



## The Zam Zam

# Mr. Miller Recounts 1941 Sinking of Egyptian Liner

**EDITOR'S NOTE**—Mr. Thomas D. Miller would never mention the Zam Zam incident unless you asked him about it. After all, it has been 40 years since he was aboard the ill-fated Egyptian Liner. He says he would never think about it anymore except for the fact that his sister calls him every year on the anniversary of the event to remind him. However, we recently persuaded Mr. Miller to share the story with us and appreciate his willingness to recount what must have been a terrifying experience. This is the fourth in the series of articles concerning personal happenings in the lives of tobacco people who travel abroad.

By Ann Feetham

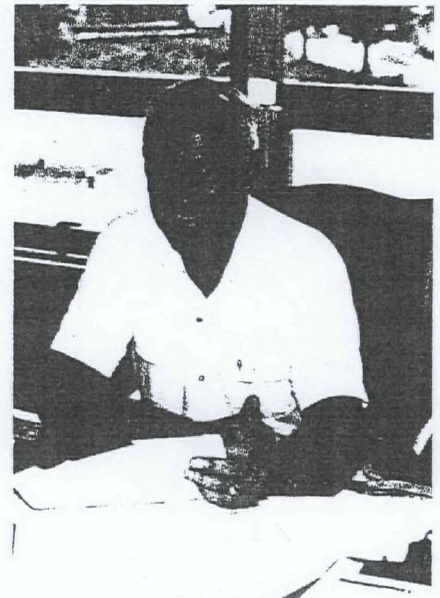
It was April 17, 1941. Dawn was just breaking over the South Atlantic Ocean between Brazil and South Africa. Mr. Thomas D. (Tommie) Miller, then a young Wilson tobaccoist en route to Rhodesia on business, was in

his bunk fast asleep aboard the Zam Zam, an Egyptian Liner on a trip from New York to Cape Town, South Africa.

For four weeks the trip had proved uneventful, according to Mr. Miller. There was occasional bad weather but nothing of a serious nature. Then, when the ship was about 500 miles south of the island of St. Helena between South America and Africa, the blow struck.

"I was awakened suddenly by something striking against the ship. First I thought it was one of the lifeboats that had broken loose from the ship and was swinging against the vessel," he recalls. "I heard a whining noise, followed by another bump. Then it dawned on me that we were being attacked," he added.

"I put on my clothes and hurried up on deck and in the early morning light I could see a ship that looked like a freighter. There was a flash and the whine of a shell followed by the bursting of shrapnel as the missile hit our ship," he continued.



Mr. Miller Today

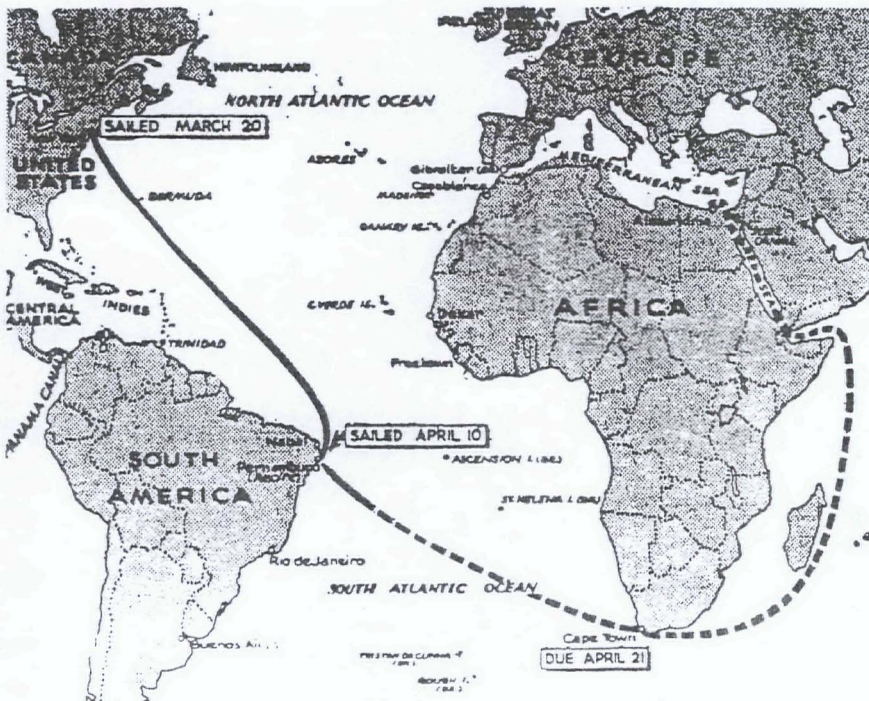
The attacker was a German raider vessel called the Tamesis which was seeking ships carrying supplies of any nature to Great Britain.

