

# The Gold Watch

(Fire aboard the tanker SS Esturia, October 5, 1925)

Following the death of Dorothy *Knight* Arnold, (the second wife of Charles Le Neve Arnold [1855-1955]) in 1987, a J.W. Benson gold watch passed into the hands of her daughter-in-law Yvonne (husband of Peter Kenneth Le Neve Arnold [1928-1981]). It was inscribed:

**Presented to  
Ch. Engr. J. N. Arnold  
S/S "Esturia"  
by the  
British Burmah Pet. Co.  
for courageous action  
in extinguishing fire  
5<sup>th</sup> October 1925**

and came in its original case along with 2 other items:

- A folded single-column NZ Herald article dated 21<sup>st</sup> April 1942 (see Appendix I)
- A green, white and red ribbon (See Appendix II)

The medal referred to in the article was the *Lloyd's Medal for Meritorious Service*. It and the certificate are lost, but lists of recipients exist, for example [here](#).

The chance discovery in June 2021 of a [book review](#) in the Maitland Daily Mercury 21<sup>st</sup> September 1938 directed us to a description of the incident. See Appendix III.

## The mystery of the ribbon

Chief Engineer John Noel Le Neve Arnold (1888-1958) was the youngest of Charles' three sons to his first wife [Jessie](#) Spencer *Smith* Arnold (1860-1920). He married Lucy Jamieson Robinson, *née Austin* (1894-1984) in 1936. Lucy was the mother of [Peter Bettley Robinson \(D.F.C.\)](#) (1920-1942).

John was the recipient of two WWI service medals which but for the remarkable intervention of Julie and Ken Eccles, we might never have known of.

After the return of the medals to the Arnolds (courtesy of the Eccles'), I realised that the ribbon in the watch case had probably once accompanied the long-lost *Mercantile Marine War Medal*.

[ The ribbon is green on the left side, red on the right side with a thin central white stripe symbolising port and starboard steaming lights! ]

As explained in Appendix III, the WWI medals and ribbon actually **do** have a relationship to the SS *Esturia* and the fire of 1925.

We may never know why the ribbon was stowed in the watch case, nor how the medals parted ways with John Arnold's family in the first place.

And we may never understand the inconsistency regarding the torpedoed ship referred to in the 1942 article (and possibly misreported, as if this and the 1925 fire aboard the SS *Esturia* were one and not two events).

But serendipity has re-united the medal and its ribbon after perhaps a hundred years. (Appendix II).



Figure 1: The watch, in its original case, along with the ribbon:



## Appendix I: Wasted Talent

Article: NZ Herald, 21 April 1942. (Post re-introduction of conscription.)

The respective values of a skilled man in the Army and in a civilian occupation were brought before the [Auckland Area Manpower Committee](#) last night when [A. and T. Burt, Limited](#), appealed for the release from camp of Corporal J. Arnold, who was formerly the company's supervising engineer. He has been in camp for two months.

The manager of the firm, Mr. H. G. Pinel, said the reservist was a highly skilled man, whose services could well have been used for the benefit of the country. Urgent military work was in the hands of the company and additional labour was necessary to cope with it. When the man was taken into camp the appellant firm understood that he was required for important duties; but that it had since learned he was a storeman and was handing out tools from a shed, work that could be done by practically anyone. This meant that his high accomplishments were not being fully utilised. It was stated that he often had sufficient slack time while on duty to allow him to read a book.

### Brought Torpedoed Ship Home

Questioned by the committee, Corporal Arnold said he was 15 years with the appellant company, and was for 22 years at sea before that. For many years he was engineer-commodore for the fleet of the Shell Company. During the last war he was torpedoed and brought his ship back to port. For that he received Lloyd's medal and certificate, a reward and a gold watch.

"The man is at least qualified for the work he is doing in the army," commented Mr. A. G. Menzies, a member of the committee.

Representing the Army, Major E. H. Rhodes said that the man would fill an important role in his unit. At present his work was not particularly important, but his technical knowledge would be of great value when equipment came to hand.

