-2/9), Boston (4-5/9) and Montreal (12-24/9). She arrived back in England at Hull, where Chris was paid off on the 9th of October. He again returned to Marconi.

After his round the world tour Chris joined the aged *Alt*. She was a 1004-ton vessel that had been built in Newcastle in 1911 and was owned by the London Midland Scottish Railway. Chris signed on in Goole on the 1st of November 1946 and was paid off on the 22nd of December at Hull. The vessel appears to have shuttled up and down the Humber between Goole and Hull although there is a stamp showing that she was at Antwerp on the 9th-10th of December.

According to the official records Chris once again had to go back to Marconi. As he was only on shore for a week, and as it was Christmas, one wonders why. On the 30th of December 1946 he was back at Goole signing on for the *Cheltenham*, a 7046-ton ship built in 1942 at Shorts in Sunderland and owned by Thompson Steam Shipping. Her master was A Blackett, a fellow Geordie. Little is known about her voyage except that she was at Takoradi in Ghana on the 24th of January 1947 and again on the 17th of February. Chris was signed off at Victoria Docks on the 17th of March. He then had to report back to Marconi but signed on for the same ship two days later. This time *Cheltenham* sailed to Antwerp (23-26/3), Lisbon (26-28/4), Piraeus (6-15/5), Vol (17-19/5), Haifa (22-31/5), Venice (13-17/6), Port Said (23-28/6), Venice (5-7/7), Port Said (16-19/7) and Hamburg (15/8-1/9). She ended her journey at South Shields where Chris was paid off on the 4th of September.

A fortnight later Chris signed on for the *Tornus*, an 8054-ton tanker that had been built at Bremen in 1936. She was owned by the Anglo Saxon Petroleum Company (Shell). Nothing is known of her voyage that ended at Manchester on the 10th of November. From his record book Chris appears to have spent two years on board the *Tornus*. Although details of her voyage(s) are sketchy we know that she called in at: Freemantle (6/48), Port Esperance, Auckland (7/48), Hong Kong (8-9/48), Port Pirie (12/48), Auckland (2/49), Wellington, Singapore (5/49), Hong Kong (6/49), Wellington (9/49), Capetown (1/50), and Curacao (2/50). Exactly when and where Chris left her is not known.

His next ship was the *Tweed*, a 7076-ton ship built in Newcastle in 1944 for the Royal Mail Lines. He signed on at Liverpool the 23rd of February 1950 and joined her two days later. Her destination was South America and she called in at Rio de Janeiro (20/3), Santos (25-28/3), Rio Grande (1-3/4), Rio Gallegos (11-20/4), San Julian (22-25/4), Puerto Deseado (26-28/4), Santos (7-12/5), and Las Palmas (30/5). She returned to Victoria Docks where Chris was paid off on the 7th of June 1950.

It is at this point that the official records available at the National Archive cease and Chris' career become more of a list of ships than of voyages. He joined his next ship, the 7243-ton *Tropic* built in Baltimore in 1943 and owned by Shaw Saville and Albion, at Victoria Docks on the 22nd of June 1950 and certainly went to New Zealand with her. He was paid off on the 21st of January 1951 at Liverpool. Two very short journeys followed which took Chris to Avonmouth and Newport. He then joined the *Eskbank* and was at Gijon in Spain on the 8th of November 1951. She returned to North Shields and Chris was paid off on the 29th of September 1952. He joined the 4928-ton freighter *Hallindene*, a new ship just built in West Hartlepool,

where Chris signed on nearly two months after leaving the *Eskbank*. Chris was destined to spend over five years as radio officer on her.

Although the list of voyages in his record book suggests that Chris did not venture beyond Rotterdam, the endorsements at the back of it show that he was in Russia on the 9th of August 1957 and at Odessa on the 16th of Oct in the same year. There are also unexplained gaps in the record book. Chris left the *Silverweir* on the 18th of November 1961 and his joined next ship, *Cedric*, on the 26th of January the following year. However, an endorsement in his book shows that he left (Gijon?) on the 19th of November.

On the 19th of December 1961 Chris had his British Seaman's Card issued by the Mercantile Marine Office at Dock Street in London. Since his next of kin was given as his mother it is assumed that his father had died. His mother had returned to Newcastle and was living at 48 Hadrian Road, Fenham, on the western outskirts of the town. Chris was living with her at he time.

Further endorsements in his record book show that Chris was at Murmansk on three occasions: 6th to 10th of August 1965 and the 13th to 16th of July and 28th of September to 1st of October 1966. His last ship was the *Silvercove*, from which he was paid off at Invergordon on the 23rd of November 1972. His Seaman's Discharge Book [held by the museum] is dated the 19th of December 1972. He was 51 years old.

Sources consulted:

Registers of Seamen 1918-1941	TNA BT 384
Registers of Seamen 1941-1972	TNA BT 382/2425
Ships' Movement Cards	TNA BT 389
Index to Agreements and Crew Lists	TNA BT 385
Agreements, Crew Lists and Log Books 1939-1946	TNA BT 381
Agreements, Crew Lists and Log Books 1947-8	TNA BT 99
Agreements, Crew Lists and Log Books 1949-50	TNA BT 380

