

HMS Phoebe
Association
Newsletter
December 2005



TS Phoebe Sea Cadets (Bournemouth)
Parade behind our memorial on Nov 13th 2005
Flanked by S/m Bob Hobbs with our Standard
and the Standard of the Association of Wrens.

Another year has almost passed; it does not seem like six months have passed since the reunion in Weymouth, and what a really successful reunion it was. The hotel, as many have told me, was great, which it should have been for a three star. Just one flaw in the entertainment on the Friday night, but everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, perhaps the free drink helped? The coach trips were full and enjoyed, fancy meeting an ex-skipper at the RNAS Museum, perhaps we should have got him for our patron? (While it is still in my mind, another Frigate Captain, whose name escapes me at the moment, is now the 1st Sea Lord).

The Lottery funding came in very handy, it took a lot of working out to spend it all, but as usual our treasurer had it all in hand. I think everyone was covered for cost of their accommodation, and the money you had saved for it most of you have left in the association fund, ready for next year. It is there for whenever you ask for it, if you want to use some of it for your deposit for the hotel next year, get in touch with the treasurer. I am sure she will accommodate you.

Lil and I went to the Trafalgar 200 Drumhead ceremony at Southsea, and met up with some of the Bournemouth sea cadet staff, it was a very enjoyable occasion, so many Standards on parade. In a huge marquee was a Federation of Naval Associations stall, (we, the association, happen to be a member of the Federation). They had all sorts of naval badges for sale from lapel to blazer badges, embroidered and gold wire. I saw they had some small gold wire Phoebe badges for berets and jumpers, I bought a couple of beret ones for our Standard bearer and myself, they were surprisingly very cheap.

If anyone would like one, contact Robbie Robson on one of the addresses given in the newsletter. You can order either the Cruiser or the Frigate type. I think the cost was £2.50 incl.

Our next visit was to the TS Phoebe for their Naval Inspection for which they get points from the inspecting officer, and the Trafalgar Night Dinner. The inspection went off quite well, it was pleasing to see more parents there this time, and our contingent of 17 Association members was very pleasing to see. The following members attended:- S/m Stuart & Yvonne Bundy, S/m Ian & Jeanette Gough, S/m Pat Willoughby and Frances, S/m Maurice Browne, S/m Taffy & Lillian Beckerton, Harold & Shirley Taylor, S/m Reg & Sylvia Cook, S/m Laurie & Mary Bagness, Lil & my self. Unfortunately S/m Laurie & Mary got held up and did not make it to the inspection. At the Dinner shipmates looked resplendent decked out in their blazers and ties. Our Ladies even more so in their evening dresses etc. The dinner was one of the best we have attended, well done the organisers. Lil and I came up from Lands End for this event, our most grateful thanks to our Chaplain, Ray Merrick, for inviting us to stay at his house for the weekend, and again for our stay there the night before

Remembrance Sunday.

I made a huge mistake this year. As you know we were in Cornwall for six weeks looking after a cottage and two dogs, my intention was to write and invite the Mayor to attend and lay wreath at our memorial stone, It went completely out of my head until Hazel, the Mayors secretary, phoned me. It was too late then to do any-thing about inviting the Mayor, but not too late to include our Standard in the Town Armistice Parade and for laying a wreath at Bournemouth's War Memorial, my thanks to S/m Stuart Bundy for carrying out this ceremony, and to S/m Bob Hobbs for parading the Standard. The day started out nice and sunny and a little bit cold, but later on the clouds came up and it got extremely cold. I had asked the Deputy Mayor, Mrs Emily Morrel-Cross, to lay the association wreath, but she arrived with a wreath on behalf of the Mayor. Many thanks to S/m Dennis Alger who stepped in to lay our wreath. Our thanks to Pat Hobbs, Yvonne Bundy, Mrs Alger, (Sorry dear, I have forgotten your name), the Association of Wrens for parading their Standard, the Sea Cadets and the Bournemouth Branch members of the Royal Naval Association, and our Chaplain Ray for officiating. Last, but by no means least, Bob Hobbs daughter, Emma for her finger work on the CD Player at the right time to play a recording of Last Post and Reveille by the Royal Marines. There were other people paying their respects as well, some passers by stopped too. Lil and I went back to the TS Phoebe HQ for a hot cuppa then left for home in a car that had no heater. (It burst on our way down to Cornwall, new one being fitted this week)....

