

HMS Phoebe Joins WW2

(Vic Chanter)

Sept 9th 1940

Along with a large draft I travelled by rail from Chatham to Glasgow to commission HMS Phoebe, which was near to completion in King George V Dock.

When the ship's company was complete, we carried out trials at sea, and she was finally handed over to the Royal Navy with 'a seal of approval'.

During our stay in Glasgow we, the crew, got to know each other and friendships were struck up. It was natural that the closest bonds were those made within our own class rating: stokers, signalmen, seamen etc., mostly because we worked and 'messed together'. Our shore leave, more often than not, resulted in two or more of us going off together to a cinema or dance. In and around Glasgow there was plenty of choice.

Around this time Ken (Kenny Boy) Kent and I discovered that we were both from Yorkshire, though I had left there at an early age. We each had our own friends, but I believe that we were the only ones with an intense interest in the music of the big bands of the era.

It was perhaps because we made it obvious in our conversation that the two of us were 'detailed off' to take a consignment of flags to deck the concert hall of a hotel where Leslie Henson – a music hall artist of the day – and his cast were to perform. We arrived to find Leslie Henson himself stage directing the décor. Ken and I 'dressed overall' the stage and hall. Then Mr. Henson decided that the piano was in the wrong position. Ken and I were conscripted and promptly swung into action. We moved the piano around from one side of the stage to the other, following instructions from a voice in the stalls - Mr. Henson had to be seen whilst he played the piano, and mustn't be obscured by the dancing girls – we then swung it on its axis, and when the piano was to Mr. Henson's liking ... it was back where it started.

Was Leslie Henson a stickler for detail or just having fun at our expense? However, Ken and I were given invitations to attend the concert and meet the girls. Now unfortunately we had a most unpopular senior killick, and I think I was the one he liked least of all. So it was not really surprising when I found that I was on duty that evening. Ken wasn't keen to go it alone. During the evening the ship received a shore-to-ship telephone call from the hotel asking why we were not at the concert and party afterwards. Leslie Henson had promised the girls a couple of sailors.

Still HMS Phoebe was a fighting ship, a cruiser, and there was a war going on out there. Eventually, therefore, we sailed down the Clyde, but not for trials. This time we knew we would not be returning to the nightlife of Glasgow. From Govan we slowly made our way down the river, passing by the headland at Greenock. I looked up and remembered the times I'd spent up there looking down at the waters of the Clyde.

We were later to join up with, and become part of, the escort force for a massive Atlantic Convoy. As the convoy formed and grew in size we reached our first port on the African continent, Freetown (Sierra Leone) – affectionately known as the White Man's Grave.

Leaving there, and joining the main convoy, we all proceeded far from the African coast into the mid-Atlantic, turning southwards to cross the equator, where the usual ritual of the 'crossing the line' ceremony was carried out. As we escorted the convoy around the Cape of Good Hope, I believe some of the ships entered Capetown. HMS Phoebe and others sailed into Port Elizabeth. It was my first glimpse of Table Mountain, and that was from seaward as we passed by. The Phoebe then sailed on to Durban.

Whilst we were there taking on provisions and fuel etc., we managed to arrange a challenge cricket match with the soldiers from the troopships. It was a great morale booster

and a marvellous experience for me, as we played on the Durban Cricket Ground, known as 'The Timeless Test Ground'.

I remember Durban, hot, dry and clean. One particular night, a PA system was blasting out from a Concert Hall to an overflow of people on the lawns outside. Some contralto from within the hall was singing 'Land of Hope and Glory'. A group of us went along to a Snake Garden; it seemed the thing to do. It didn't fair well with my comparison of days in New York. Some over-enthusiastic girl ran off with my cap, which didn't go down well when I returned to ship and faced the quarterdeck with no salute, which cost me.

From South Africa we sailed through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Those experiences are legend. I think we were lucky – we saw most things. I was amazed at how far 'flying fish' were able to glide; so many of them shooting out of the sea and landing on our deck.

Probably the worst experience was running into a swarm of locusts. They seemed to have neither sense of direction nor built-in radar, but forever on a self-destruct course. Unfortunately they were not content knocking their own brains out against bulkheads and funnels, but seemed intent on taking any humans that got in their way. I can only say that it was very scary to be in the middle of such a black mass – black because they blocked out the light from the sun.

We arrived at Port Suez at the southern entrance of the Suez Canal, took aboard a pilot and commenced the slow memorable journey through the narrow passage to Port Said and the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. After a short stay, HMS Phoebe sailed on to Alexandria, which was to be our Home Base.

To recap on the events of 1940:

In April, Germany invaded Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. In May, Belgium surrendered.

Mussolini got together with Hitler, and Italy joined Germany in declaring war on the Allies. Britain stood alone.

