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Naval Service 1943-1946

From Ordinary Telegraphist to Leading Telegraphist

It was just 15 days after my 18th birthday that I joined the Navy at H.M.S. Royal Arthur which was the Butlin's Holiday Camp at Skegness. Something that could not happen today was that we were allocated 3 to a chalet and each chalet had a single bed and a double bed. Two slept in the double bed with a wooden board down the middle. We thought nothing of it. We were here for six weeks initial training which was quite rigorous. I was to be trained as a Radio/Radar Mechanic and at the end of the six weeks I went to Devonport for this training. We were housed in Stoke Damerel school which had been taken over by R.N. and the course was held at a civilian college on Albert Road. Nobody would ever be able to make me into a mechanic of any sort - even today if I pick up a screwdriver everyone runs to take cover - and halfway through the course it was mutually agreed that I should retrain as a telegraphist. It was back to Skegness and then to another civilian college in Earls Court, London, and billeted in a civilian hostel. The whole situation was overseen by a naval P.O. but we lived like civilians and had the run of London with all its facilities for troops and the various excellent canteens and theatres. Every week end was free time.

At the end of the four months in Earls Court we went to another former Butlin's camp, H.M.S. Scotia at Ayr, Scotland. Here we finished our training under naval discipline. As a Pompey rating I then went to several establishments around Portsmouth including R.N.B., H.M.S. Collingwood and the signal school, H.M.S. Mercury, a barracks rather than a school at Leydene. At this time we were coming up to D-Day. When this day arrived I was in R.N.B. and two days later, left to join a troopship S.S. Orontes which took me to Naples where I transferred to a French ferry Ville d'Alger to Malta, H.M.S. St. Angelo. I was not in the main barracks but in a signals establishment in another school taken over by the Navy until a draft to H.M.S. Abercrombie, a monitor, which was in Taranto being repaired after being mined at Anzio. We took passage to Taranto on an Italian cruiser Emmanuel Filiberto, Duca d'Aosta. It was eight weeks before we went to sea, setting sail for Malta but when some miles off Malta the ship hit two mines resulting in her being towed by tug into Valetta. Back to barracks, this time to Fort Madliena until a draft in early September 1944 to Undaunted which had come out to the Mediterranean following her activities at D-Day. It was mainly anti-submarine sweeps in the Med and the Adriatic with visits to Bari, Augusta (Sicily) and, I think, Taranto before returning to Malta. Then home via Gibraltar. From Devonport we escorted KGV to Scapa and had a very unpleasant trip in northern waters with elements of the Home Fleet, Then to Glasgow from where, on 1st November 1944 we left for Trincomalee via Gibraltar, Port Said, Suez Canal, Aden (one of the most inhospitable climates I experienced and from where it was most difficult to get signals in or out due to the all surrounding mountains) and to Trinco to join the East Indies Fleet. While based here we escorted an American vessel to Bombay where we stayed for a week before returning to base. While based here we supported aircraft carriers attacking the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Then with the first elements of the British Pacific Fleet it was to Sumatra where the carrier based planes attacked the oilfields at Palembang and then on to Sydney with a brief one night stop at Fremantle on the way. As we sailed into Sydney and saw the magnificent and imposing Bridge, the local radio stations gave a running commentary to their listeners.

What follows is a reprint of the contribution I made to the paying off booklet (32 pages) printed at the time of paying off in 1973. A little earlier the ship had visited Bootle docks (Liverpool) and I had gone on board where I was greeted enthusiastically and met with excellent hospitality. At that time I was invited to write about my service aboard Undaunted.

H.M.S. Undaunted 1944-1945

She was a happy ship. On joining her in Malta in September 1944 the feeling was more like being welcomed into the home of a relative rather than that of becoming a part of a war machine. The crew were very young, many of them being of my own age, 19 at that time. Another telegraphist, Bert Hargrave from Leeds should have joined with me but he was sick and joined us a few days later. He and I had been together on several ships and our naval destinies were clearly to run together. By this time Undaunted had shaken down and we felt we had joined an efficient unit, fit to be compared with our previous ill-fated ship H.M.S. Abercrombie.

Settling down took place during several patrols, chiefly in the Adriatic, during one of which we encountered a Yugoslavian yacht in the middle watch. She had six or seven of a family trying to reach Italy and after taking them on board the Gunner(T) made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to sink the yacht with revolver fire. Eventually the Bofors were brought into action, much to the amusement of the communications ratings. The ladies of the party were domiciled in the SDO and we never really discovered whether the story told by one of the signalmen of his amorous adventures was true.

It was during this period that we visited Bari and I will not comment on the operation of going alongside. However we were soon joined by a Greek destroyer- an old Hunt Class, I think - which carried a British communications branch and Signals Officer. This latter gentleman had decided in the interests of hygiene that he would be better on the lad's mess deck rather than in the wardroom. It would appear that the Hellenic navy did not maintain the same standards as our own.

After visiting Taranto and Gibraltar we returned to Plymouth and then followed what was for me the worst fortnight of my naval career, due to the appalling weather we encountered. After joining company with H.M.S. Nubian we escorted King George V to Scapa and then together with what must have been a large contingent of the Home Fleet went on patrol in northern waters. Most of us were sea sick and for some days it was common practice to sit on watch with a bucket between our knees. After a few days leave from Glasgow we went from the ridiculous to the sublime by sailing on 1st November 1944 from Glasgow to Trincomalee. The sun shone brilliantly and the scenery during the voyage down the coast was magnificent. The voyage was uneventful, as was our stay at Trincomalee. We enjoyed the swimming here but on one occasion several of my colleagues took this pleasure rather far when, having missed the last liberty boat back to the ship, they decided the only thing to do was to swim back. This certainly had a sobering effect and I think the Officer of the Watch must have been feeling benevolent at the time.