There will be a new members list in the February newsletter, I hope there will not be any mistakes this time, (but I'm not making any promises), so if there is a mistake in your listing, let me know. We missed Taffy & Lillian Beckerton at the Remembrance event, Lillian does the driving and she had hurt her leg, hope it is better now, dear. S/m Ernie Clewes was made up to CPO on the cadets Inspection night, Congratulations Ernie.

S/m Ron Franklin is in his local Orthopaedic hospital. Ron had a knee replacement, and then collapsed when he returned home, he was taken back into hospital and after various tests he was found to have two collapsed vertebrae. Good luck Ron, perhaps Beryl could keep me informed.

I phoned Josie White today to see how S/m George is progressing, I was surprised to find George was out in town visiting and shopping on his own, so it looks like he is well on the way to recovery. He has a little bit of gout trouble now and again. Perhaps we will see George and the family at our next reunion? Talking of which, there has been a good response so far of members attending at Scar-borough. One bit of news I think I forgot to mention, all the rooms have been refurbished now. One coach trip is definite, that is to York on Saturday, it takes about an hour to get there, so you will have about 5 hours to see the sights. I expect the AGM will be at the usual time, about 4.45pm on

Saturday. The Sunday coach trip is at the moment more like a mystery trip, probably round Heartbeat country with a stop somewhere for refreshments. At the moment, and subject to a committee meeting, (Friday evening please), we are looking at £2 pp for each trip, sorry about this but it is due to the increase in coach hire. If you wish to go on the trips could you phone me before the February newsletter is published. I need to know by then for hiring the coaches, if you have already told me can I ask you to do so again.

We still have 3 Large and 1 Medium Fleece jackets that were ordered last June, if you ordered one please let me know so we can send it to you. Any left over will be on sale at the reunion.

Sometime ago S/m Derek West went to a Military show near Maidstone, on a stall was a Royal Navy Ensign for sale, Derek made enquiries and found it to be from the Frigate, and was flown for the last time when, the ship decommissioned. The Bunting Tosser aboard when the ensign was hauled down decided to purloin it. Along with the ensign was a large photo of the frigate and a Phoebe cap tally. The sale price was too high but Derek in his wisdom, made further enquiries and got the name and phone number of the owner. Later on he passed this info to S/m John Barratt who phoned the owner and negotiated a fairer price. We now own the ensign which is almost the size of a battle ensign.

Obituaries:

It is with great sadness and regret to report the passing of S/m Bill Gibson Bill died on Saturday, 19th November from lung cancer. Some of you may remember Bill as a Writer in the ships office on the 1948/51 commission. The funeral is at 2pm on 1st December at Merton Crematorium, Blackshaw Rd. A donation will be made to the Trinity Hospice which Bill attended.

Also S/m Gordon Penman passed away on 23rd November after a long illness. Gordon was a Stoker who was also aboard for the 1948/51 commission. No funeral arrangements have yet been received. I am pretty sure it will be at the Barham Crematorium, Kent. If you would be able to attend please phone me I may have the details by the time this newsletter is received.



A couple of shipmates are off on the WW11 Total Recall venue. S/m Ken Bartlett has gone to Burma for two weeks, his son will be going as his carer. And S/m Jimmy Sutcliffe is off to Sri Lanka for two weeks, unfortunately Jim is stone deaf, I don't know if he has anyone with him as a carer. We hope both their trips go well with them and do not bring back to many bad remembrances.

We have had a picture post card from S/m Ken, he says the places he

has visited so far are a lot different now, but he is enjoying the trip.