June saw the armistice between first France and Germany, then France and Italy. The Germans then occupied the Channel Islands.

The Royal Navy was busy keeping the trade-lanes open, escorting convoys with provisions, until we were cut off from importing from Europe. Strict rationing was then imposed.

The stories of the Royal Navy's part in the evacuation of troops is legend, also its part in seeking out and destroying enemy warships, surface vessels and U-boats. Our RN forces carried out many raids and bombardments on enemy occupied coastal towns and strategic ports. In many of these actions the cruisers Southampton, Galatea and Edinburgh – the ships in which I had served – were involved. Now aboard HMS Phoebe I was entering a new theatre of war.

When France capitulated, it was feared that the French fleet would become an added threat to us, as the Vichy Government of France was willing to collaborate with the Germans. Fortunately, that was soon resolved by the RN putting the French warships out of commission by direct action or, as I discovered in Alexandria, by interning the disarmed vessels in harbour under scrutiny.

Working out of French occupied Syria some Vichy French fighter aircraft caused us a little aggravation, shooting down two of our Skua reconnaissance aircraft whilst we were operating off the Levant coast.

Haifa was an interesting port. Gigantic oil pipelines seemed to run everywhere, to and from the jetty in the harbour. Once ashore I could see the evidence of the endless strife between

Palestinians and the Jews. Where they hadn't already been vandalised, shops were either boarded up or barred. But for the time being there was tranquillity of a kind amongst the locals as they stood back and watched others struggle in what was now World War II.

Because of the short-term leave granted to us, I was not able to visit Bethlehem or Nazareth, but Haifa itself was a place from the past. To wander through its narrow streets and light-heartedly barter in the bazaar or souk (market) was a great experience – though not readily appreciated at the time.

I remember being more impressed whilst walking up Mount Carmel – **The Mount Carmel**. Then another first, built on the side of the mountain was a cinema with a natural tier system. As I sat looking at the screen that was below, the roof slowly began to roll back to reveal the star-filled sky above, a beautiful romantic setting wasted! And so the modern world had come to Haifa.

Our Eastern Mediterranean fleet was based back in Alexandria, and from there our warships patrolled the Eastern Med., supplying escorts to convoys of supply ships moving along the North African coast and backing up Allied troops which were sent to halt the advance of the Italian army.

In October 1940, Mussolini decided to invade Greece for strategic – and other- reasons. Greece had until this time remained neutral, but now became our ally against a common enemy.

The small Greek nation gallantly resisted the powerful onslaught of the Italian forces, and so effective were the Greeks that the Germans were sent to assist the Italians to crush their resistance.

At first the Greeks were reluctant to accept help, but soon the Allied Troops were sent in to assist in the defence of Greece. It wasn't long, however, before the troops that had been landed on the mainland were being withdrawn, and a second 'Dunkirk' began.

HMS Phoebe, along with ships of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, was involved in the evacuation of Greek royalty and government along with troops from Kalamata to the island of Crete. Soon after, we were to enter the seas around Crete at night-time to once more evacuate troops, this time to take them to safe haven at Alexandria.

Most of the army evacuated by HMS Phoebe was either Australian or New Zealand. Several of them insisted that I have their home addresses so that I could visit them should I ever get to Oz or N.Z.

After the fall of Greece and Crete, the waters of the Eastern Med. became more hazardous. Hitler and Mussolini tried to break the spirit of the people of Malta by insistent bombing of Malta itself and the constant attacks upon merchant ships that were bringing vital supplies for the inhabitants.

My own notes of that period were:

Yugoslavia, Greece & Crete

1941 April

- 6th Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece. Cruiser Ajax lands British troops to assist the Greeks repel German attack from the north.
- 21st Greek army capitulates and evacuation of troops is scheduled for the night of 24th – for a maximum of 4 days.
- 24th HMS Phoebe, along with destroyers Stuart and Voyager, corvette Hyacinth and transports Glencarn and Ulster Prince, approached Navplion to evacuate. Glencarn was hit during attack by dive-bombers, and had to stop to extinguish fire. Ulster Prince ran aground and had to be abandoned. Using small craft, caiques etc., 1,130 troops were ferried to Phoebe for transfer to Suda Bay.

Italian fleet at Taranto was only 12 hours away!

25th Should have left at 3am, but was delayed until 4.15am. Cleared Gulf of Navplion at 6am. At 7am air attacks by 30 dive-bombers. Dutch vessel Slamet was sunk along with destroyers Diamond and Wryneck.

26/27th Destroyer Griffin returned from Suda to find survivors at 2.30am on the 28th.

28th Athens Radio closed down a few hours later with a signal to Malta and Alexandria, which was acknowledged before the final silence.

Meanwhile...Evening of 28th. Phoebe, Perth and 6 Destroyers sailed to pick up about 7,000 including about 1,200 fighting units at Kalamata. At 9pm news came through that the Germans had occupied the town and had mined the harbour.