It was while we were based at Trinco that we took an American troop transport, the General Grant I seem to recall, to Bombay where we suffered one of our more tragic experiences. The Chief T.G.M. was seriously injured when a detonator he was holding exploded. He was taken to hospital and did not rejoin the ship.

During January 1945, together with several battleships and carriers, we sailed for Sydney to become the nucleus of the British Pacific Fleet, and famous names come to mind like KGV, Duke of York, Illustrious, Indefatigable, in addition to several destroyer flotillas. There were a number of interesting activities during this voyage, including attacks by the carrier based aircraft on targets in the Nicobar Islands and at Palembang in Sumatra. Fuelling and re-storing ship took place at sea from ships of the Fleet Train, the first time this had been done on such a scale. There were one or two slight mishaps such as when the oil pipe broke, covering a number of the ship's company in the Filthy stuff.

We finally reached Sydney on a Saturday morning, 1st February I think and passed through the Heads and under the famous bridge, all to a running commentary from the local radio station. The welcome we received from the people

of Sydney was overwhelming and certainly a never to be forgotten experience. Now began a new era in the history of Undaunted and her crew.

After the experience of the black-out for years at home and at sea, it was refreshing to find streets and houses illuminated, And if the pubs closed at 6pm, there was always the inevitable "home brew" at the "Up homers". We all met relatives we had only ever heard of, met new girl friends and for two weeks we felt as if the war was over. To some, returning to sea was a relief from the sleepless nights spent ashore. Mention must be made of one unorthodox addition to the telegraphists' routine. As we were likely to be operating with units of the American navy who used automatic high speed morse, it was decided that telegraphists must be taught to type to enable us to take down high speed signals. We were duly enrolled at a commercial college which we attended each morning during our first spell in Australia. This was a pleasant change from our normal activities, especially as it brought us in contact with people from outside service life, especially the young and attractive instructresses.

From this point on to the end of the war we put in a vast amount of sea time in the Pacific with operations at Sakishima and in support of the landings and battles at Okinawa. After each spell of about two months we would have ten to fourteen days back in Sydney. Whilst away from Sydney we visited a number of anchorages including Manus, Ulithi and Leyte which in normal times would probably be the most interesting. I seem to recall that we were given the opportunity to go ashore at Leyte but only if we were prepared to carry rifles. To my eternal regret I opted to stay on board and do my dhobying. Leyte is one of the places I would dearly like to revisit.

The long spells at sea were relieved by the introduction of a number of inter-mess competitions and I well remember the interest and enthusiasm that was aroused by the "Uckers" competition final. It was incredible that despite the boredom personal relationships remained of the best. The arguments that did arise were usually about the relative merits of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, of Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller and of Liverpool and Manchester.

When the Pacific war finished we were on our way to Auckland, New Zealand for a refit, where we spent a most enjoyable and interesting six weeks including, in my case, two weeks leave spent in a small town called Te Aroha. During this time I obtained my leading rate which led to my leaving Undaunted when she returned to Sydney.

After two months in barracks near Sydney, H.M.S. Golden Hind, I joined Implacable which was so different from Undaunted in so many ways. However we visited Melbourne and whilst we were there Undaunted arrived on her way back to U.K. She sailed before we did and I well remember standing on Implacable's flight deck watching her slowly passing out of sight, and perhaps my emotions had the better of me. I was sad.

I too was soon to return home and join R.N.B. Portsmouth in the middle of the night. I slept on the deck and on awakening next morning, there, immediately above me was the hammock of Bert Hargrave, my oppo through almost all of my naval career. We stayed together from that time until we were demobilised on the same day.

There are so many memories to be recalled and the people associated with them; Bogey Knight, Daddy Marshall, Charlie Kenny, Fred Rohrer, Stewart Budge, Pots Rubens and Taff Harries. How I should love to meet again our signals officer Lieutenant Jonathon Huntingford and our captain, Lieutenant Commander C.E.R. Sharp. I wonder were they all are now.

Yes, Undaunted was the happiest of ships and will always live in my memory.

After being demobbed in September 1946 I returned home to resume my lifelong career in the gas industry in Liverpool. I retired in 1985 and started to try to find people with whom I had served. I made contact with my former Signals Officer who was also the Navigator, Sub Lt. (later Lt.) Jonathon Huntingford. He will always be remembered for teaching me a lesson in life. Coming into the wireless office during the middle watch he found me with my earphones slung around my neck and the radio's volume turned to maximum. I was

fast asleep. His reaction was to place a hand on my shoulder and awaken me with the words " Burns, one of these days someone will catch you asleep on watch." With that he left the wireless office and the matter was never mentioned again. I fully realised what could have happened to me and it was a lesson I carried with me through my days in management. After I contacted him, he put me in touch with our captain's widow. Lt. Commander C.E.R. Sharp had sadly passed away three years earlier. He was one of nature's gentlemen.

Apart from Sydney, the place I would most like to revisit is Guam where we spent less than a day having gone there to collect the fleet's mail. We anchored off shore close to the beach which was one of the most attractive I ever saw though it was littered with the detritus of war.

Of all my oppos with whom I kept in touch over all these years, three have gone in the last year and there are now only three of us left. They are Bert Hargrave, now in Poole, Dorset, and Fred Rohrer who married an Australian girl and went to live in Sydney about 1949. We remain in frequent contact.

My time in the navy was my university education and I hope I graduated in the study of life.