Mr. Miller was among the more than 300 passengers aboard the ship and one of six Wilson tobaccoists. The other tobaccoists were Ned Laughinghouse, Harry Cathorne and James Smith, Miller tobacco buyers (Mr. Miller also was a tobacco buyer at that time); Paul Burton, an auctioneer; and W. A. (Tinkie) Johnson, a ticket marker. It is interesting to note that the buyers were en route to Southern Rhodesia to purchase tobacco for Mashonaland Tobacco Co. which at that time was owned by Andrew Chalmers Tobacco Co.

The Zam Zam had on board when the shelling began a cargo of fertilizer, trucks, automobiles, ambulances, various types of machinery, and a group of British-American ambulance drivers and their assistants en route to serve with the British and the "free-French" forces in Egypt.

The ship was a bulky passenger liner whose final destination was to be Alexandria, Egypt. It did not reach port with its crew and passengers.

The Zam Zam was said to have been marked plainly with the flags of non-belligerent Egypt. And since the entry of Italy into the war, the Zam Zam had been one of the principal links between the Middle East, South America and New York. She had carried home hundreds of Americans before her sinking and was playing an important part in transporting passengers and supplies.



Route Taken By Zam Zam

Written by  
Ann Feetham  
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\* Before the sinking, Germany had notified America that if the U.S. sent supplies to aid England, the vessels would be sunk. And according to some old news clippings, the captain of the German raider began shelling the Zam Zam only when he could not reach the unfamiliar ship by radio.

The ship had been sailing through the South Atlantic waters under black-out conditions and radio silence, and the German captain reportedly thought the Zam Zam to be a troop ship and began shelling.

One man supposedly tried to signal the German raider that the ship was Egyptian but his signal instrument was shattered in his hands by an exploding shell. Another man reached for a flashlight and flashed out the signal to the raider that the ship was

Egyptian and the shelling was then stopped.

All-in-all more than 50 shells were fired at the Zam Zam with nine striking the liner, causing her to list badly, Mr. Miller said. He recalls some of the passengers jumped into the water; others made it to lifeboats; and some remained on ship until the enemy raider drew near. Many of the women and children were badly frightened and hesitant about getting into the lifeboats. So Mr. Miller, carrying a small child in his arms, made his way down the side of the ship and into one of the lifeboats. As he began to move, others became less fearful and followed.

Only two of the passengers were seriously injured. One was Ned Laughinghouse of Wilson who eventually died of his wounds. Mr. Miller

said Laughinghouse was standing in a cabin when the shelling began. He was struck in the skull by a shell fragment and underwent emergency surgery on board the German ship.

After all the passengers were taken off the Zam Zam, three mines were placed on board and exploded. The Zam Zam WAS SUNK.

After a night on the Tamesis the passengers were transferred to the prison ship Dresden and spent 34 days on board before landing in St. Jean de Luz in occupied France.

Several weeks before the Zam Zam was taken another Wilsonian had traveled the same waters. V. E. (Dick) Brooks who years later became president of Imperial Tobacco Company's American Leaf Organization, was scheduled to sail on the Zam Zam but his plans changed and he took an earlier ship instead. His destination also was Southern Rhodesia and he arrived there safely. However, because of the war he couldn't get back home and spent five and one half years there.