A full list of the ships on which Chris Hammett sailed

Indora (166382)	28/8/40	Swansea	21/11/40	Calcutta
Gogra (141915)	1/12/40	Calcutta	9/6/41	Calcutta
Monte Piana (174207)	10/6/41	Calcutta	9/7/41	Rangoon
Hoihow (154079)	10/7/41	Moulmein	17/7/41	Calcutta
Monte Piana (174207)	19/8/41	Calcutta	16/12/41	Dundee
Monte Piana (174207)	17/12/41	Dundee	23/1/42	Victoria Docks
Empire Reindeer (168203)	20/2/42	Tilbury	25/5/42	Newport
King Arthur (160458)	2/6/42	Cardiff	15/11/42	at sea
'Can poolout "Fort Nashwaak"'	27/1/43	Vancouver	Montréal	1/7/43 Garden
[Fort Nashwaak	16/11/42	Vancouver	1/5/43	Garston
City of Delhi (148871)	16 or 17/6/43	Birkenhead	27/1/44	Calcutta
Binfield (141895)	28/1/44	Calcutta	11/5/44	Calcutta
Binfield (141895)	12/5/44	Calcutta	27/8/44	Calcutta
Binfield (141895)	28/8/44	Calcutta	8/12/44	Calcutta
Ocean Viceroy (168734)	9/12/44	Calcutta	3/2/45	Glasgow
Errington Court (148611)	27/3/45	Glasgow	20/1/46	South Shields
Samdel (169838)	22/2/46	Middlesborough	9/10/46	Hull
'ALT' (128877)	1/11/46	Goole	22/12/46	Hull
Cheltenham (169107)	30/12/46	Hull	17/3/47	London
Cheltenham (169107)	19/3/47	nil	4/9/47	South Shields
Tornus (165349)	18/9/47	Sunderland	10/11/47	Manchester
Tornus (165349)	11/11/47	Manchester	19/10/49 or 24/1/50	Singapore
Tweed (169183)	25/2/50	Liverpool	7/6/50	Victoria Docks
Tropic (169679)	22/6/50	Victoria Docks	21/1/51	Liverpool
Corrales (161902)	14/2/51	Garston	16/2/51	Avonmouth
Tabaristan (181634)	23/2/51	Avonmouth	25/2/51	Newport

Eskbank (164117)	28/2/51	Birkenhead	29/9/52	North Shields
Hallindene (184741)	1/12/52	West Hartlepool	8/5/53	Falmouth
Hallindene (184741)	8/5/53	Falmouth	10/6/53	Newport
Hallindene (184741)	17/6/53	Newport	1/9/53	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	9/9/53	Avonmouth	8/12/53	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	16/12/53	Avonmouth	28/3/53	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	5/4/54	Avonmouth	17/7/54	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	26/7/54	Avonmouth	22/11/54	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	6/12/54	Avonmouth	17/3/55	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	24/3/55	Avonmouth	19/11/55	Swansea
Hallindene (184741)	6/12/55	Newport	2/7/56	Swansea
Hallindene (184741)	11/7/56	Swansea	9 or 8/3/57	Avonmouth
Hallindene (184741)	16/3/57	Avonmouth	1/7/57	Cardiff
Hallindene (184741)	23/7/57	Cardiff	25/6/58	Rotterdam
Silverdene (187395)	3/7/58	Poplar	20/10/58	Falmouth
Silverdene (187395)	20/10/58	Falmouth	26/3/59	Liverpool
Silverdene (187395)	13/4/59	Avonmouth	12/8/59	Liverpool
Silverdene (187395)	13 or 14/8/59	Liverpool	27/11/59	Rotterdam
Silver Isle (301056)	4/2/60	Sunderland	14/4/61	London
Corstream (186288)	5/6/61	Blyth	21/6/61	West Hartlepool
Silverweir (302701)	5/7/61	Sunderland	18/11/61	Gijon, Spain
Cedric (185253)	26/1/62	Victoria Docks	4/2/62	Poplar
Silverweir (302701)	26/2/62	Sunderland	19/12/62	Hull
Silverleaf (304430)	30/1/63	Sunderland	25/6/63	Victoria Docks
Silverleaf (304430)	26 or 25/6/63	Victoria Docks	13/1/64	Sunderland
Silverweir (302701)	9 or 10/3/64	Rotterdam	8/7/64	London
Silverweir (302701)	22/7/64	Belfast	14/11/64	Belfast
Silverweir (302701)	15/11/64	Belfast	18/11/64	Liverpool
Silvercrag (300798)	15/1/65	Middlesborough	30/6/65	Middlesbrough
Silvercrag (300798)	1/7/65	Middlesborough	4/11/65	Sunderland
Bishopsgate (301133)	22/2/66	Emden	23/4/66	West Hartlepool
Bishopsgate (301133)	23 or 24/4/66	Dunkirk	7/10/66	South Shields
Bishopsgate (301133)	7/10/66	South Shields	23 or 28/11/66	West Hartlepool
Silverbeach (315935)	31/1/67	Cardiff	8/1/68	Avonmouth
Silversea (316278)	8 or 12/3/68	Dock St	24/7/68	Cardiff
Sigsilver (309371)	9/9 or 8/68	Rotterdam	17/8/69	Lourenco Marques
Ineffective. 12 months rule. Date. 8/70				
Silvercove (309828)	29/8/70	New York	11/11/70	Osaka
Silvercove (309828)	12 or 11/11/70	Osaka	6 or 7/4/71	Wilmington, USA
Cluden (317298)	4/6/71	Falmouth	2/3/72	Genoa
Silverbeach (315935)	11/5/72	New Orleans	25/7/72	Hong Kong
Silvercove (309828)	9/8/72	Dar es Salaam	23/11/72	Invergordon

[This list is taken from Chris' Continuous Certificate of Discharge and his Official Register of Seamen, compiled by the Registry of Shipping and Seamen. The registered numbers of the ship are given in brackets. Additional information was taken from Lloyds List of Shipping.]

Brian Oldham
March 2007

Copyright: Major B.J. Oldham (rtd.) M.B.E.
(tel: 01908 551880)