HMS Gloucester(continued)

Taken from the book "HMS Gloucester – The Untold Story"

By Ken Otter

Chapter Two: In the water

Owing to a shortage of oil fuel and ammunition, our tiny force of cruisers and destroyers had been compelled to withdraw to the South, and if our hearts were heavy at the thought of being deserted in our hour of need, we still managed to raise a cheer that lacked nothing in warmth and understanding as they steamed reluctantly away. To have remained under existing conditions would have been suicidal, we knew they would return under the cover of darkness to pick us up.

The ship had gone down within sight of land, from Gloucester's forecastle white foaming waves had be seen breaking on the rocky beaches of several small islands in the far distance. It had a heartening effect on me, being a strong swimmer, I felt convinced I could reach one of the islands before nightfall. The water was warm and calm under a cloudless blue sky, I discarded my life jacket and shirt, with my knife lanyard secured round my waist I started swimming for the nearest island. My progress was stopped by a shout from Captain Rowley. His face peeping out from under his duffle coat hood, his pipe clenched tightly between his teeth, still retaining his calm and unruffled appearance, which never failed to inspire us when we were subjected to minefields and all the other dangers of war at sea.

Taking command of Gloucester in July 1940 he had quickly earned the respect and affection of all the ships company. HMS Gloucester had but two commanding officers in her lifetime. Our first, Captain Garside, was killed by a bomb dropped on the bridge. He was laid on a stretcher on the hangar deck, his face unmarked by the explosion retained his kindly expression, reflecting the depths of his kindly nature. One by one the ships company came to pay their last respects to their Captain, a burly, bearded stoker touched his cheek and came away with tears on his cheeks. One rating whispered "God bless you Sir" A South African rating said it all when he leant over the body and said, "We're sure going to miss you shipmate".

Captain Rowley had proved to be a worthy successor. As he beckoned to me in the water he spoke quietly, "The destroyers will return during the night to pick us up, tell the men to organise themselves in large groups and keep together in the dark. But the task set me was quite impossible to fulfil. Some five hundred men were scattered over a wide expanse of the sea, and judging by the reaction of a group nearby they would not likely be influenced by the

Captain's suggestion. About thirty men had formed a circle around a Carley float and were playing 'ring-a-ring of roses'. On the Carley float a man was hitting the head of anyone who came within striking distance of the Carley float paddle he had hold of. Everyone was laughing and cheering loudly. Even those who received a whack on the head laughed. Someone yelled to me that there was plenty of room to join in the fun, another voice assured me there was no reason to be shy as we were all in the same boat.

Ahead were Carley floats packed with men and surrounded by struggling swimmers trying to get a foothold on a float. Men on the floats determined not to let them. Stukas began diving down on the men, their sirens screaming. I filled my lungs and submerged below the surface, but even beneath the water I could hear the wailing sirens. Machine guns blasted exploding bullets into the swimmers and overcrowded floats. Again and again they dived on the floats, killing and wounding many defenceless men. For the first time in my life I knew the feeling of intense fear, and waited for a bullet to penetrate my body. I surfaced and looked around, two of the three Carley floats cleared of men were quickly being boarded again, but there was no sign of the third float. Loss of life had not been as many as I had expected, but those who survived the attack had repercussions that later made death preferable. Men who had once been rational suddenly became violently insane, their only motive in life now appeared to be the destruction of their fellow men. Unfortunately it was the men who had retained their mental stability that these demented men vented their anger on. It was a grim and pitiful sight to see. Insanity had been forced upon them by the horrors of war and the mental strain of the past twenty four hours took its toll.

With the awful sensation of fear that seemed to be gripping my senses with icy fingers, and with grim determination, I struck out blindly for the islands that now seemed a million miles away. A small Carley float, fully laden with men, paddled past me, standing up in it was one of the canteen staff waving an enormous wad of paper money and gleefully shouting "This is what you want". In happier times I could not have agreed with him more, but then I doubted the money he held would be beneficial in present conditions. They should have reached the islands before nightfall, but they were never heard of again. Had they reached an island only to be imprisoned by the enemy and executed. Some others had been rescued by a German ship and handed over to the German Army on an island then were sentenced to death, but later reprieved.