### Conservation of Manpower

The chairman of the committee, Mr. I. J. Goldstine, expressed concern that the army should have withdrawn the man from important work a considerable time before his services were required in a military capacity. It would have been wiser to leave him in his civilian work until the Army equipment required his attention, and so have allowed full use to be made of his services. That was the true test of conservation of manpower.

The committee ordered the man's release from camp, the chairman stating that the duties for which the firm required him in a civilian capacity were of more immediate importance to the war effort than those on which he was engaged in the Army.

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## WASTED TALENT

### ENGINEER IN FORCES

#### WORK AS A STOREMAN

#### ORDER MADE FOR RELEASE

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## Appendix II: WWI Service Medals

(Awarded to John Noel Le Neve Arnold)

These are the **Mercantile Marine War Medal** and the **British War Medal**.

All recipients of the former automatically received the latter also.

These medals were returned to the Arnold family in 2018 after being found in a tin of family heirlooms by Julie and Ken Eccles, in Nelson, NZ!

### Mercantile Marine War Medal



### British War Medal





Edges



Reunited Medal and Ribbon



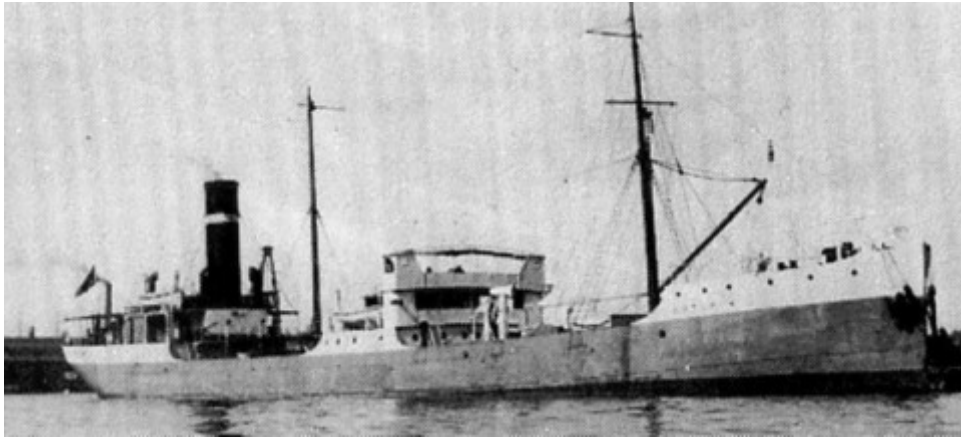
Medal Card (Downloaded from [here](#))

Surname..... ARNOLD .....  
 Christian names..... JOHN NOEL .....  
 Place of birth..... Auckland N.Z. ..... Year of birth..... 1888 .....  
 Mercantile Marine Ribbon issued..... 23521 ..... to M.M.O..... Hull .....  
 British Medal Ribbon issued..... 23521 ..... to M.M.O..... "S.S. Aetonia" .....  
 Mercantile Marine Medal issued..... 23521 ..... to M.M.O..... George Cannon Esq. 11, St. Helens Street .....  
 British Medal issued..... 23521 ..... to M.M.O..... George Cannon Esq. 11, St. Helens Street .....  
 Clasps issued..... 1919 .....  
 Certif. } 12<sup>th</sup> Cl. Eng. 652 N.S.W.  
 or } 1040490  
 Dis. A. )

## Appendix III: S/S Esturia (1910)

(And the fire of October 5, 1925)

The following photo and other information was obtained from [Tyne Built Ships](#):



The 2,143 ton tanker was built in 1910 for [Burmah Oil](#) and the 1925 inscription on the watch confirms its association with the company until at least then.

This [Helderline link](#) also notes a relationship with Shell Oil and [Anglo-Saxon Petroleum](#).

It began service in the merchant navy on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1914 when it was [chartered](#) for wartime service by the *Royal Australian Navy* as an *oiler and stores ship*.

