

The
HMS Phoebe
Association
Newsletter
February 2009✠



Desmond "Bill" Graham

It is with great sadness that I begin this 2009 newsletter with an obituary for a committee member and one of our regular reunion attendees. A large and jovial man who soon became a friend to all that met him, he doted on his two sons who attended reunions with him, and indeed the rest of his large family. I regret to report that Shipmate Bill Graham crossed the bar on 1st December 2008. Bill had fallen over and injured his shoulder also breaking a hip, he went into hospital and had the shoulder seen to, but after an operation on his hip complications set in from which he did not recover. Lil and I attended the cremation where we laid a wreath from the Association, after the service we joined the family for refreshments. We were thanked by most of the family for attending and found Bill was wearing his Phoebe tie for the cremation.

With much regret I report S/m Joe Suttons wife, Mary, has passed away while in hospital, I do not know the actual date but it was around Christmas.

Our thoughts are with Joe at this time. A card of condolence and sympathy was sent.

New Members:-

237	CULPIN Arthur	10 Lawns Crescent Little Downham Ely Cambs CB6 2TT	01353 698604	OD/AB	1943/44
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236	PAYNE George	Highview Wormshill Sittingbourne ME9 0TU	01622 884374	AB/T	1942/46
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S/m Darryl Scholey - membership terminated under Section 4.2. Constitution

S/m Terry Mann crossed the bar on Oct 20th 2008. (No other details).

David Graham now lives at - - 55 Charter Avenue, - Coventry. - CV4 8EJ

Not long to go to the reunion, if you have not reserved your room yet we advise you to do so quickly. Don't leave it until the last minute.

Mislaid your booking form? Phone me for a replacement. 01235 211501

The Treasurer is asking for the late payers of subscriptions to catch up. The rules state that any member owing subscriptions for more than three years can automatically have their membership cancelled.

The cost of postage will increase from April 1st, in order to cover the increase may we ask those who have E-Mail facilities "Can we send your newsletter by E-Mail". All you need do is send me an email stating you would like your newsletter sent this way; I will send you a copy as a PDF file, you can read it as it is, or you may be able to print it off. Getting your newsletter this way means you get it at least two days earlier than by post. Not got Adobe Reader? It can be downloaded free of charge.
My E-Mail Address: < r.pavely@ntlworld.com >

Two guys are drinking in a bar. One says, "Did you know that Lions have sex 10 to 15 times a night?" "Blast it!" says his friend.

"And I've just joined the Freemasons"

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Almost two years to the day I suffered another heart attack, rushed into A&E to have a catheter fitted and drained off 5 kilos of fluid from lungs, next came a Angiogram, at the same time a large 'stent' was inserted, but not very easily, it was supposed to be done through the right side of my groin, after attempts lasting 10 minutes, it was changed to the left side, the right side had to be compressed hard to stop the blood pumping out, this was very painful. Because of my hearts condition it was a serious procedure, however all went well except that I had to have a big dose of morphine to alleviate the pain I was in. I was attended to constantly for two days, then passed as ready to go home. It is taking a while to build my strength up, my left leg feels very weak but I have to walk a bit daily, a little further each time. My Angina is still with me, but not anywhere near as bad as it was, only on a couple of occasions have I had to use my nitro spray. I am hoping that at the end of the 4 weeks of taking things easy, I will be a lot fitter. Roy.

"Due to the above I got behind making up the newsletter I had just a few days in which to do it. I apologise for its contents, but had to rely mostly on the internet, hope you do not get too bored with the result". Roy.

This is the story of the paddle steamer "Sultana". A disaster that happened in the American Civil War and was never told.

Last Voyage of the "Sultana" By Hugh Martyr.

At 2am on April 27th 1865, seven miles upstream from Memphis, the side-paddle steamer Sultana was slowly making way against a strong spring current when a large explosion occurred followed quickly by two more. A column of fire and steam shot up almost cutting the boat in two; within minutes the boat was a blazing wreck. This resulted in the deaths of at least 1,700 people, mostly paroled prisoners returning north as the war was ending. The sinking remains to this day the United States worst civilian boat disaster. So what had happened?

