

Cliff Richards
WWII Veteran
Ariguani and
Gorjistan
1941 and 1943



My wife and I paid a visit to your very interesting Pier 21 exhibition whilst on a cruise on M.V. Royal Princess last month.

I had two unusual experiences there. First, a British wartime identity card, which was on display, in the name of Gillis, which was my mother's maiden name - no relation that I am aware of.

Secondly, your computer screen of ships that had visited Halifax was "open" to the S.S. Ariguani - one of my old ships. You said you were still trying to get more information and would be grateful for any I might be able to supply.

I joined Ariguani as a deck boy one month after my 14th birthday (we left school early in those days). I had planned to take an apprenticeship as a deck officer but had two years to wait to start that so thought I would get in some sea experience.

Pre-war there were five ships in that class: Ariguani, Bayano, Carare, Cavina and Camito, who ran a regular 4 week round trip between Avonmouth and Jamaica carrying 100 passengers each way and bananas on the return trip. The English cricket team were regular passengers, en route to play the West Indies and the Earl and Countess of Athlone (Princess Alice) used the Ariguani regularly for holidays in Jamaica.

I left her in May 1939 to prepare for my apprenticeship. The Ariguani was taken over by the Royal Navy on the outbreak of hostilities and, armed with two 6 guns, etc., she became an ocean boarding vessel. She was torpedoed early on but managed to be towed into port - Gibraltar, I think - to be repaired to fight again.

She was then fitted with a catapult on the bow on which was a Fairey Fukmar fighter. The Germans had the habit of sending out long-range Focke Wolfe Condors, which found, then circled, the convoys, out of range of convoy A/A guns and reported their position to their submarines.

The Ariguani was actually acting as one of the escorts with a convoy I sailed home in, from Halifax, in June 1943. She sent up her plane when 'Jerry' appeared but couldn't make contact and I later heard her plane had managed to make a landing in Ireland. The alternative was to ditch and hope to be picked up. She resumed her regular sailings to Jamaica after the war, until she was broken up.

My first visit to Halifax was very brief. I was serving as a cadet on the S.S. Gorjistan (photocopy enclosed). We were homeward bound from Australia, and Christmas Day 1941 found us two days from Halifax. The Captain suggested delaying Christmas dinner until we arrived at Halifax when we all would be off watch and relaxed. As it turned out, we arrived off Halifax as a U.K.-bound convoy was sailing. We were given our papers and told to join on to this convoy. So we didn't get Christmas dinner in port then.

My second visit, in June 1943 came after a very hectic month in St. John, N.B. We had loaded as cargo, 5000 tons of H.E. when a fire broke out in the boiler room. The authorities were very quickly on the scene to extinguish it, but it meant a month altogether there for repairs and we then sailed round to Halifax to join a homeward bound convoy, after being away from home for a year and a half.

One very poignant moment in that convoy: We were a 100 ship convoy, routed North and sailing between icebergs when we were told that every ship had to fly their ensign at half-mast. It seems that an electrician on a small Norwegian ship had died and he was to be buried at sea. That little ship, with one escort, went ahead of the convoy for the burial, between icebergs, with 100 ensigns at half-mast. It was very sad but somehow appropriate.

I served my whole cadetship on the one ship. We were very lucky, coming through the war without too much trouble and the ship was finally broken up in the 60s. I hope the ramblings of an old sea dog haven't bored you too much. My wife and I thoroughly enjoyed our visit to Halifax. The only difference being, on previous visits I was paid but this time I had to pay for the privilege.

I send you my best wishes for your Pier 21 project.