"It was too far to swim," Brooks said jokingly when asked why he stayed in Rhodesia so long.

Mr. Miller likes to joke with Brooks about the incident. He tells everyone that Brooks spent the war years playing tennis and "living it up."

Brooks recalls that he didn't even know about the sinking of the Zam Zam until months later when an old newspaper someone had mailed him from home finally arrived.

When word of the event began filtering to the States and to other nations there was much anxiety among the families of those on board. Friends and relatives of the Wilson passengers were terrified that their loved ones were dead. But three days after the sinking, Germany announced the Zam Zam had been sunk but all the passengers were alive. Authorized sources at the time simply said that all aboard the ill-fated Zam Zam were safe and well cared for.

On May 21, 1941 the State Department was informed that the German Naval authorities would permit American survivors to leave France where they had been taken. The report came through Vichy, France, from Henry S. Walderman, American Consulate at Bordeaux, France before he left for St. Jean de Luz where the Americans were being detained.

The report said the "German Naval authorities have no objection to American survivors leaving France via Spain or Portugal."

*Continued on page 20*



*CARRYING A SMALL CHILD, Mr. Miller is shown climbing down the side of the Zam Zam into a lifeboat after the Egyptian Liner was shelled. This dramatic photo was taken by a Life Magazine photographer who was aboard the ship at the time. It later was published in Life Magazine.*

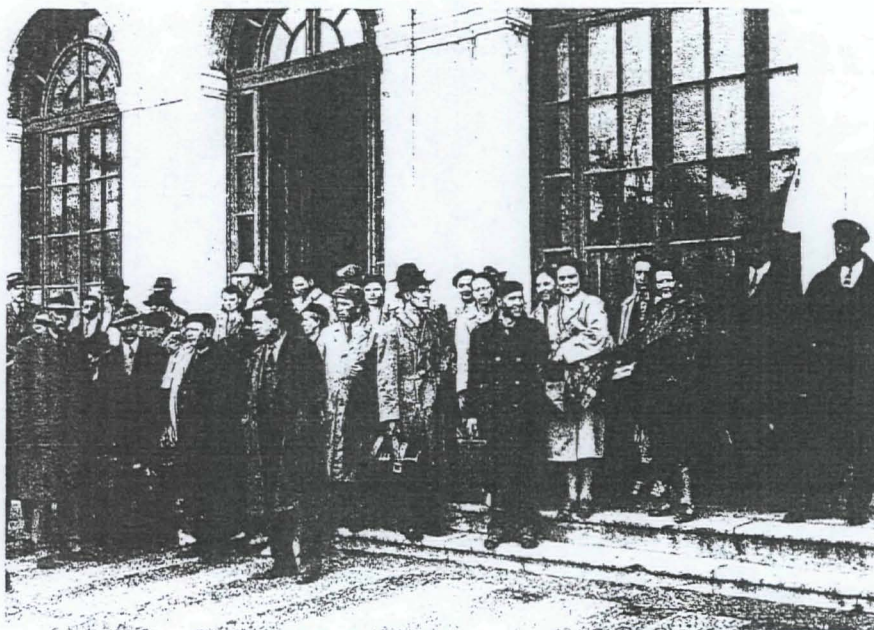


## The Zam Zam Continued

On June 24, a festive homecoming awaited the Wilson men. Mr. Miller said hundreds turned out to meet the train bringing them to the city. There were welcoming banners, lots of flag waving, tears of happiness, hugging and kissing. The men were later feted at a big celebration in town.

Of course, radio and newspaper reporters were on hand to record the event. All told their personal stories, describing the ordeal in detail. It was then learned that from St. Jean de Luz the passengers were taken by bus to Biarritz, France. From there they were taken to the French-Spanish border and from there to San Sebastian and later to the Portuguese border. What a way to see the world!

