

The Great BOMBAY EXPLOSION



(Left) *Fort Stikine* prior to the disastrous explosion. (Above) The remains of *Fort Stikine*.

catastrophic effects on other ships sailing with her. So when she left Birkenhead in

and red-hot shell splinters began to shower down on the *Stikine's* deck plating less than half an inch thick. If just one of those splinters had gotten into the cargo...

Then the ship's Oerlikon guns opened up and the vibration sent a rack containing live shells crashing onto the deck. Near nightfall, with the German planes still hovering around, the convoy commodore ordered the ships to make smoke, whereupon when seamen aboard the *Stikine* tried to light a smoke canister, it burst into flames.

The convoy suffered no serious damage and the *Stikine* survived unscathed. By the time she reached Alexandria the crew thought their troubles were over. But that first brush with disaster was a mere foretaste of things to come.

Meanwhile, as throughout the voyage so far, the subject of the dangerous cargo was banned among the crew. To speak, let alone joke, about it was felt to be tempting providence. But from now on the journey was uneventful and on 30 March the *Stikine* docked at Karachi after crossing the Arabian Sea.

There some crated gliders and Spitfires were unloaded and the spaces filled with fresh cargo destined — together with the explosives — for Bombay. And what a cargo! Scrap iron, stinking

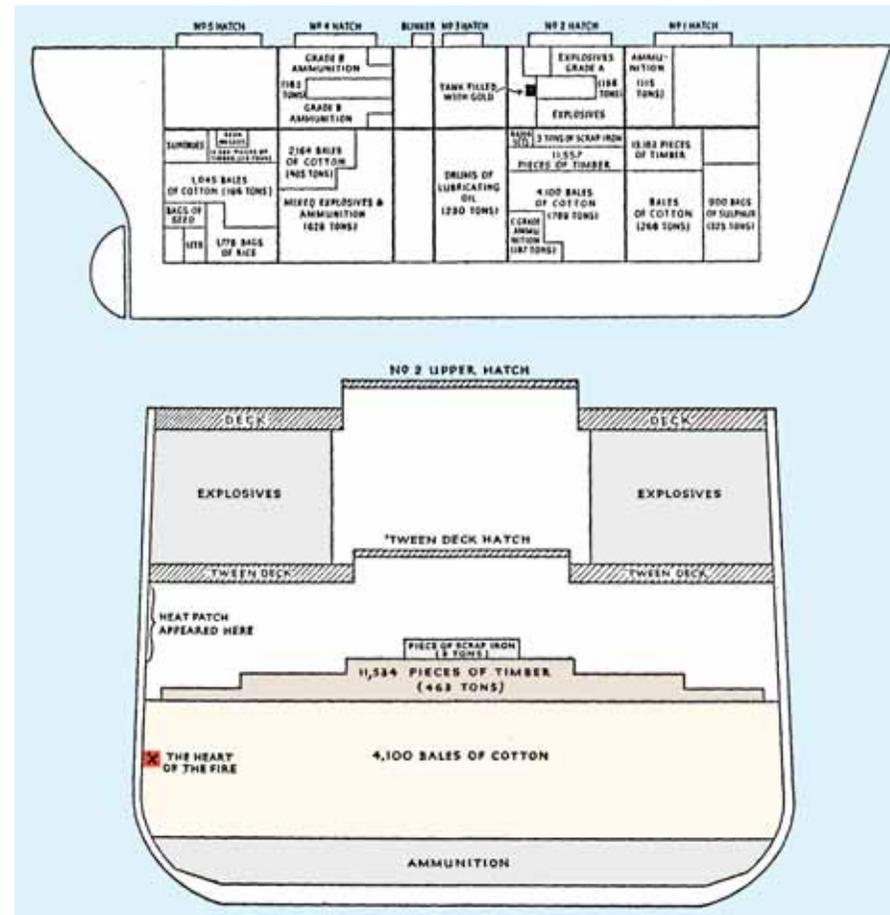
fish manure, and rice were the sort of stuff a ship might have to accept. But the rest was highly flammable: Hundreds of drums of lubricating oil, 8700 bales of raw cotton, sulfur, and resin.

