

CAPTAIN CAMERON SIMMONS AT WAR

By: Will Johnson

My former old neighbor Capt. George Irvin Holm (1891-1984) was one of my sources for indentifying our Saba captains and their exploits. Once, when interviewing him, I asked if any of his ships had ever been in trouble during either of the World Wars. He made light of it and said he did not think so. The next day I passed his house. He was 91 then and out working in his vegetable garden. He shouted out to me that he had not remembered to tell me that he had been torpedoed twice and shot at by German warplanes many times during the war.

Sometime back Ms. Ashley Cordi, a great granddaughter of Capt. Samuel Augustus Simmons visited me and brought me Confidential and Secret documents from the U.S. Navy Department. No. No. That was before Wikileaks if that is what you are thinking. Anyway the documents are from the Second World War and I assume that it is safe to use them now.

Every hand while I try to file documents away. My house is like the Augean stables, and like Hercules it would take me twenty years to put all the paperwork in some kind of order. When filing the documents from Ms. Cordi I decided to read up on the life of Capt. Cameron Dudley Simmons. He was born on February 10th, 1892 in the home near the Roman Catholic Church in The Bottom. Mrs. Carmen Simmons born Nicholson now owns this home. Cameron's parents were Capt. Samuel Augustus Simmons of Saba (1848-1930) and Eva Johnson Simmons born St. Thomas Parish, Barbados February 8th, 1860 and died on Saba February 20th, 1942.

After sailing on schooners around the West Indies, Cameron went to the United States. There he met and married Blanche Bruce from Montego Bay, Jamaica (daughter of Capt. Solomon Simmons "Butchy Coonks".) They had 7 children.

Cameron's parents had a number of tragedies in their lifetime. A son Solomon aged 16 fell out of a tree in the hillside of Parish Hill landed on a rock and died.

Another son Capt. Harold Christopher, his wife Belle Williams from New Orleans and their two children were lost in the Gulf of Mexico. They abandoned ship and only one lifeboat made it to shore. Their life raft never made it to shore. This happened on the molasses tanker “Melero” on January 20th, 1920 (Lat.31.45 N Long. 78-48W.)



The following report of the Navy Department concerns the Liberty cargo ship “William Wirt”, Capt. Cameron Dudley Simmons and 1st Mate George Irvin Holm. The report was compiled by the Commander of U.S. Naval Armed Guard S/S William Wirt, from Gibraltar, directed to the chief of Naval Operations and dated February 2nd, 1943. There were 21 armed guards on board under the command of Lieut. R.H. Mcilwaine. The merchant personnel consisted of 13 merchant men assigned to gun posts, among them Samuel Augustus Simmons Jr. (brother of the Captain) and listed as 3rd Mate. There was also a Jones, M.L., Peterson, M.C., Green, J.H. and Collins, J.P. (3rd cook). These are all Saba names and they could have been from here as our people liked to sail together even into war. The

report is of the Voyage of the S/S William Wirt from December 28th, 1943 to January 10th, 1944.

On 7 January 1943, approximately seventy miles West of Philippeville Algeria, we encountered the enemy. With no warning whatsoever from escorts, an attack by air was launched against the convoy at 1810. Planes painted dark grey, with no insignias visible, came in from the North, North East and North West. Flying low, about 50 to 100 feet above the water, the first assault was launched by torpedo carrying planes. The ship on our port side was the first to go up with a great explosion, which destroyed the attacking plane that was caught and sucked into the flame. Simultaneously, torpedo planes came in on our port bow and quarter. 3"/50 and 20MM Oerlikon barrage drove these planes off their course causing their torpedoes to go astray. Another followed close, coming in on the port quarter and was hit by 20MM fire. He dropped two torpedoes, one going astray and the other hitting a small Norwegian ship astern sinking her, then burst into flames and fell to our starboard side aft. The next wave, followed closely and were dive bombers coming in high from North or seaside. One diving on us on the port beam was hit by 20MM fire and his port motor burst into flames, causing him to bank sharply to port and the two bombs released to fall twenty yards from the portside of the ship. He appeared to try and gain altitude, then released another bomb which entered No. 1 hold (Loaded with 100 octane gas); and fell into drink just forward of our starboard bow. The explosion of the two near misses jammed the breech and training arc of the 3"/50 and we had to carry on with 20MM alone. The last wave of planes approached from forward and crossed our bow. One was hit by 20MM from flying bridge starboard and rapidly lost altitude with heavy black smoke pouring from his motors. He fell into the drink about one mile astern.