The Sultana was a wide berth cargo/passenger steamer skippered by a maverick captain who had just had the distinction of making the fastest trip between New Orleans and St Louis. Captain J Cass Mason had arrived in Vicksburg a few weeks before on his way to New Orleans, he met with the Chief Q.M. of the Mississippi, Col. Ruben Heath who told him that the Federal Government were paying \$5 per enlisted man and \$10 per officer to any steamboat owner who would take them north. Col. Heath was a scoundrel who had been cheating the Government throughout the war and had only managed to avoid court martial through his family connections in Washington. Mason left New Orleans leaving Heath to arrange to get as many men as he could for him to pick up on the return trip.

With bribes and deception Heath fooled the Officers in charge of the prisoner repatriation Capt. Frederick Speed and he in turn deceived Captains Williams and Kerns who were under pressure to empty the transit camps. As the Sultana arrived back he had at least 1,400 men ready to board with more on the trains due to arrive. The Sultana had been delayed slightly as it had developed a bulge and leak in one of its four boilers; advised by engineers to have two whole plates removed and replaced, Cass and his chief engineer made do with riveting a patch over the problem. Despite this, loading started on the morning of April 24th. The men being loaded did express doubts about overloading when they saw crew having to wedge large beams in to hold up the decks that were beginning to sag under the weight of so many and were puzzled about the numbers boarding Sultana when there were other craft available.

As the boat cast off from Vicksburg docks, she carried nearly 2,100 paroled

prisoners who were policed by 22 men of the 58th Ohio Regiment. In addition to this there were 90 or so paying passengers and the boats crew of 88. In the cargo holds were two thousand hogsheads of sugar each weighing 1,200lbs but the strangest passenger must have been a large alligator in a sturdy crate. Mason had bought it in New Orleans as a mascot. All this on a boat that was registered to carry 376 people.

The first signs of any trouble arose when the boat passed other vessels or sights of interest on the shore, being a flat bottomed boat the Sultana had become top heavy and as men went from one side to the other she listed badly. This meant that the water in her boilers flowed from one side to the other emptying one and flooding another, as the boat righted, steam pressure built up in the refilling boiler. The crew and men of the 58th Ohio tried to stop this movement it became even more serious when at Memphis the sugar was unloaded. The boat was now seriously top heavy.

A few men had slipped ashore and disappeared after helping to unload the sugar, so the actual count of people on board is impossible to state, overcrowding was still a problem as the Sultana slipped her moorings at around midnight. Seven miles upstream she hit the full flood current and listed badly, the repaired starboard boiler could no longer take the pressure and blew, the two boilers amidships followed suit in a tremendous roar. The blast tore out the centre of the vessel ripping apart the upper decks, the area immediately above the boiler room where sick and wounded soldiers had been placed was completely destroyed. Further damage to the surrounding area was caused as one of the huge smoke stacks crashed down. Below the boiler room the furnaces were badly damaged and fire broke out, soon to be uncontrollable as it was fanned by the breeze blowing down the river. The huge amount of escaping steam caused horrific injuries to men as it blasted aft, many could not have known what had hit them and many more were flung into the river by it.

The fire caused panic. At first the men in the bow area thought themselves safe as the fire spread aft, yet as the wreck turned in the current so the fire spread towards them, anything that would float was flung overboard and the lucky few that found ropes lowered themselves into the water, yet the months of bad diet and depredation in Confederate prisons meant that many drowned in the river. One quick thinking soldier however made his own life raft. Private William Lugenbeal bayoneted the alligator and used its crate to take him downstream.

An hour after the blast the southbound steamer Boston II came upon the burning Sultana, everything that could be done to save men was tried and about 150 were pulled aboard. The captain of the Boston II realised that the current was taking men down stream, then sped to Memphis to raise the alarm. However the town was already aware of the event, a soldier, Private Wesley Lee, had been blown off the deck and had managed to swim and float all the way to Memphis where he was lucky to be spotted by night-watchmen on the levee. Now many small craft were in the river searching for survivors being washed down stream. Problems arose when soldiers on guard at the nearby Fort Pickering who had been told to be aware of guerilla activity opened fire on the small dark craft traversing the river, nobody was injured however and once the position was made clear the fort's compliment helped in the rescue by taking survivors in.

With most of the superstructure burnt away the Sultana was boarded again by some 40 or so men who had lowered themselves to the water line, the wreck drifted into a flooded grove of trees and shortly after the men were taken off she sank. In all 786 people were rescued most of whom were injured in some way; some 200 of these would die in hospital. Capt. Mason was among the killed; the pilothouse was destroyed in the initial blast as was the officers' quarters. Many of the survivors were placed in another steamer and one can understand their reluctance to make the trip, it was reported that one man spent the entire journey sitting in the steamer's small dingy.