Except in wartime a captain would have been within his rights to refuse such a mixture. All he could do now was bow to the inevitable and get one of his officers to search the reference books for details of raw cotton — how to stow it and the dangers to be avoided. Such a cargo was seldom if ever exported from Britain and all he knew was that cotton was tricky, but just why he could not remember.

The officer came up with a note about damp cotton giving off hydrogen. That was bad enough. But if he or the captain had possessed two standard works published in the US they would have found something else. After listing the fire precautions to be taken when loading or unloading raw cotton, one of them stated: "Cotton bales which are or have been in contact with oil or grease are very liable to spontaneous combustion."

And the other, under the heading of explosives: "These commodities should never be stowed in the same hatch with cotton but in a properly constructed magazine in the opposite end of the ship from that in which cotton is stowed."

In No. 2 hold of the *Fort Stikine*, 769-tons of raw cotton were stowed in the bottom with timber and scrap iron above it. Then in the upper compartment, drums of



Disposition of the *Fort Stikine's* cargo at the time of the explosions.

lubricating oil — some of which were leaking — were stacked on tarpaulins that covered most, but not all, of the deck between the upper and lower holds.

In this upper compartment there were also 124 gold bars valued at a million pounds Sterling, sealed in a steel tank lashed to the bulkhead and consigned to a Bombay bank, and 168-tons of Category A, the most sensitive explosives.

Two more of the ship's five holds were also stowed with explosives and cotton.

On 9 April, the *Fort Stikine* sailed from Karachi in convoy with tankers from the Persian Gulf down the west coast of India towards Bombay, arriving three-days later in the beautiful harbor lying between the mainland on

the east and, to the west, the long tongue of Bombay Island with its docks, warehouses, railway terminus, and street upon street of poor wooden houses.

The ship tied up in Victoria Dock, flanked by Prince's Dock to the north and Alexandria Dock to the south, all three of them on the east side of the island. Normally, port regulations required that ships carrying explosives should fly a red flag and unload into lighters in the harbor. But in wartime, the first requirement would have been an advertisement to enemy agents and the second had to be waived for the sake of rapid turnaround.

So it was that on that day the *Fort Stikine* found herself at the nerve center of western India, while only a handful of people knew just what she was carrying.

On the 12th, the same day that she docked, unloading began by Indian stevedores — first the fish manure because the stench had plagued the crew ever since Karachi, then sundries such as dynamos and wireless sets, some of the timber and



Vast destruction at Victoria Docks.

A load of high explosives and ignorance of their handling combined to create one of World War Two's great naval disasters

BY HOWARD CARTER

Once the ship reached Alexandria heading for the Suez Canal, the entire crew — from the captain to the youngest seaman — breathed a hearty sigh of relief.

The ship was only two-years-old, built in Canada from Lend-Lease funds made available by the United States of America, one of 26 identical cargo boats all called *Fort* something, in this case *Fort Stikine*, from a river in British Columbia.

But this was wartime and though staunch in every respect, the ship was no more than a floating volcano, for she was carrying 1395-tons of explosives — a cargo which a torpedo, or even one bomb from an aircraft, could send sky-high, probably with

February 1944, the *Fort Stikine* was put in the outside lane of a heavily protected convoy, which made her more vulnerable to U-Boat attack but less lethal to other ships if, to put it bluntly, she blew up.

If those ships had passed anywhere near the Bay of Biscay in earlier war years, they would probably have been decimated. But by this time, with greatly improved radar, depth-charging devices, and the so-called Merchant Aircraft Carriers — which could fly off scouting planes — the U-Boats were no longer the hunters but the hunted and this particular convoy reached Gibraltar without a scratch.

Then a grievous ordeal began. At Gibraltar the convoy split up, some ships continuing southwards down the coast of Africa and others — including the *Fort Stikine* — sailing east through the Mediterranean. One evening when they were off Algiers they were attacked by 20 *Luftwaffe* Focke-Wulfs, which dropped bombs haphazardly and sprayed the decks with machine-gun fire. The convoy threw up a terrific barrage