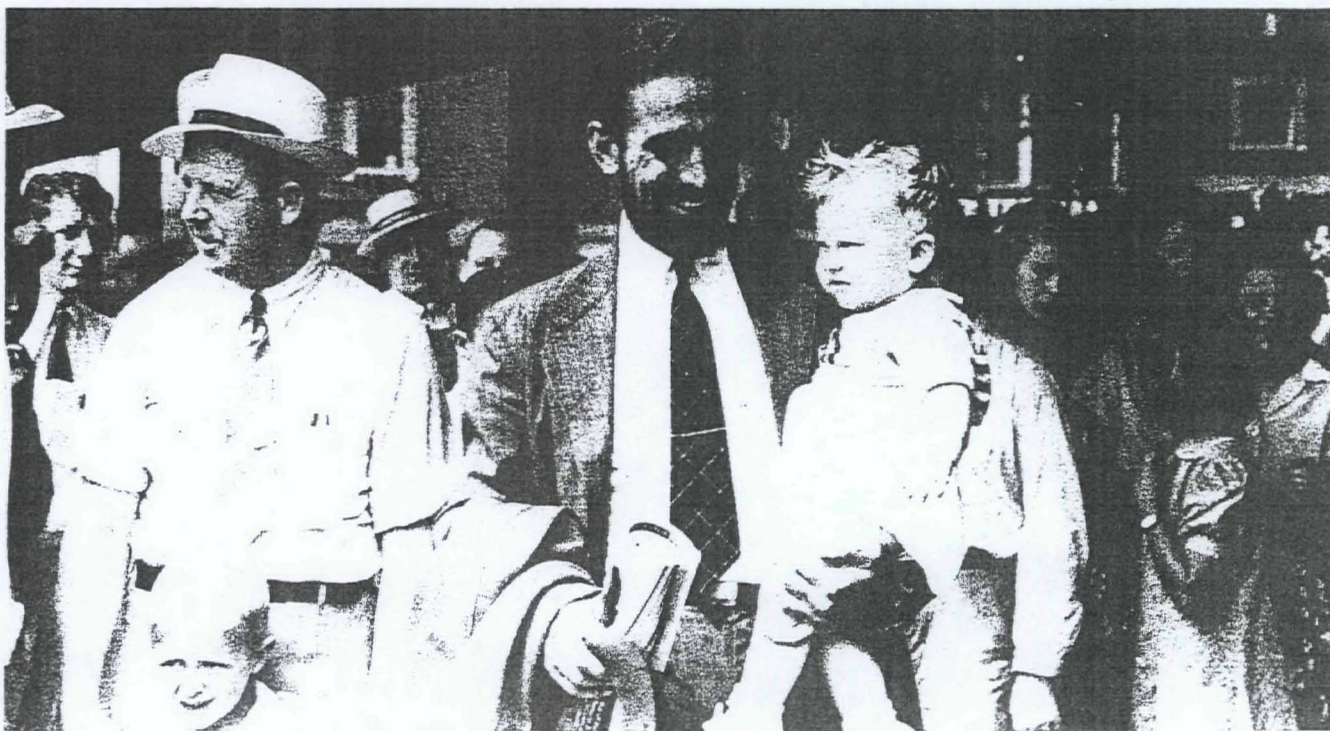
Mr. Miller's homecoming was short-lived because the next year he joined the U.S. Coast Guard and served his country until December 1945. A commissioned lieutenant, he spent much of the time serving in the Pacific Theatre.



*ZAM ZAM PASSENGERS are shown awaiting their release. Mr. Miller is pictured at far right.*

After the war Mr. Miller returned to the tobacco business and later became president of Jas. I. Miller. He presently serves as chairman of the Board.

During the last 40 years he has done a lot of traveling but thankfully has never had another experience like his voyage aboard the Zam Zam.



*A BIG WELCOME awaited the Wilson men when they returned home June 24, 1941. Hundreds gathered at the Wilson train station. Mr. Miller, a big smile on his face, is pictured on that happy day. In his arms is a small son of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Graves of Wilson. Tom retired several years ago from Imperial Tobacco Company's American Leaf Organization. At left is W. B. (Buster) Waddill who was treasurer of Miller Co. for many years. In front of him is his young son, William, who now is a doctor.*