Not only do we know from the returned medals that John Arnold served in the merchant navy during the Great War, but thanks to the superb research of Julie and Ken Eccles we were able to obtain a replica of his original **Medal Card** (see Appendix II) which cites:

SS Asturia [sic]  
Anglo Saxon Pet. Coy Ltd  
... (unintelligible)

This strongly suggests that John Arnold was aboard during the conflict. Demobilisation is confirmed by a 26th September 1919 NZ Herald gossip [column](#) (London, 10<sup>th</sup> August):

**Mr. John N. Arnold, who was serving as chief engineer of the oil steamer *Esturia*, in the Eastern Mediterranean, left that vessel at the end of June and returned to England by way of France. He leaves for Auckland within a few weeks.**

We can only speculate on just how many *other* war time crew were still serving aboard her in 1925, at the time of the fire, and whether or not any were New Zealanders.

Some short time after the fire, John put 22 years at sea behind him and joined A&T Burt back home in New Zealand.

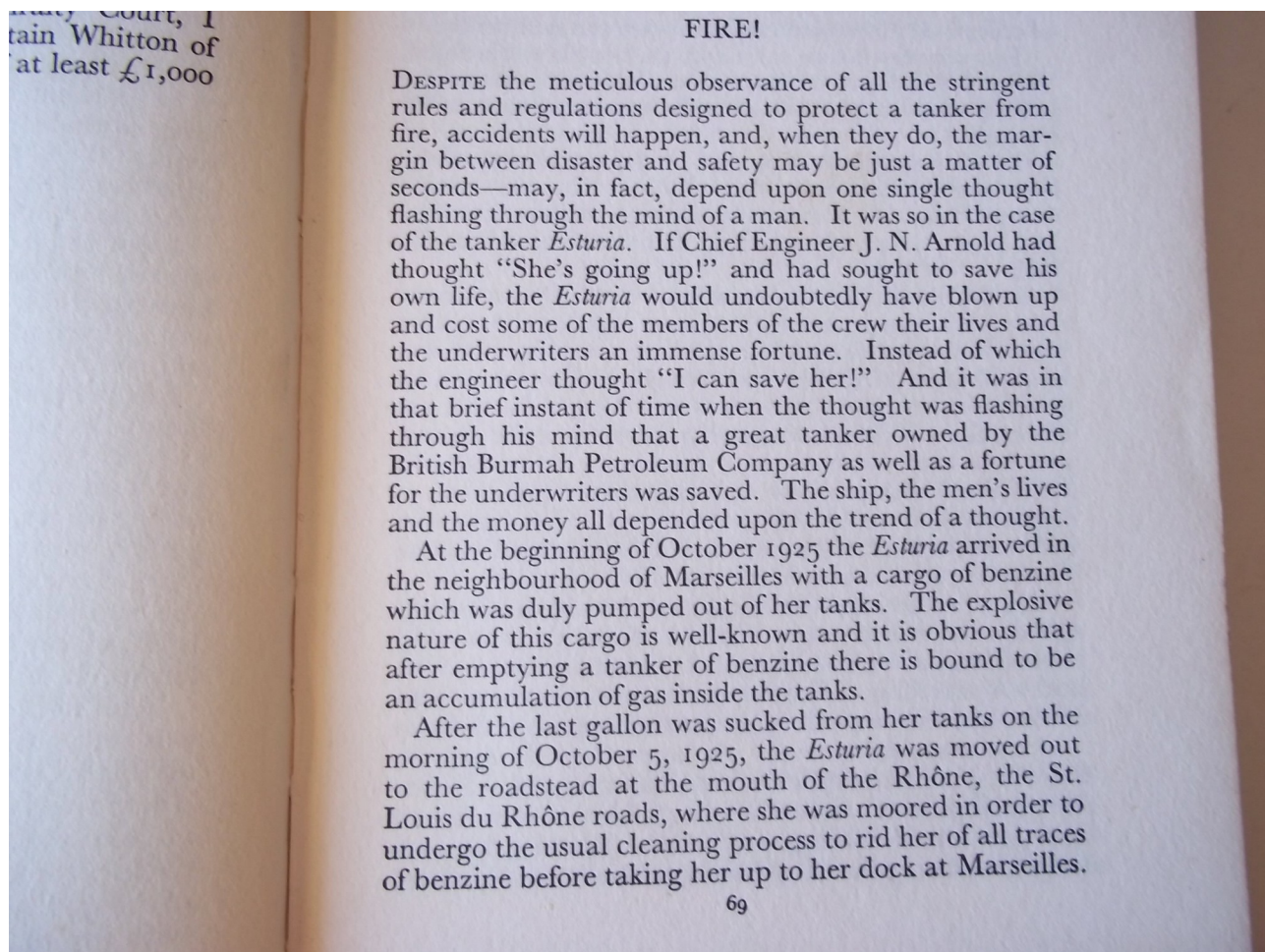
The *Esturia* was renamed *Loukia* in 1928 and perished with all but one of its 23-man crew when it struck a mine in 1937, off Cape San Sebastian, Catalonia, Spain, during the Spanish Civil War.

