

I. North Atlantic

It was late summer of 1940 when I caught my first sight of the ship to which I had been assigned. The ship was not a very awe inspiring sight at the time, but then again, I do not believe that I looked too awe inspiring either, when I got off the train in Glasgow. I had boarded the train the previous evening in London, and night-time train riding in Britain during the War was an adventure in itself. The trains were completely blacked-out, and a trip to the bathroom demanded the practice of groping one's way all the way to a distant part of the train. You groped your way past half-asleep service-men propped up in the corridors, while your feet groped their way past the ones completely asleep on the floor of the train. Once in the bathroom, more groping was required to find and use the facilities before you started the return ordeal. While this was going on, the train could suddenly be shunted to an out of the way spur or siding, or remain in a tunnel, until an air-raid was over. There was definitely not a lot of restful repose to be had on trains at that time, and I suppose everyone was washed out on arrival. Then again, returning from a few days leave did not insure a happy and restful return to service life either.

HMS Phoebe was a light cruiser that was in the final stages of completion in the shipbuilder's yard. The ship was being built by a company named Fairfields, and was being constructed on the River Clyde within the boundaries of Glasgow. No ship is the most pleasant sight while under construction. There are cranes, electric cables, crates, riggings, welding equipment, and a large variety of other gear cluttering every part of the decks. All this is set to the musical background of lots of shouting, riveting, hammering, and winches squealing. Not the best place to take a headache. Of course, a very different picture can be had when all is finished, and the ship is ready for sea. Nevertheless, the entire crew eventually became very proud of the ship.

At this point, some statistics concerning the ship should be inserted for those who may be interested in such details. For those who are uninterested, I recommend that the entire paragraph be skipped to avoid being put to sleep. Although HMS Phoebe had a 5450 tonnage displacement, she was a light cruiser. However, armour-plated defence and heavy guns had been sacrificed for more speed and manoeuvrability. The ship had tremendous speed and could make a rapid turn at this high speed to avoid dive bomber attacks, which it did very successfully on many occasions in her future. The main armament consisted of ten guns mounted in twin turrets, with three turrets forward of the bridge and two turrets on the afterdeck. Each of these guns were 5.25-inch calibre, and could be fired at hostile surface targets, and could also be elevated to fire at enemy aircraft. In fact, I believe that this class of cruisers had been designed with this dual purpose in mind, and were considered to be expendable. In addition to her dual purpose weaponry, Phoebe sported lighter anti-aircraft guns, as well as some surface mounted torpedo tubes, which was all well and good assuming the ship could get close enough to an enemy ship to score a hit with a torpedo.

I learned most of this sometime after I boarded the ship for the first time. My main thoughts while walking up the gangway were not so much about what type of ship she was, or why she had been designed; they were more along the lines of trying to determine what I was getting into. Although I had been in the Navy for the best part of a year, that was my first ship and it was the Phoebe that would inform me how I would like a life on the ocean wave. It would be the Phoebe experience that would tell me if I should have joined the army instead. The same experience would let me know if I had the stomach to survive a full meal in a rough sea, or if I would like not being able to take a long walk on a short ship. In essence, one could feel that joining one's first ship was like walking from one life style, into another, and knowing that it would be unlike anything ever known before.

Not a great deal more time was spent in the shipyard, for it was only a short time before we headed further down the River Clyde and were docked at Greenock, where the Clyde is much wider, and yet still not out in the open sea. From that point, we made several trips to places where the ship could do trial runs at various speeds, and perform many different tests to insure that the ship would function properly. Of course, we also managed to do considerable testing on the weaponry. While the ship itself was being tested, the ship's crew was also doing the necessary drills to work them into a high state of efficiency. There were constant gunnery exercises, torpedo drills, and calls to 'Battle Stations' to attain continuing improvement in response times. In between, some shore leave was permitted on occasion, but only for a few hours, which enabled us to enjoy the sights of Greenock and Gourock. Yet, other than finding some very pleasant and hospitable Scottish people, the sights could be seen completely in considerably less time than we were given.

One very unpleasant incident sticks in my memory of those days, which could have occurred even before we left Glasgow. That was a night-time event where it appeared that most of the crew got a severe attack of diarrhoea, and all were afflicted at the same time. There was no official explanation given as to the cause of the unpleasantness, but rumour had it that one or more rats had been trapped in the ship's fresh water tanks when they were filled for the first time, explaining the need for the mass congregation at the toilets during the wee hours.