News soon spread of the sinking, yet little was made of it. President Lincoln had just been assassinated and the country was weary of war news. The authorities in Washington however started an inquiry. Three official investigations were held, at first it was reported that a Confederate bomb had been smuggled on board in the coal, that was quickly dismissed by engineers. They pointed to a number of factors, firstly poorly designed boilers that had been badly repaired, the top-heavy state of the craft and the lack of ballast. Four men were found to be culpable for the overcrowding: Col. Hatch and Captains Speed, Williams and Kerns. Williams and Kerns although holding office concerning the prisoners transportation were clearly able to get out of any censure. It is apparent that Speed was to be held as a scapegoat. He was court-martialled and his defence tried to subpoena the unscrupulous Hatch to testify, he refused having quit the army soon after the disaster, the military justice system could not touch him. Speed was found guilty on all counts and faced a dishonourable discharge,

however upon review by the judge Advocate General of the Army the findings were reversed, no one else faced any charges.

There is no memorial to the soldiers who died. Survivors sought to have one erected but it came to nothing. Major Will McTeer the adjutant of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry which lost 213 men in the catastrophe wrote *"There in the bosom of the Mississippi they found their resting place. No stone or tablet marked with their names or even unknown for them.. flowers are strewn over the graves in the cemeteries of our dead but there are none for the men who went down with the Sultana. But let us remember them"*.

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A NEAR DISASTER (*October 30,1939*)

The German submarine **U-56**, commanded by Lieutenant Wilhelm Zahn, found itself bang in the middle of a contingent of the British Home Fleet sailing just west of the Orkney Islands. Leading the contingent was the battleship **HMS Rodney** followed by the **HMS Nelson** and **HMS Hood**, all surrounded by a protective screen of destroyers. Here was the *U-56*, sitting at periscope depth in an ideal firing position and straight ahead was the Flagship of the Fleet, *HMS Nelson*. Elated, Zahn fired three torpedoes at the target which was impossible to miss. Two of the torpedoes actually hit the *Nelson* but did not explode! The *U-56* made a quick getaway. Had the torpedoes exploded, the V.I.P.s on board the *Nelson* would have been in great danger. They had gathered for a conference to determine what action had to be taken after the sinking of the *Royal Oak* at Scapa flow. The illustrious guests included the C-in-C Home Fleet, Admiral Sir Charles Forbes, the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Dudley Pound, and Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Winston Churchill! This heaven sent opportunity caused Admiral Karl Donetz, the German U-boat supremo, to write in his war diary *"Without doubt, the torpedo inspectors have fallen down on their job ... at least 30% of our torpedoes are duds!"* Gunther Prien, hero of Scapa Flow, remarked *"How the hell do they expect us to fight with dummy rifles"*. Without doubt this was a great embarrassment to the German Navy - 31 U-boat attacks from favourable positions, 4 attacks on the *Warspite*, 12 attacks on various cruisers, 10 attacks on destroyers and 5 attacks on troop transports - without a single hit! All torpedoes failed to explode. How lucky we were!

(If the ship had sunk with all the VIPs going down with her, I wonder what would have been the outcome of the war)?

BRETAGNE (July 3, 1940)

In one of the saddest episodes of the war, the French battleship Bretagne was sunk by British warships, which included the Hood, Ark Royal and Valiant. The refusal by Vichy France to hand over their battleships to Britain, rather than fall into the hands of the German Navy, resulted in the attack at the French naval bases at Mers-el-Kabir, and Oran, North Africa. Hit by 15-inch salvoes from a range of 14,000 yards, the *Bretagne* exploded and capsized with the loss of 977 men. Many died clinging to the life-saving nets as the ship rolled over. Another ship, the Provence, (23,250 tons) was badly damaged and suffered the loss of 135 men. The battle-cruiser Dunkerque (26,500 tons) lost 210 men. The British attack on Mers-el-Kabir took the lives of 47 officers, 190 petty officers and 1,054 ratings, a total of 1,282 men. This action caused great bitterness in France, many French pilots volunteering to bomb Gibraltar, which they did on the night of 24/25 September, 1940, dropping 200 tons of bombs on the British fortress.

