

It All Started In Oban

by KEN FARROW

During the two world wars of the last century ships were built at an unprecedented rate in order to keep up with the numbers that were being lost at sea through U-boat attacks. Most of the ships built were destined for a short life. However, as Ken Farrow explains there was one ship that defied the odds on a number of occasions before the inevitable occurred.

SOME SHIPS seem to be lucky ships while others suffer one accident or incident after another and eventually they are broken up for scrap or become dive sites. However this sinking really begins in Oban. As such it brings to mind the *Breda* for reasons that will become clear.

This ship was built in the final days of the Great War of 1914-1918 when there had been a need to build ships more quickly than the U-boats could sink them. A lesson that seemed to have been forgotten came the Second World War of 1939-1945. A Standard B Class ship, she slid into the water from the yard of the Northumberland Ship Building Company on Tyneside, like the Clyde an important ship building area in that time. Only completed in 1919 as the *War Buffalo* she missed the war and entered service with the Compagnie Maritime Belge formerly Lloyd Royal Belge. They renamed her *Persier* and between the wars she traded around the world.

In the Second World War the *Persier* was sent to Dunkirk in May 1940 and then traded across the Atlantic. Just before Christmas 1940, like the *Breda* and several other ships, the *Persier* was stationed off Oban. With Oban being a mere three hours flying time for German Heinkel 111s based at Stavanger in occupied Norway, air raids took place. Two bombs exploded off the stern but the *Persier* was luckier than the *Breda* and

remained afloat apparently undamaged.

The *Breda* sank but the *Persier* crossed the Atlantic to the USA during which time some leaks were discovered. However, the true extent of the damage was only realised when she was laden ready to return with a full cargo. Nevertheless she sailed, but leaks meant that repairs had to be made and she was left behind by the convoy, becoming a sitting duck for any shadowing U-boat.

Luck was with her in terms of enemy action, but it was winter in the Atlantic. A mast was ripped off, a hatch cover was damaged allowing water into the hold, the steering broke down and the electrical system failed. The *Persier* survived all of this, but out of control went ashore in Iceland.

There she remained throughout the gales of March and it was not till April that salvage began. Her good fortune continued, as being beached on sand, she had remained in one piece and was eventually refloated and beached for examinations and repairs which took until January. However she was still leaking and was beached once more in February 1941. It was not until May 1942 after being stranded for a year and half that she was finally towed back to Yarrow to be dry docked in sight of where she had been built in 1918.

By 1943 the *Persier* was back in service but then found herself selected for sacrifice as a block ship to support the landings on the Normandy beaches that were to become D-day with the Mulberry harbours and breakwaters of scuttled ships. Fittings were removed and holes cut into the bulkheads ready for sinking as an artificial breakwater. A change of

plan then lead to the winches and derricks being re-installed, the bulkhead openings filled and she sailed again. Once more the *Persier* had escaped a watery fate.

Come February 8, 1945 the *Persier* left Cardiff bound for Belgium as the Convoy commodore's ship of convoy BTC 65. Although by then the threat from U-boats was waning the weather was still determined to do its worst and the ships were forced to shelter in the lee of Lundy and then Clovelly before reaching the Eddystone lighthouse off Plymouth on February 11.

However U-1017 was on form having attacked ships on January 26, January 27 and two others on February 6. On February 11 the *Persier's* convoy appeared in range of OLRD Werner Rieken who fired torpedoes and reported hitting two ships.

Although only one torpedo appears to have hit the *Persier* the explosion was devastating. The forward hold completely flooded, the ship started to list so that with the engines stopped the order to abandon ship was given. Tragically the engine restarted and the turning propeller chopped up two of the lifeboats before stopping.

Depth charge attacks on the submarine then appear to have restarted the engine but escort vessels closed and took off the remainder of the crew successfully.

The sinking *Persier* was left to her own fate whilst U-1017 escaped the depth charge attacks and slipped away. The fate of the U-1017 was to be sunk off the north west of Ireland on April 29, 1945 with all her crew. The *Persier* however vanished, presumably sinking some-

"Luck was with her in terms of enemy action, but it was winter in the Atlantic."



The Persier in her prime

where out by the Eddystone lighthouse where she had been attacked by the U-boat torpedo, a long way from the original aircraft bombing attack off Oban at the beginning of the war.

Where the *Persier* went was to remain a mystery for a quarter of a century during which time scuba diving was to emerge as a sporting activity. Many dives in and around the Eddystone rocks must therefore have been carried out in the hope of finding the wreck of the *War Buffalo / Persier*. However those dives were all doomed to failure.