Since I was a member of the medical staff, most of my time was spent in the Sick Bay. The medical staff consisted of a doctor, a Medical Petty Officer, and two medical assistants. I was the junior member of the medical assistants, so naturally I got the choicest assignments. We were responsible for the health and welfare of the entire ship's company, which meant that we handled more than five hundred people with their fair share of injuries, sickness, and assorted problems. It was at this point in a person's navy career that one had to learn the real meaning of sea duty. Thus far, we had not been engaged in any enemy action, yet we had had our share of accidents that included serious injuries, and near drowning, while simultaneously getting a daily quota of crew members reporting sick. Some of these events occurred while the ship was in open and rough water, and required doing one's best to care for them as well as keeping your balance. However, I suppose it was excellent conditioning for what would have to be done later under less favourable conditions. This time was also well spent in requisitioning and stowing all types of medical supplies that might be required. That included the acquisition of a complete dispensary. Since there would be no local drug-store available, any ailment being treated on the Phoebe would naturally have to be treated with supplies that we, ourselves, carried. All in all, the short time spent in that area could be considered as very necessary, and enabled all of us to become better equipped and better trained, and to be fused with the ship itself into a more efficient fighting unit. When this period was over, the ship received orders to join the Home Fleet in Scapa Flow. This was the naval harbour contained within the circle of the Orkney Islands, and was situated in the turbulent waters north of Scotland. This is also where the waters of the Atlantic Ocean have a stormy meeting with the waters of the North Sea. It would be from this base that the ship itself, with the investment of money and personnel, would be put to the test of being ready for war.

HMS Phoebe spent a period of some months performing various duties in the North Atlantic. The period included the unusually harsh winter months between the fall of 1940, and the spring of 1941, before the ship was reassigned to another part of the world. As mentioned, our permanent base was Scapa Flow, not a particularly endearing locale to be permanently based. Although we were given a very slight amount of shore leave when the ship was in port, most of the crew decided to forego their leave and remain aboard, a strong indication of the degree of attraction for the Orkney Islands. Even while the ship was at anchor in Scapa Flow, the rough seas there did not always make the stay a pleasant one. In fact, during the early weeks of the war in 1939, a German submarine had

penetrated the harbour defences and had sunk a battleship named HMS Royal Oak. Hundreds of the crew of the Royal Oak had died, and many of them had perished trying to swim from the ship to the shore. That distance being insignificant, their deaths are strong testimony of the rough and frigid waters that were there.

For some reason, there was a period when the other medic and I had to take our turn at look-out duty on the bridge when the ship was at sea. On occasion, this meant four hours on watch, and then four hours off, all through the twenty-four hour cycle. However, if your four hours off happened to be during the daily duty hours, then you were required to spend those hours cleaning, dispensing medicine, changing surgical dressings, and performing a host of other tasks. After some weeks of this routine, everyone experienced a strange transformation from an alert and alive human being, into a zombie type individual. During this state, tasks were performed purely mechanically, with few of the crew members having even the semblance of a spring in their step. When you were on your own time, you simply crawled into your hammock, and swung from side to side as you tried to get some sleep. You then pulled on sea boots, sweaters, and a parka, before crawling up to the bridge to begin the cycle over again. I suppose some people would mistakenly believe that we were a very brave bunch of seamen, for news of enemy submarines and even enemy warships did not bother us one bit. We just yawned and went back to sleep, for all normal emotions, including fear, were less important than turning off your brain for a while.

Most of the crew took considerable comfort from an old British Navy tradition that was observed each day at a time preceding the noon meal. This was the honoured and revered custom, known as splicing the main brace, or toasting the King's health, or getting one's grog ration, or just plain downing a goodly portion of rum. This rum ration was provided every day to all those who requested it, and consisted of a pretty generous portion which was imbibed on an immediate basis. Maybe it was given so you wouldn't much care what you ate later for lunch, but until your system got used to this mid-day custom, you didn't have much energy for afternoon activities. I understand that since my departure from His Majesty's Service, this nice old tradition has been abandoned and may be responsible for any decrease in recruitment.

We did not do much convoy duty, even though that was an important function being performed by many other Navy vessels. In retrospect, I assume that we were part of a force that was standing ready in the event that German battleships or cruisers made a venture into the North Atlantic to attack allied shipping. There were much heavier members of this force, such as battleships and heavy cruisers, but I believe the Phoebe role in this force was to be an advance scout to locate the German Navy if it appeared, then stay with them until the heavier British forces could arrive. I don't think the Germans would have taken too kindly to our joining them, and would have been more inclined to dispose of us as soon as possible. Even under those circumstances, we might have delayed them for at least a while. In any event, we were expendable and could possibly make our loss into a bigger loss for the opposition.