HMS BARHAM (November 25, 1941)

The 31,100 ton British battleship, part of the British Mediterranean Fleet, blows up north of Sidi Barrani after being hit on the port side by three torpedoes from the German submarine U-331 commanded by Kptlt. von Tiesenhausen. About four minutes after the torpedoes struck the Barham's 15-inch magazine exploded which completely disintegrated the battleship and sending up an enormous cloud of black smoke which covered her sinking. A total of 862 crewmen perished including her commander, Captain G. C. Cooke. There were 449 men rescued from the water by the destroyers HMS Hotspur and HMAS Nizam. The *U-331* was later sunk on November 17, 1942, by torpedo-carrying Swordfish from the carrier HMS Formidable. (32 men died, 15 were rescued). Kptlt. Hans-Diedrich Tiesenhausen was one of the rescued and survived the war. He died on August 17, 2000, in Vancouver, Canada, at the age of 85.

It was during a spiritual séance in Portsmouth that the apparition of a dead sailor appeared and told the gathering, which including his mother, that his ship had been sunk. (The ship in question was the Barham) The gathering was presided over by Helen Duncan, a citizen of Edinburgh and one of Britain's most respected materialization mediums. The dead sailor's mother then

contacted the War Office asking for details of the sinking and explaining how she came to hear of it. As ship sinkings during wartime was classified 'Secret' an investigation was launched and Helen Duncan, a mother of seven, was arrested and charged under the Witchcraft Act of 1735. After her release from prison she continued to bring comfort to grieving wartime families. In 1951, the Witchcraft Act was repealed and four years later Spiritualism was formally recognised as a religion. Helen Duncan died in 1956 at age 59 after many attempts to clear her name.

ICEBERG CARRIER

One of the most fantastic ideas to come out of WW11 was to build a super iceberg aircraft carrier. Gaining the support of Churchill and Mountbatten, British inventor, Geoffrey Pike, set out to build a prototype on Patricia Lake near Jasper in Canada, where it could be naturally frozen. The steel hull structure was filled with a compound of paper pulp and sea water which was frozen to produce a substance called 'Pykecrete' after the inventor. Pykecrete was almost as strong as concrete. The actual carrier, to be named HMS Habakkuk (after the Old Testament prophet) when built, could be up to 4,000 feet long, 600 feet wide, 130 feet high with ice walls 40 feet thick constructed from 280,000 blocks of ice and weigh anything up to one million tons. Pipes, circulating cold air from a refrigeration plant inside the berg, would keep the ice from melting. It would be driven by 26 electric drive motors giving it a speed of around 6 knots. By 1943, technical problems meant that the vessel would not be ready until 1945 which was too late to be of any use in the Battle of the Atlantic where convoys were sailing part way to Britain without air cover. The model on Patricia Lake was eventually scuttled after the ice took almost a year to melt. A commemorative plaque was placed on the lake's shore in 1989. Sadly, the inventor Geoffrey Pyke, committed suicide in 1948 with an overdose of sleeping tablets.

(How would anyone be able to keep warm with out any heating)??

I have been looking at brochures for East Sussex, to find somewhere interesting that we can visit, so far all I have come up with is the towns of Battle and Hastings, In Hastings there is the Smugglers caverns and tunnels and the Hill Railway which look worth a visit, and Hastings itself is well presented.

Many years ago I passed through Battle and recall there being a castle and old houses, perhaps an hour or two here first then on to Hastings would at least make a pleasant day out. I did look at a place in Kent that caters for outdoor activities such as Paintball games, and Off road trials etc, but the entrance fee was high and so was the individual charges for taking part. I also enquired about a trip to Calais, but not everyone will have a passport, and the cost by coach via the tunnel is excessive, a ferry was cheaper, but on the negative side is the time one would have to look around, probably less than a hour. Some will say 'how about Brighton' well yes; but Brighton can be reached by bus quite easily from Eastbourne. I will continue with the search for a little longer.

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I may have said this before but its worth looking at again:-

Nowadays nearly everyone has a mobile phone; and everyone stores phone numbers on them, how many of you have a number stored under **"In case of emergency"**, someone you would like to be contacted if an emergency arose? The recognised international abbreviation for this message is **ICE**. Put this into your phones memory list with the number you want informed, you can add as many number under **ICE** that you need. Be sensible and do it now, you never know when it will be needed. Roy.