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## Fire and heroism.

Excerpts from **Divers in Deep Seas. More Romances of Salvage** by David Masters (1938):



This clean-up is accomplished by turning steam into the tanks for an hour or two, after which the tanks are washed out with a hose and every trace of the spirit is scoured away.

About 8.30 that night the steam was turned into No. 4 tank on the starboard side of the ship, and after allowing it to play inside the tank for about three hours a couple of officers and four men began to wash the tank down.

Ten minutes before midnight an electric cable fused. There was a burst of flame into the face of one of the sailors, who staggered back with hands and face badly burned.

On the instant those engaged on the work dropped the hose and fled for their lives. Inflammable gas was all around them and their experience taught them that they had little chance of surviving, if they remained on the spot.

As the flame burst out and the men rushed for the safety of the poop, the chief engineer happened to glance toward the spot where they had been working. He was in a safe place, and if he had thought of his own risk he would have remained where he was. Instead, he thought of the ship. He had been serving for years in the *Esturia*, and none knew better than he the danger at that instant. He realised that in a few moments there might be an explosion that would blot them all out. The men who fled were justified in their action. Death seemed so close that their rush to save themselves was instinctive.

Instead of fleeing, Chief Engineer Arnold deliberately ran into the danger zone. On the other side of the ship men started to work at top speed to launch a boat. The heat was scorching. The flames were zooming up as high as the mast. It seemed hopeless to attempt to quell them.

Not to Arnold, however. As he reached the spot, he came on the hose which the men had dropped. It was still gushing water, and swiftly he grabbed it and turned the water on the blazing woodwork. Ignoring his own danger, enduring the heat, he played methodically along

the woodwork, quelling the fire that threatened to overwhelm them, selecting with an expert eye the spots where the flames were fiercest and directing the water on them until the flames had given way to clouds of steam.

Neither the heat nor the danger could force him to retreat. Under the flood the flames in the tank soon died away, whereupon he turned the hose upon a sail and other burning objects until the fire was dead.

Thus he saved the ship.

Captain Jones decided to move immediately to Marseilles in order to place the injured sailor in the hands of a doctor. Dressing his burns with carron oil, they swathed them in cotton wool to keep the air away from them, changed the poor fellow's clothing and put him to bed, where he remained until they were able to take him ashore early next morning.

"You've had a narrow escape," remarked Lloyd's surveyor to the master, as he examined the burned wood and scorched paint.

Captain Jones, who had commanded the tanker for eleven years, knew it. He recognized courage when he saw it, and was not afraid to say so, for he expressed his appreciation of the chief engineer's action in the most glowing terms.

"Having been a number of years in the benzine carrying trade, he was, of course, absolutely cognisant of the extreme probability of a destructive explosion which would blow himself to atoms, and this is where his bravery is evident," wrote Captain Jones in his report. "Had he not acted so promptly, the amidships accommodation would have been burned out, and subsequently the whole vessel may have ended with a terrific explosion, as we had only a few hours previously discharged a cargo of benzine."

The Committee of Lloyd's were prompt to pay tribute to the action of John Noel Arnold, and by November 25th, a bare month after Captain Jones sent off his report from Constanta in the Black Sea, they awarded him