The fuel oil that I had swum through had penetrated my skin and turned it to a chocolate brown colour, I had also swallowed some, this brought on nausea, putting fingers down my throat to make me vomit was a successful remedy, and I felt better afterwards. My waterproof watch showed I had been in the water for two and a half hours, but already my strength was beginning to fail and I knew I would not be able to reach land before darkness descended. There was debris from the ship floating around me. I needed something that I

could cling to. After searching I came across a length of timber about 8 foot long and cushioned on one side. As I was gloating on my discovery I saw a man thrashing his way towards me, although some distance away his shouting was quite audible, he was shouting " I'm coming after you, and I'm going to kill you". Using all my strength I swam away from him, but he was rapidly gaining on me. Fate intervened when he was just a few feet from me, he stopped swimming, the hoarse voice that had been shouting abuse at me was now whispering words of endearment to a loved one that only he could see, he covered his face with his hands, his head went back, then his hands clutched feebly at a rosary round his neck and water trickled into his open mouth as he sank below the surface.

Half laying upon what was once a ships bench seat, I paddled away, other Carley floats had arrived, but I kept clear of them, carefully eyeing any swimmer that came near to me. Ahead was a half submerged boat, I paddled up to it, the Padre swam strongly past me and shouted that there was land ahead. He was a Inter-Services swimming Champion, who I felt sure would be able to swim to the safety of the islands.

On reaching the half submerged boat I witnessed an act of bravery that can have no equal. For five hours Lt Brooks had been holding up an unconscious man in the water. It was impossible to recognise the man; the flesh of his face had been so terribly burnt that his jaw and cheek bones were plainly visible, there was a great jagged wound in his shoulder, his right hand was severed at the wrist, that he was still alive was a miracle, at that moment I thought it would have been an act of kindness to let the man sink beneath the waves and end his misery. Calling upon other swimming men for help we managed to turn the boat over, the injured man was laid across the keel.

For hours Lt. Brooks patiently tended the man, it would be dark in another four hours. The destroyers would have refuelled and soon return, their grey shapes would merge into the blackness of the night as they sped to us on their errand of mercy.

An attack of cramp in both legs made it difficult to swim, laying on my back I floated for an hour, the cramp became less painful and I swam on my back for a while. Not seeing where I was going I almost collided with the Commander, automatically my hand went up to salute him He smiled, not to be outdone, he removed his pipe from between his clenched teeth and returned the salute. "Good luck", he said, "and keep clear of those Carley floats". We shook hands before he swam off.

I located the cushioned seat again, the sun began to set, and a breeze sprung up which developed into a squall. The sea became so rough it was difficult to hold onto the seat, several times I was swept away. The squall was of short duration and by midnight the wind had died right away, apart from a slight swell the sea was calm. All around me I could hear voices, some in the process of dying, many floating past me before they sank below the surface.

These men died without fear or complaint, no evidence of despair or clutching for the invisible straw as the sea closed over their still bodies. I derived a little comfort hearing the voices of men in the Carley floats, then shortly before two o'clock the darkness was shattered by a beam of light as a single searchlight swept the sea. Suddenly a whole series of beams criss-crossed each other, bursts of cheering greeted each beam of light. The destroyers had returned to pick us up. But then we heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire and the lights went out, we kept shouting, consoling ourselves with the thought that the destroyers had seen us, and were heading towards us. Hope does not die easily, but after two more hours had passed, and no sign from the Destroyers we concluded we had been abandoned, and they were making for Alexandria at full speed. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours we had been deserted in our hour of need, left to fight against overwhelming odds, to die like rats in a sewer. To many, this proved a bitter pill to swallow in silence. The Admiralty was cursed from the 1st Sea Lord down to the most junior Sub-Lt. They cursed Hitler and Mussolini and the Luftwaffe, above all they cursed the sea. This was not the moment for sober reflection. Fear and despair walked hand in hand and death smiled invitingly.

We did not know that we were well outside the radius of the searchlight beams, which would account for not being seen by the destroyers. We did not know that five hundred and seventy three survivors from HMS Fiji had been picked up from a watery grave by the destroyers HMS Kingston and Kandahar in the desperately short period of time allocated to them. Had we known, I doubt if we would have found any consolation in the knowledge.