Working people frequently ask us elderly retired citizens what we do to make our days interesting. Well for an example the other day my wife and I went into town and into a shop, we were only in there for a few minutes, when we came out there was a traffic warden writing out a parking ticket. We walked up to him and said, "Come on mate, how about giving a senior citizen a break?" He ignored us and carried on writing the ticket. I called him a Nazi Twerp, he glared at us and started writing another ticket for having worn tyres, the wife called him a 'dickhead' He starte writing out a

third ticket, this went on for about 20 minutes, the more we abused him the more tickets he wrote and tucked under the wiper blade. Personally, we didn't care, we came in on the bus!

We try to have a bit of fun each day, its important at our age.

LISBON MARU (*October 1, 1942*)

Japanese transport vessel of 7,053-tons, carrying 1,816 British and Canadian prisoners of war from the Shamshuipo POW camp at Hong Kong to Japan, was torpedoed by the US submarine *Grouper* about six miles off Tung Tusham Island on the Chinese coast. The prisoners were contained in three holds which soon became foul with the stench of sweat, excreta and vomit. Many lost consciousness through thirst, lack of fresh air and extreme heat. Men were reduced to licking the condensation from the sides of the ships hull. A bucket of liquid was lowered by the guards and thirsty men rushed to grab it, only to find it was filled with urine. On top deck were some 778 Japanese military men on their way home to Japan. At 7 o'clock in the morning, the torpedo struck, severely damaging the ship but causing no casualties among the prisoners. Soon a Japanese ship, the freighter *Toyukuni Maru* came alongside and took on board all the Japanese soldiers but none of the Allied prisoners.

The *Lisbon Maru* was then taken in tow heading for Shanghai, but some hours later the ship, now low in the water, began to sink by the stern. Prisoners in Number 3 hold were unfortunately below the water-line and now beyond rescue. Some prisoners in the other two holds managed to break free but were shot down as they emerged. Another four Japanese ships appeared on the scene and some escaped prisoners, swimming in the water, managed to reach the dangling ropes and started to climb aboard only to be kicked back into the water when within a few inches from the deck. Eventually, most of the surviving prisoners were taken on board the four ships and taken to Shanghai where thirty-five sick and wounded were unloaded. A few however, managed to swim away from the *Lisbon Maru* and were rescued by Chinese fishermen and taken to a group of small islands near by (Sing Pan islands). At Shanghai, a roll call accounted for 970 men, a total of 846 had perished, 154 were from the Middlesex regiment.

- Of the 970 survivors, some 244 died during their first winter in the Japanese camps. The *'Lisbon Maru'* was not marked in any way to indicate that she was carrying prisoners of war but as she was armed and carried Japanese troops the ship was a legitimate target. (Among the 1,780 graves in the Sai Wan Bay cemetery are the graves of those who lost their lives in this tragedy)

Toilets for POW's on these ships were primitive to say the least. They were hung like bird cages over the two sides of the ship. all swaying like swings in the wind. A prisoner hung on to the ropes and defecated directly into the ocean. Some, too weak to get out, had to wait for the next in line to help him out while he in turn helped the other in. In the wake of the ship two yellow coloured streaks could be seen trailing to the horizon, the result of droppings from dozens of these outboard 'benjos'. When the seas were rough, the prisoner got drenched but as toilet paper was unknown, what the hell, it was better than using your hands to clean yourself. But why bother, you may ask, back in the torrid holds of the ship you again sat in a few centimetres thick carpet of semifluid human waste, blood, urine and vomit, the stench of which must have been horrific. Caged animals could not have suffered worse

HMS CURACOA (*October 2, 1942*)

British light cruiser of 4,290 tons was engaged mainly in convoy escort duties during World War II. It was while escorting the [Queen Mary](#) that disaster struck. The Cunard White Star liner was carrying 15,000 American troops to England when the [Curacao's](#) lookout reported what he thought was a submarine on the port bow. The *Queen Mary* turned sharply to starboard and the *Curacao*, in pursuit of the suspected U-boat, crossed her bows with insufficient clearance causing the two ships to collide. Proceeding on a zigzag course at a speed of twenty eight and a half knots the *Queen Mary* knifed through the escort cruiser cutting her in two, the halves separated by about 100 yards. Fearful of U-boats in the area and aware of his responsibility to his passengers, the captain did not even slow the ship down until it entered the safer waters of the Firth of Clyde. The *'Queen'* was badly damaged, her bow plates folded back at least forty feet into the ship. A total of 338 men aboard the *Curacao* died as a result of this tragedy (25 officers and 313 ratings) There were 26 survivors. The incident occurred some 20 miles off the coast of Donegal, Ireland.