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Earl Stott's Voyage on the Aquitania

During the early summer days of 1944, Private First Class Thomas Earl Stott, an American soldier attached to the 551st Division, A Company, specializing in anti-aircraft weaponry, found himself shipped out to Europe to support the invasion of France. From the rural areas of central New York, the 20-year-old Stott had never seen a huge ocean liner before. When he arrived in Manhattan's West Side docks, however, he soon found himself boarding the great Aquitania, bound for Glasgow, Scotland. His vivid recollections of that voyage, as well as his comparison of the Aquitania to the smaller vessel he was shipped back to the States on after the war, provide a fascinating insight into what it was like for a young GI to be shipped out to Europe aboard the Aquitania, and by extension, the other troopships then in service. This is his story.

“On June 6, 1944, my anti-aircraft company was just packing up to leave Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, when we received news of the invasion at Normandy. We knew that we were shipping out, and we figured our destination would probably be in France, supporting the front lines moving in from Normandy. But anything more than that we weren't sure of.

“We left Camp Edwards in the morning, and we traveled through the night, arriving in New York the following day. As we were walking along the pier, everybody was asking everybody where the ship was, because we were expecting some small ship, I imagine. As we were looking around, we kept seeing people walking into the side of a building. We were running out of pier, and we thought that the ship was on the other side of the building, but when we went through the opening in the ‘building’, we knew that we were on the ship then.

“Apparently there were spies back on the docks watching for the ship to leave so that they could report her departure time to the German U-boats operating in the Atlantic and in the waters around the British Isles, so that they could catch us. But we didn't know that until later.

“The ship was nice and clean. Once we had gotten on board, we were directed to go to our quarters, and we very quickly got confused by what seemed like a maze of passages and corridors – but those directing us apparently knew where they were telling us to go, because we found it all right. There were hammocks for me and the other guys to sleep in. We found that in our quarters, we had room, but you know, we didn't have a lot of room. But you weren't elbow to elbow, you know.

“Once we had found our quarters, we were asked to stay there, and not to venture out, because we could get lost and cause a lot of problems, you know. Several thousand guys all walking around and not knowing where they were going, would have tended to get underfoot. This directive was especially necessary in case there was an emergency during the trip, or a fire drill, or something, you know, because the crew would need to get to their battle stations quickly, and if the corridors and passages were full of guys, they couldn't do it

in time.

“We didn’t feel a thing when the ship cast off and started her trip. She was smooth and stable during the voyage, despite the fact that she was zigzagging and running at top speed the whole time. We didn’t encounter any rough weather during the voyage. You’d never know, being down below there, that you were moving or doing anything.

“We all passed the time playing pinochle. I didn’t start smoking until I was in action, you know, the nerves and all, so I don’t remember whether smoking was allowed or not while we were on board.

“Even though we were told to stay put, there were four of us pinochle buddies who took a walk down our deck, just to see how far we could go, you know. After a while, we run into the M.P., and he said: ‘That’s as far as you go.’

“We said, ‘We thought we’d go down to the end of the ship and turn around.’

“‘This is the WACs [Women’s Army Corps] area,’ he replied. ‘There are no soldiers allowed in here.’

“So we got sent packing right back to our quarters and started playing cards again.

“We were about halfway through the voyage when the ship’s radar picked up two German subs. The Captain quickly made an announcement, telling us what they had found. He said: ‘We’ll go out around, two-hundred miles out around them. When we get even with them, we’re safe, they can’t touch us, because they can’t go as fast as we do.’ What he didn’t say was what might happen if we didn’t get even with them.

“That didn’t end up mattering much, though. A few hours later, the captain came back over the loudspeaker and said: ‘It’s all clear now.’ He told us there was nothing to worry about; they had gotten by the subs and the subs couldn’t catch us now.

“As we were coming in past Ireland, it was so exciting, ‘cause we finally got a clear view of what was going on around us. It seemed as if we was up on top, but I don’t remember. At any rate, the view I had was great; there was nobody in front of me and I had a clear view. I could see everything around on that one side of the ship. There was a big, long hill, a strip of land like a hedge row that separated us from another channel. It wasn’t a steep hill, and it didn’t have any buildings or nothing on it where we went by. As we were going up the one channel, I could clearly see one of the big British battleships going out to sea down the other channel.

“The voyage to England took a total of eleven days. We landed in Glasgow, Scotland. We got off the ship and took the train down to England. We were at each camp in England for seven days. One of those camps was the Lucky Strike, and one of them was just thirty miles from Bristol, where my relatives lived. We were moving around like that, acquiring our equipment before shipping out.

“From England, we got on the boats and went out on the North Sea. We had to stay on the boat overnight, and while we was there the German planes came over and dropped the mines for the ships to hit and blow up, you know. He was so close he almost dropped it on our ship and we got splashed from where it went into the water. The next morning we arrived at Normandy. I was attached to the 1st Army until General Patton arrived. The first town we went through was Saint-Lo. I survived a lot of enemy action, and nearly got

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it at the Battle of the Bulge. But eventually, the Germans surrendered.

“After that, they shipped us back to France, and we were waiting for a ship to take us over to Japan, so that we could pitch in there. But before the ship came, they’d dropped the two atomic bombs, and the war was over. So when the ship got there, instead of taking us to Japan, they took us home.

“We went up through the Mediterranean, by Spain, and past the Rock of Gibraltar. It was a smaller, army ship, the S.S. *[David C.] Shanks*. She was a baby compared to the *Aquitania*, about the size of a liberty ship. The voyage was not as pleasant as the one out on the *Aquitania*. Two days out from New York, we run into a terrific storm, and they told us to stay down below, you know. Where we ate, you know, the food would run down the tables and you’d have to catch it as it slid by. Even though told to stay below, I just had to see what was going on, and I went up on deck. They had rails along the edge, but there was nothing but a pole for quite a ways there. So I started to go across, and the ship tipped, and I slipped right across toward the edge. The water was coming up on deck, and I caught the chains, with my feet dangling into the water. When the ship tipped the other way, I grabbed the pole for support, and then when it righted I ducked back down inside – right quick, you had better believe. So after all my wartime adventures, including my voyage on the *Aquitania*, I nearly lost my life two days out of New York. But I did get home safe.”

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