The Fortunate Few

For the past two hours the wind had been steadily rising, but now it was from the North-East, waves rapidly increasing in size were sweeping over me as I struggled to retain my horizontal position my small flat and slippery raft. Bitterly I reproached myself for avoiding contact with the Carley floats, a clever and practical move on my part that I was now regretting, not a sensible plan at all. I could have boarded one when the storm became imminent. How easy it is to become wise after the event. I had to make an effort to reach the floats before my brain, numb with weariness ceased to function altogether. But where were they, in which direction do they lay? Perhaps the wind has carried them beyond my reach! Panic seized me as a big wave swept me off my raft, for long breathless moments I fought my way to the surface only to be dumped into the trough of another big wave. How could I survive in such conditions, was it really me telling myself death was inevitable, don't fight it, you're a fool to keep trying, give up now, just close your eyes. Desperately I fought against this state of mind, it had to be conquered. Perched for a brief few seconds on the crest of a wave I saw a Carley float in the distance, it is not possible to describe how I managed to reach the Carley float in that mountainous sea, I cannot even give the time it took before eager hands reached down and lifted

me out of the sea, all that registers is the feeling of great elation and personal triumph.

Regaining consciousness I found myself surrounded by men who were vigorously slapping and punching me, according to a elderly stoker who had acted as a referee in the slapping and punching, it was needed to bring me back to the present, I was in a sort of coma. Apart from one or two cases, during the last twenty-four hours I had not seen anyone making any attempt to save or prolong the life of a shipmate, as far as I remember it had been entirely the opposite, so why had they saved me? The reply to my query was simply this: "we couldn't let you peg out after watching you fight those waves". It was as good a reason as any I suppose.

The hours passed slowly, when would it end, how long could we survive without food and water? What chance of being rescued? We visualised the lean grey shape of a destroyer dashing up to rescue us, davits swung outboard, boats ready to lower, rope ladders dangling down the sides, even a submarine surfacing close by, or a Sunderland flying boat landing on calm waters, and even being rescued by the enemy, and being sent to a POW camp, which brought our minds to planning to escape from. It was common knowledge that Italian destroyers and E-boats were conspicuous by their absence in this area, and there was no evidence of German warships operating either.

In the air was a different story, a grim reminder for us when German Stukas twice machine-gunned us, and also an Italian spotter plane did the same. This time bad weather was on our side, the attacks were not too severe because of it. But fear had returned again with renewed intensity, and death beckoned invitingly. Two men on the float died. Then one by one another twelve men slipped quietly, and unemotionally, over the side and to die in the dark waters that surged over them. We were morbid and bitter because of our inability to keep alive in those men that vital spark of life. Heaven knows we tried hard enough. There was no reason for these men to die, they had no wounds, neither were they physically handicapped or mentally deranged. Yet they sought death willingly, calmly and without regret.

We have been lead to believe when the balance of the brain is disturbed has a man the courage to end his life, is this completely true, I wonder?

Over 500 men had perished during the past twenty-four hours, a corpse is an unpleasant sight to see, to be constantly surrounded by them is enough to upset the constitution of even the most callous individual. They circled the Carley float, grinning hideously as they bobbed up and down in the heavy swell, hands outstretched as if to embrace us, on their faces a grinning welcome. As we reached down and cut away their inflated life-jackets others came in to take their places. Only eight men remained in the Carley float now and two of these, the elderly stoker and a young Marine were waiting for death to creep upon them, each

died as the others had done, quietly and without emotion. "Give Mum my love and tell her I could not make it" whispered the young Marine as he pushed my arms away, with a deep sigh he passed away. The elderly stoker was married, "Tell my wife I was thinking of her all the time". He died alone because it was his wish. I wondered how long this process of elimination would go on. Who would be next? Looking round I realised the importance their will to live had played in their struggle to survive. There was Bill Salter, short and stocky, grey-bearded and a veteran of the First World War. His ability to smile in the face of adversity, his cheerful and outlook on life had been an inspiration to us all.