TOTAL LIFTED 50,662. TOTAL TAKEN TO SAFETY 50,162.

MAY

EVACUATION OF CRETE

LOST 7 Warships and Merchant Ships and approx. 2,000 seamen.

Quote: "There appears to be nowhere more naked than a ship with dive-bombers and sticks of bombs streaming downwards."

28th To Sphakia for evacuation.

29th Commenced embarkation.

30th 3.20am we left area and were attacked from the air. Ships in company were: Phoebe, Perth (was hit), Calcutta, Assault ship Glengyle and 3 Destroyers.

31st Ships in company in area of evacuation: Phoebe, Abdiel and 3 Destroyers under the orders of Admiral King.

June 1st at 3.00am, embarkation completed. Sailed for Alexandria.

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When we, HMS Phoebe, set out from Alexandria to carry out the above, our Captain, Guy Grantham, said over the ship's PA system, "Our job is going to be a discouraging one. Britain has decided that Greece cannot be held and it has been decided to evacuate as much of the Army as we can get out of Greece."

Our Navigating Officer, Lieut. Lumsden, did a great job of manoeuvring our group into the bay at Navplion. We crept in under the cover of darkness with no navigation lights and no local pilot.

Our second foray into Greece had to be at Kalamata, as the Germans had already occupied Navplion. We were always more vulnerable as daylight uncovered our actions. That's when the high-level Dornier 217s appeared, followed by the Stuka, JU87, dive-bombers and also the JU88s. Throughout this entire barrage that we were throwing up, our ammunition was dwindling at an alarming rate, so that it was necessary to conserve it as much as possible without jeopardising the safety of the operation.

What was demoralising and distressing was the sighting of the remains of one transport ship that had been sunk and the RAF and Army bodies which we passed and were unable to recover, there being no signs of life. At Suda we were again bombed whilst in harbour.

Phoebe, Perth (Australian and Senior Officer) and 3 Destroyers returned to Kalamata, under cover of night. A boat was sent inshore and returned to the Perth with information that the Germans were already there. The captain of the Perth didn't want to take any chances and ordered the fleet to retire at all speed. Guy Grantham, our skipper, was against this decision, and wanted to 'run the gauntlet' to try and get some of the remaining soldiers away, even if the Germans were nearby. Although the Phoebe's Ships Company were with him, he had to

abide by the senior officer's orders, and leave hundreds of soldiers behind to become prisoners of war.

On 29th April the Phoebe did join up with other cruisers to return to Greece to escort some Destroyers that had taken off the last soldiers from a pickup area, returning at full speed to Alexandria. During 6 days, it was estimated that no one had more than 15 to 20 hours of sleep.

The war-weary soldiers that we had taken to Crete were unable to withstand the onslaught, and so on 28th May we were off again *under the cover of darkness*, this time to Sphakia to embark as many troops as possible before dawn broke, to leave with all possible haste for Alexandria. We evacuated thousands but the bombing became fiercer. We had no air cover and the cry from both the army and navy was "Where is the RAF?"

When we reached Alex., and disembarked our troops, we refuelled whilst the crew of the damaged HMS Naiad came over to reload ammunition, allowing our crew to get some well earned rest before setting off once more for Crete.

We left at 4am for Sphakia and en route encountered the ubiquitous Junkers 88s. The Phoebe and the Abdiel managed to lift thousands of troops and raced back to Alex. This time the RAF released some air cover for us.

The Mediterranean had developed the reputation as a graveyard of navies, the Italians and ours. We had been greeted upon our arrival with, "We'll give you two months!" We had survived until 1st June, so how much longer?

One last reference to the Greece and Crete evacuation:

The New Zealand Army in Alexandria arranged a large party in honour of the Navy that evacuated them from Greece and Crete. The party was held on the Phoebe. Admiral Cunningham flew his flag on Phoebe for the event. Representatives of all ships went aboard. The N.Z. Army sent a large delegation and presented a huge cheque to be a fund to assist the dependants of those members of the RN who lost their lives during the operation.

From the speech by the army it was said, "We in the Army didn't worry much while we were retreating to the beaches at Navplion, Kalamata, Sphakia and Piraeus. We knew the Navy would be there and our hopes and wishes came true. When we got to the beaches, the word was passed around... 'It's all right; the Navy's here'."

We had managed to subdue the Vichy French working out of Syria, but now had to contend with the Luftwaffe coming at us from Crete.

I enjoyed my times ashore in Alexandria where some of us had our favourite watering holes. The bathing was superb at a spot called Stanley Bay at Sidi Bishr. Later I was to spend time at Sidi Bishr army camp under canvas, where you either slept with your boots on or shook them out each morning to eject any foreign bodies – such as scorpions. There were no 'roads' on the camp; all the tents were erected on sand, and sand was what you got. When you cleaned your mess kettles and tins after meals you used sand. You could see your own reflection mirrored in them when you'd finished.