Instead of sinking out at sea the *Persier* had continued chugging on shoreward before finally sinking a long time after being abandoned. Thus it was only in May 1970 that the bell was raised confirming the identity of the large wreck found in Bigbury Bay well away from where the *Persier* had been reported lost.

At 400 feet long and 5382 tons the WWI *War Buffalo / WWII Persier* was a large ship though slightly smaller than the *Breda's* 6941 tons. Originally the *Persier* lay on her side and like many other merchant vessels was armed with a gun on the stern for defence against U-boats. Now the ship has broken up into a large dive site with the boilers, which had fed her triple expansion steam engine being the most obvious features. Otherwise the wreck is now a mass of jumbled plates, masts, beams and machinery.

A memory from diving the *Persier* in 2005 is the number of conger eels, not just in the masts but under the plates whilst my oldest recollection from back in the 1970s is of a substantial lobster sitting out in the open, before vanishing as I approached.

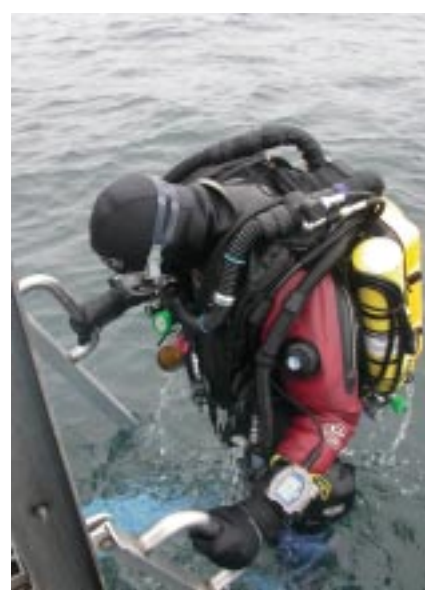
This year there appeared to be an abundance of fish but I think that was partly due to the fact that there were only three pairs of divers on the wreck (the weather being awful) and we were all on inspiration closed circuit rebreathers, which being very quiet do not frighten away the fish like the noisy exhalation of open circuit. Certainly, last year there were fewer fish but there were both open circuit and rebreather divers on the wreck.

Around the wreck the bottom has a lot of sand that reflects back considerable light and provides a definite contrast with the dark wreckage. At less than 30 metres it is a suitable dive to take advantage of nitrox.

But did I really go all the way down to Plymouth, from Aberdeen, both this year and last just to dive the *Persier*. Is the



Some of the wildlife that resides on the *Persier* wreck



Ken Farrow believes that diver lifts have been a boon for the sport

diving that good? Well no. Is the weather that much better? Well no.

However there are a lot of wrecks to dive on, many of them big wrecks, good wrecks and in sensible depths of just 20 or 30 metres in some cases, on down to the deeper 60 metres or so for trimix divers to explore.

Some of the wrecks are the classic ones that appear in oh so many logbooks, the *James Egan Layne* for example. In just 20 metres of water it is a readily accessible example of a Liberty ship. It is thus one of the many prefabricated, standard design production line jobs that were needed if ships were to be built faster than the German U-boats could sink them in World War II.

So why bother you may ask. Well there are the other aspects of diving: the fun; the camaraderie; the craic; to meet people you know from past trips and to meet others with common interests. In particular both trips were for gatherings of just inspiration rebreather divers from all over the world. We were based at the Mountbatten centre outside of which the dive boats were loaded from the pontoon whilst Deep Blue supplied the diving needs.

However there was one other aspect of the diving that was a positive pleasure; one that we had also encountered on an earlier trip down to Littlehampton. The diving is easier. No I'm not referring to

the warmer water, better weather or better visibility.

Various things have improved or even revolutionised diving in the past few decades, stabjackets and wings rather than uncomfortable horse collar life jackets, dive computers, affordable drysuits, bigger higher pressure cylinders, Nitrox and trimix have all transformed diving followed by the advent of electronic closed circuit rebreathers.

On the down side a drysuit for me meant carrying about 10lbs more lead than a wet suit. Trimix meant carrying a twin set and two side mounts, even a rebreather means carrying more lead to balance out the buoyant effect of the counterlungs and scrubber. However diving from any of the Plymouth boats or those from Littlehampton the problem of all that extra weight had been resolved. No struggling up the ladder, or stripping off side mounts and laboriously passing them up.

The solution to the weight of kit problem is to replace the diving ladders with diver lifts, something I have yet to encounter in Scotland even though in the same time period I've been diving in the Clyde, the Sound of Mull, Orkney and up here off the NE and Moray coasts. However those diver lifts are the future. Not only do they make it easier, but they must also reduce the risk of decompression illness.

"The Persier vanished... where she went was to remain a mystery for a quarter of a century."