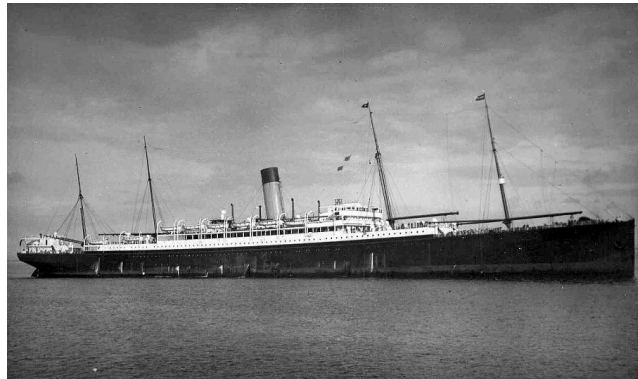


## Sinking Of The Ceramic 7<sup>th</sup> December 1943 – Tony Buck (1955)

In 1942, when I was 5 years old, it was decided by my parents that my older brother then 13 years old and myself should be sent to Australia under the overseas refugee plan for children. Our emigration was sponsored by my father's friend, Major Lewis in Brisbane, Queensland, with whom we would stay for the duration of the war. My father had met and become friends with Major Lewis in 1918 when my father was on the Staff of the 26th Brigade, 9th (Scottish) Division and Major Lewis was the Liaison Officer attached from the 1st Australian Division. Many children were sent away to Canada, Australia and New Zealand at this time. My brother and I were amongst the last chosen.



We were booked to sail from Liverpool on the Shaw Savill and Albion vessel 'Ceramic', the ship being scheduled to leave to sail for St Helena, Durban and Sydney during November 1942.

We were kitted out with extra clothing for the voyage, including some tropical shirts and shorts in khaki for which a special allocation of clothing coupons were issued - clothing, like much else being strictly rationed at this time. My brother came home from boarding school at the beginning of the month, to pack and make ready for the journey. However on arrival home, he became seriously ill with 'scarlet fever' and was promptly placed in the local 'Fever Hospital'. I along with anyone who had been in contact with my brother was promptly placed in quarantine for 6 weeks. Fortunately I never developed the disease.

Our emigration was immediately cancelled as were our bookings on 'Ceramic' though the Nurse/Companion, hired by my father for the voyage, did sail with the ship. I still have vivid memories of going to visit my brother at the Fever Hospital with the Housekeeper. We had to stand outside the ward in a special cubicle and could only see and speak to him through a perforated glass screen. As will be seen, my brother's illness was instrumental in saving both of our lives.

The 'Ceramic' sailed from Liverpool on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1942, with Captain Elford in command. By this time, it was unusual for ships to sail independently but this is what she did. She had on board 378 passengers, including 12 children but NOT the Buck boys, 244 naval and military personnel and a crew of 278, a total of 900 passengers and crew. She was also carrying 12,362 tons of general cargo and Government stores. On the 7th December 1942, whilst she was west of the Azores, the ship was sighted and stalked by a German U-Boat. U515.

The weather was cold with rough seas running. At 2000 hrs U515 fired a torpedo at the ship, followed by two others; the stricken 'Ceramic' was stopped dead in the water and eight lifeboats were lowered and got away. They were crammed full of people and several capsized, throwing the occupants into the sea. 'Ceramic' finally sank before midnight. The next morning, the same U-boat reappeared and one survivor, Sapper Eric Munday of the Royal Engineers, was taken aboard the submarine which then sailed away. Apparently the U-Boat was ordered to return and find the ship's Captain but failed to locate him. All the then remaining survivors, 665 passengers and those crew not killed in the initial attack were left to their fate. All later perished, leaving Sapper Munday as the sole survivor.

The full details of the sinking did not come to light until well after the war ended in 1945. It was only after the surviving war diaries of the U-Boats were finally fully analysed and the testimony of Sapper Munday on his release from his POW Camp in Upper Silesia that the true story of the sinking became available. However it was only in May 1954 that the full unedited details were released – after the writer of this article had started on his first term at the School of Navigation! Eric Munday died in 2001 and my brother died of cancer at Christmas 2008, aged 79.

(Editor) As a sequel to this article I have traced on the internet that on 4.4.1944, a Hunter/Killer Group of the US Navy whilst patrolling off the French West African Coast, came across U515 and sank her. 15 of her crew were killed and the remainder including her Capt. Werner Henke who had been in command when he had ordered 'Ceramic' to be torpedoed, were taken prisoner. He was later accused of machine gunning 'Ceramic' survivors in the water but there was no proof of this at the time. He however, on being told that

he was to be handed over to the British, attempted to escape from Camp Ruston in Louisiana where he was being detained and was shot and killed by the Military Guards.

(Chris Clarke - Here is a website [SS Ceramic](#) advertising a book by Clare Hardy of the life of the Ceramic, and another website page by the author of [Ceramic: The Untold Story](#)).