

Robert Charles Cousins was killed on 2 July 1940 about 8 months after I was born. He was in the Merchant Navy at the outbreak of WW2 and was serving on the Arandora Starr which at that time was a luxury cruise liner of the Blue Star Line. After the start of WW2 the ship was converted for use transferring Prisoners of War to Canada. The passengers were Italian internees and German Prisoners of War. On their second day out of Liverpool at 6 am on 2 July 1940 the Arandora Star was spotted by a German U-boat, captained by Gunther Prien and torpedoed. The torpedo struck amidships and I have been reliably informed that this would have been in the region of the galley where Robert Charles would have been working preparing breakfast.

Alistair Maclean has written a book called "The Lonely Sea", which is a selection of short stories. One of those stories is "The Arandora Star". This story tells of the sinking of the ship and contains some very chilling revelations. Apparently most of the crew would have died when the torpedo struck and in all the confusion there was no one to take charge of the evacuation into the lifeboats. As a result there was a free for all and press reports at the time that there was a lot of casualties due to panic and passengers fighting to reach the life boats. Great credit was given to one of the German Prisoners, Captain Burnfeld who took charge of the launching of several lifeboats and at the end refused a place for himself and went down with the ship.

Ironically, the true reasons for the great loss of life were that the ship was grossly overloaded, there were close on 1700 internees and guards aboard. The Captain had protested strongly about the danger of overcrowding but the authorities had refused to listen to him. There were also not enough life-jackets and many people drowned through lack of them. There were far too few lifeboats. There were about a dozen of these, old, worn out and with a capacity of about 60 each, a total capacity of less than half of the entire complement of the Arandora Star. Some of the lifeboats had had oars, emergency provisions and plugs removed to immobilize them against any attempt on the part of the internees to escape. The rafts, which might have save more lives were secured by wire which could only be loosened by special implements which were unobtainable. Another terrible occurrence which was not admitted at the time was that the decks of the ship had been surrounded and festooned with impenetrable barbed-wire fencing which was designed to keep the prisoners apart, presumably again to deter any attempts to escape. Unfortunately because of the obstructing wire trained members of the ship's company were not able to reach all their boats' positions in time.

After reading this terrible account of the last hours of the Arandora Star I have tried to obtain comment from the War Office without success. I find this a really chilling story but have unfortunately been unable to verify all the facts so anyone reading this must appreciate that there could be some errors or omissions. I am still making further enquiries into this tragedy.