

Heroes

Don't speak to me of heroes until you've heard the tale
of Britain's merchant seamen who sailed through storm and gale
to keep the lifelines open in our nation's hour of need,
when a tyrant cast a shadow across our island breed.
Captains, greasers, cabin boys, mates and engineers
heard the call to duty and cast aside their fears.

They stoked those hungry boilers and stood behind the wheel
whilst cooks and stewards manned the guns on coffins made of steel.

They moved in icy convoys from Scapa to Murmansk
and crossed the western ocean, never seeking thanks.

They sailed the South Atlantic where raiders lay in wait
and kept the food lines open from Malta to the Cape.

Tracked by silent U-boats which hunted from below,
shelled by mighty cannons and fighters flying low,
they clung to burning lifeboats where the sea had turned to flame
and watched their shipmates disappear to everlasting fame.

I speak not of a handful but thirty thousand plus,
some whose names we'll never know, in whom we placed our trust.

They never knew the honour of medals on their chests
or marching bands and victory or glory and the rest.

The ocean is their resting place, their tombstone is the wind,
the seabirds' cry their last goodbye to family and friend.

Freighters, troopships, liners, and tankers by the score,
fishing boats and coasters, two thousand ships and more
flew that proud Red Duster as they sank beneath the waves
and took those countless heroes to lonely ocean graves.

Their legacy is freedom to those who hold it dear,
to walk with clear horizons and never hide in fear.

So when you speak of heroes, remember those at sea,
From Britain's Merchant Navy, who died to keep us free.

David Partridge, October 2002.