George Friend was short and stocky too, the son of a Devonshire farmer, his inherited dry humour, and stubbornness. Joined the navy as a boy, now with twenty years to his credit, a three badger, the backbone of the navy, a good man to have as a friend.

Ben Bowley and George Lofthouse were both young men, tireless in their efforts to comfort their less fortunate comrades, and acts of courage worthy of praise.

The fifth man was a young Able Seaman recently qualified as a Telegraphist Air Gunner. He died in peculiar circumstances, announcing he had thought of a brilliant method of escape, had dived over the side of the carley float and disappeared. A few minutes later he was back shouting he had located it. "Located what" I asked. "The under-water aerodrome" he said, " I have examined the aircraft in the hangar and its ready for it quick take off". He pleaded with us to follow him, not being enthusiastic about that idea, he became violent and almost capsized the float. Bill Salter said "If you're serious it exists, and as you are the only one with technical know-how, it might be an idea to check on petrol and seating capacity". Smiling happily he agreed, and said "I'll have you home in Blighty in no time" He waved his hand and dived into the sea. We did not see him again.

The wind force had dropped although a high sea was running. Len Bowler was first to sight the sailing ship. With bated breath we watched it get nearer, then it suddenly altered course away from us. At times we lost sight of it, then it would appear coming from a different direction. The suspense was so unbearable, I decided to make an effort to reach it. Bill tried to stop me, but my mind was made up. Four times I got within a few hundred yards of it only to see her bows swing away onto another course. I cursed her soundly. On one occasion I managed to get close enough to see her name was Argus. No matter how much I waved and shouted she gave no notice she had seen or heard me. If only she had come a little bit nearer. What a pity the islands were so far away. The islands! What a fool I had been to forget them. There might still be a chance of survival, it was of little consequence they were not visible or not knowing in which direction they lay. Unlike the Argus they were stationary. The first hour or two passed away slowly, I had forgotten the Carley float, I was

only conscious of the sea gull cries and the water slapping against my face, and the vague knowledge that my life was passing away. Then a voice called out "Don't worry anymore, you're safe now" Something struck my head, it was a heaving line, I looked up it was from the Argus a crewman dived in. quickly tied a bowline round my waist and I was hauled aboard. I lay stretched out on the deck. At last I could go to sleep. Later I opened my eyes to find the sailor who had saved me pushing a pillow beneath my head, he smiled and said "Englander nicht kaput" German! Rescued by the enemy. Was is possible to be grateful and resentful at the same time, had I come to a sticky end? He brought blankets and a tarpaulin to cover me, then produced a glass of brandy, I tried to utter words of gratitude but the swelling in my throat made it too difficult and painful. My lips were badly swollen and split wide open in several places, that did not worry me as much as not being able to move any part of my body. If they realised this would they be tempted to throw me back in? It was only a temporary paralysis I told myself. My fears were ill-founded, sympathetically the German sailor spooned brandy down my throat, covered me up in the blankets and tarpaulin, within minutes I was fast in a deep and intoxicated sleep

I awoke to find myself in a comfortable bunk and to my amazement the other bunks were occupied by the four men I had left in the Carley float. They had been picked up less than an hour after I had deserted them. On the deck lay a man whose identity I did not know. He introduced himself as Frank Shipley, a survivor from the destroyer HMS Glowworm.

The crew of the Argus were most considerate in their attitude towards us, and everything that could be done for our comfort was executed with willingness that lacked nothing in sincerity. Delicious lemon-flavoured coffee appeared whenever we asked for it, and because of my inability to swallow solid food a specially prepared vegetable soup was introduced to the menu.

This is not the complete version but an abridged one from one mans tale of events leading to his becoming a prisoner of war.

There had been 807 men aboard HMS Gloucester when she was sunk on 22nd May 1941, but at the end of the war in 1945 only 83 had survived the sinking and Prisoners of War camps.

The survivors and their families gather at the RN War Memorial on Plymouth Hoe each year on the anniversary of the sinking of their ship

I have in my possession the book: **"HMS Gloucester" - The Untold Story. By Ken Otter.**

If any one would like to read it please phone me. **Roy.**