My brother, Jack, and I hardly ever discussed our service experiences, so it was many years before I discovered that Jack had been on a troopship leaving England to go out East, when I had been on HMS Phoebe escorting the convoy. When I mentioned to him sitting on the grass outside Durban Town Hall listening to the warbling of some contralto, he said, "I was there!" He eventually carried on to Iraq, whilst we continued into the Med. Later still I was to learn that he too was at Sidi Bishr camp at the same time that I was. So twice we just missed each other en passant.

Because of the proximity of the enemy airfields, the Germans constantly bombed Alexandria harbour, approximately five nights out of seven. Not a lot of damage was sustained. Some magnetic mines were dropped to cause damage later.

We had enjoyed four months of constant sunshine with not a drop of rain. Our rig of the day was always Whites, sometimes trousers, sometimes shorts, unless you had duties, which called for boiler suits. There were many times when I had to wear khaki drill.

For a while we experienced the lesser evil of Action Stations in harbour instead of at sea until we were once again in fighting trim and seaworthy.

Our forces at this time were just about holding out at Tobruk, which was surrounded by Rommel's forces. The only means of providing supplies and backup was by sea. This is where we came back into action – The Tobruk Ferry! Our job was to escort supply ships along the coast to Tobruk. We would leave Alex. at 8am and arrive off Tobruk around midnight; stooge around outside the port whilst the supplies were unloaded from the transports and join up again about 4am to return to Alex. There was always opposition from bombers of course. All part of the deal.

Through August we kept this schedule going and lived a charmed life. We left Alex as usual on the 27th and received the usual reception as we approached the Libyan coast. We had Naiad, my old ship Galatea and the Latona in company. In the darkness around 9pm we knew the aircraft were around but couldn't see them until they flew low right by us and into the moonlight. They were torpedo bombers coming out of the darkness as we became silhouetted against the rising moon. Our armament opened up immediately. The torpedo passed harmlessly astern of us, but a second aircraft again coming in low was more successful. With an almighty Boom we had been hit. It was 9.30pm.

The torpedo had caught us forward of the engine rooms, which was serious enough, but not it appeared terminal. We lurched, shuddered and listed, settling over at about 15 degrees. Our watertight doors were holding out preventing any further major flooding. Damage control throughout the Phoebe was checked and reported upon. In fact all heads of departments reported back to the bridge, and it appeared that we were still a fighting ship with slightly less armament, but able to make way slowly with creaking bulkheads at about 12 knots. There were fatalities in B magazine and on the Quarterdeck messdeck. Everyone remained busy; especially the shipwrights shoring up bulkheads and strengthening existing decks as we slowly wended our way back to Alexandria.

Oil and water swished around everywhere. In order to lighten the load on our starboard side, where the damage was, three torpedoes, an anchor and a motorboat were jettisoned.

The Italians were jubilant and announced over the radio that they had sunk us. We were still lucky later when a single Junker 88 swooped down on us and flew off. He must have cursed the fact that he had run out of ammunition, or have been asleep, which was fortunate for us.

The ship seemed to hold herself up despite the hole in her side and the list to starboard. We were confident that she would stay on top if we could only maintain the status quo, with no drastic alterations of speed or course, and no further enemy action.

When we finally reached Alex. it was a great relief from the heightened tension aboard during that long, slow voyage back to base; a relief from the vigil of listening and searching for any possible foreign noises that could prove a threat to us.

The following day, we went into dock. The hole in our side just below the bridge stretched from our waterline down to the keel, big enough to drive a double-decker bus through. Thank goodness for watertight compartments. Along with the clearing of tangled wreckage was the grisly job of finding and removing the bodies. Several volunteers spent hours moving tangled steel and piles of ammunition to reach their dead shipmates. There was a funeral service at the

British cemetery at Alexandria, where the sailors were laid to rest alongside other fellow countrymen.

The Phoebe was not ready to leave dry dock until October. Although many things had been repaired or replaced, the hole in her side had only been given a temporary patch to make her seaworthy to steam to a proper dockyard. Following on the knowledge of previous similar circumstances, I was banking on us sailing for Brooklyn Navyyard. I was, therefore, looking forward to visiting Long Island and seeing again the American girl called Phoebe I had met in June 1939. Ship – Girl. Couldn't have planned it better.

The skipper, Captain Grantham, addressed the ship's company to thank everyone and said he was sad to be leaving the ship, but many of the ship's company would be leaving also, as more key men were required to stay behind on the Mediterranean Station. And... You guessed it. I turned out to be one of the key men!

With others, I left HMS Phoebe to go to a shore base, whilst she sailed off to the USA.