- a. The actual attack ended at 1850 and approximately twenty or more planes were used by the enemy. These consisted, to the best of our ability to recognize them, of Heinkles, Folke-Wulf, Stuka and Junkers bombers. Also some planes resembling Savia SM's.
- b. The attack, we feel, was the result of a reconnaissance plane which appeared over the convoy at 1605. Escorting Hurricanes opened fire and

the plane disappeared into a cloud with no pursuit attempted. Two hours and five minutes later the actual attack occurred, at which time no warning and very little support was given the convoy by sea escorts.

- c. Shrapnel and some unexploded shells fell on deck and hatch covers but no injuries except minor ones were received. The bomb entering No.1 hold did not set off the gasoline; it was removed in pieces after arrival at Philipeville.

Our next encounter took place on the return, westerly course, on 19 January 1943; planes approached low over the water from North and seaside. All batteries ordered to open fire and barrage diverted the planes from their course. The next wave of attacking planes came in on the port bow. 3"/50 and 20MM barrage hit one plane and dispersed the others who retreated flying to northward. The last attack came from high level bombers, but no hits on the ships were scored.

At 1305 escort hoisted his black pennant and began dropping depth charges on our starboard side abaft the beam. At about 1320 an enemy sub surfaced and was fired on and sank immediately by escort. Escort put over life raft and the convoy steamed on, proceeding west.

Another attack was encountered on January 20th. And a second attack about six hours out of Algiers on that same date. At 2045, and again with no warning and very little support from our sea escort, the attack was launched against the convoy. This action lasted for one hour and five minutes and was our last encounter before anchoring at Gibraltar.

Every man in the crew, including signalman H.F. Wilson, stayed by his station throughout the night, each night of the attacks. All were calm, determined and relentless in their persecution of the enemy. Even after a bomb had entered No.1 hold (containing 100 octane gas) and none knew when an explosion might mean the ship's destruction, all hands remained at the gun stations throughout the night. Every man asked only the chance to further protect his ship and help her make port and deliver the cargo.

Further commendation is due to the merchant personnel assisting in servicing the guns. Nothing but the highest praise can be offered for them too. Like gunners, they too, exhibited a calm determination to eradicate any and all enemy within sight, no matter what cost. The Master,

C.D. Simmons, and Chief Mate G.I. Holm, did their utmost in navigating safely and presenting the best fighting point of vantage for the ship. Too, Chief mate G.I. Holm did more than anyone to prevent panic. With no thought of himself he jollied and kidded his men and by doing so preserved order and discipline so necessary in such times of crisis."The office of the chief of naval operations also made a report which stated that the SS William Wirt was damaged as the result of a series of air attacks. She had sailed from Liverpool in a convoy which consisted of 13 merchant ships and 5 escort vessels. Although damaged, the ship made port safely and returned to the USA where it underwent repairs.

Before that Capt. C.D. Simmons when in command of the SS Laranga from Boston to Murmansk Russia was attacked and the ship went into Reykjavik Iceland for repairs. Captain Simmons had a severely injured foot and was hospitalized in Iceland for three months, and his ship after repairs and proceeding to Russia, returned and picked him up. For the Algiers mission Capt. Simmons was awarded the Medal for Meritorious Service. He later commanded another Liberty ship until sometime in the spring of 1944 when he became captain of the Point Loma, a seagoing tugboat. He served on the "Point Loma" in the War of the Pacific until his death in January 1945. Here is the log report on his death at sea, a fate suffered by so many Sabans in former times.

January 15th, 1945, Monday; Purser was called to Captains cabin. He was complaining of dizziness. At once he passed out. Artificial respiration was begun. Signalman called for Doctor who was brought alongside by Navy tug. At about 1525 doctor pronounced captain dead of heart attack which occurred at 1350.

January 16th, Tuesday 1815: Gun crew formed guard of Honor for sea burial. 1st Mate Kelly read short services. He [the Captain] slipped from under flag and was confined to the sea at 1830. And so Captain Cameron Dudley Simmons found a watery grave in that vast Pacific Ocean. He and Capt. Holm are some of the many men of former times who did Saba proud and we are pleased to honor their memory.