

Zamalek - A Rescue Ship in World War 2

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[Murdo Morrison](#)

My novel [Roses of Winter](#), set in World War 2 Glasgow, Scotland and various theaters of the war, includes several chapters that describe the adventures of a convoy rescue ship, the *Izmir*. The *Izmir* was based on a real ship, the *Zamalek*. Rescue ships and the invaluable service of the merchant navy in the war have not received the attention they deserve. One goal of *Roses of Winter* was to address that omission. Although fiction and intended to be an engaging story, *Roses of Winter* is based on extensive research. I would like to share some of that background information in this blog post.

The convoy rescue ships were born of the bitter experience gained in the early months of the war. The convoy escorts, few in number compared with the need and strained to the limit, had little time or opportunity to stop for survivors as they tried to locate and destroy attacking U-boats. When they did pick up survivors they were ill-equipped to treat the often horribly injured and exhausted men. The answer was the conversion of a number of vessels for use as rescue ships.



Zamalek (known previously as *Halcyon*) was built by the Ailsa Shipbuilding Co. in 1921 in Troon, Scotland. In the years before World War 2 she served in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, carrying cargo, mail and passengers.

Requisitioned in March, 1940, *Zamalek* underwent conversion for service as a rescue ship at Barclay Curle shipyard in Govan, Glasgow and was allocated to the rescue service in October, 1940. At 1566 tons, with a low freeboard and single screw, *Zamalek* was typical of many small merchant ships that underwent conversion. As part of the Fleet Auxiliary she flew under the blue ensign. I have a personal connection with this ship in that



my father, Donald Morrison served as Third Engineer on *Zamalek* from 1942 until 1944.

In the course of the war, *Zamalek* served on Atlantic convoys, Arctic convoys, and off the West coast of Africa. She is probably best known for her service on Arctic convoys, most notably on convoy PQ 17. Only 11 of the ships in Convoy PQ 17 made it to port. Three rescue ships (*Zamalek*, *Rathlin*, and *Zaafaran*) accompanied the convoy. *Zamalek* and *Rathlin* survived, *Zaafaran* was lost.

Zamalek, like other rescue ships, had medical facilities on board, including an operating theater and sick bay. Well armed for her size, a rescue ship such as the *Zamalek* did not have the status of a hospital ship and would have played an important role in the defense of convoys in addition to picking up survivors.



Included in this post are images from the wartime operation of the rescue ship *Zamalek* and of Captain Morris. Such photographs are rare. My thanks to George Graydon, an officer on the *Zamalek*, Bob Trundle, who also served on the ship, and Isabella Morris Palumbo, who gave permission for their use.

Finally, a word about the Captain of *Zamalek*, Captain Owen Charles Morris. Born in Pwllheli Wales in 1905, Captain Morris served as Master of *Zamalek* for over four wartime years while the ship picked up the most survivors of any Allied rescue ship in World War II. For his service, Captain Morris was awarded a very deserved Distinguished



Service Order (DSO). George Graydon, who served under Captain Morris, told me that he was very highly regarded by the ship's crew.

There is now a [Zamalek Crew and Survivors](#) Facebook Page for crew members of *Zamalek* and their families to share their memories and photos.

In January of 2015 I spoke with George Graydon who served on a number of ships during WW2 including *Zamalek*. In the interview George speaks candidly about his wartime experience, the hardships of the sea, and the frequent lack of appreciation for the contribution made by the Allied merchant seamen.

[Listen to the interview.](#)

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My thanks to Isabella Morris Palumbo, Bob Trundle, and George Graydon for providing images for this blog post.

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