There were at least a few times where German naval forces had left their bases in Norway or further into the Baltic Sea. There were other times where it was only suspected that the Germans were at sea, but we still had to go out and look for them. One or more of the German ships had indeed penetrated into the Atlantic, and had wreaked havoc on an allied Atlantic convoy. We were informed that these raiders were either the Scharnhorst, the Gneisenau, the Scheer, or some combination of any of these. This particular convoy had a converted merchant ship, which I believe was the former P & O liner named Rawalpindi, as its heaviest escort. Upon being attacked and very heavily outgunned by the Germans, the Rawalpindi gave orders to the rest of the convoy to disperse in all directions, while she herself went directly at the enemy warship. Of course, the Rawalpindi did not last too long, but gave enough time for most of the other ships to escape. By the time the

German ship had sunk the Rawalpindi, it only had time to pursue and destroy a few more merchant ships. When we eventually arrived on the scene, we saw some wreckage, but little else.

There was another time when we got word that the Germans had left port, and were making a big swing into the Arctic Circle, before heading south into the open Atlantic. We were sent ahead of the main force, into the Arctic Circle to intercept. We did not meet them, but we did meet the worst weather experienced in that area for the previous twenty years or so. Even as far south of us as Scotland, there were heavy barrage balloons torn from their moorings, and other damage caused by the gale force winds. Our main force had to put into Iceland, or the Faeroe Islands, for protection, but we were not permitted that luxury, for it seemed more important to the British Admiralty for us to locate the enemy. I believe the enemy had more brains than we, or else they had better weather forecasting, for all that we met was the terrible weather. The seas were so mountainous they came crashing down on the bridge with such force that heavy timber supports had to be propped between the decks to prevent them from sagging. That was the first time I experienced any bad sea sickness, but I also had the company of people who had many years of sea time, and still were as sick as I was feeling. I believe I got over it more quickly than most, but that was because I found some medicine in the Sick Bay that I tried, which seemed to work well. In fact, I got a lot more business from others who had heard of the remarkable cure, and wanted to try it. The only details of this medicine, that I can recall were that it was dispensed under the name of Eastman pills, and that it is normally used as a tonic for patients recovering from illness, and contains some strychnine, which does have some medicinal benefits, but is also a deadly poison. Accordingly, it is definitely not recommended for general use.

There were many days where there were no regular meals prepared by the ship's galley staff. They simply cut huge slabs of canned corned beef, which they left available to anyone who had an appetite. They also had a huge metal tub which they partially filled with water, smashed big pieces of chocolate into the mix, and then ran a steam hose into the tub to get the mix as hot as possible. They then stirred the mix with an oar from one of the lifeboats, and left the whole thing available to anyone who felt the need for a beverage. Incidentally, there were lifelines extending through various parts of the ship, and particularly to the ship's galley. If you thought you had problems clinging to these lines to get there safely, it was nothing compared to the problems you had on the return trip with your share of the corned beef, and the hot chocolate.

This was the type of life we had during those winter months, although we were somewhat fortunate in that we were able to spend few days at Christmas in the Scottish port of Oban. Oban was a collection port for outgoing convoys, and a place that had received a severe bombing raid from the German Air Force. Considerable damage had been done to many of the merchant ships, and we had been sent there to provide more anti-aircraft protection while their air defences were being improved. However, this was a very temporary arrangement, and lasted for only a few days.

Sometime during those early months on the Phoebe, I was given a fairly short leave, and managed to get back home for a while. It could have been given because we received orders to proceed to another theatre, and one from which we might not soon return to England. Getting leave to go back to the London area, simply meant leaving one war zone for another, for this was the time of the German all-out effort to destroy London. The devastation that met the eyes was hard to believe, and the tales that met the ears were also difficult to comprehend. There were stories of people being killed in large groups in subway stations; women being killed while they stood in line to obtain scarce food and kitchen utensils; and people being killed as their homes collapsed around them.

My youngest brother, Bob, had returned from his evacuation to safety outside of the danger area, and was with my parents as they were asking me about being at sea in the North Atlantic. This was definitely not a scenario of the return of our brave hero from the sea. You just listened to their experiences, and realized that they had a far more dangerous life than we had. While we were catching up on our various experiences, I heard the sound of the air-raid sirens giving warning of the approach of the German bombers. I felt that maybe we should proceed to the air-raid shelters, but since no one else suggested it, I did not think it proper for our hero to be the first to make the suggestion. Then we heard the drone of airplanes overhead, but I didn't want to ask whether they were friendly or otherwise. This was followed by the sound of the anti-aircraft guns, and then the whistle of a bomb coming down. I must have turned a little pale, because my brother Bob just paused in what he was saying, and assured me there was nothing to worry about. He casually informed me that the bomb was some distance away, which proved to be true, since the explosion was in the next block. It all seemed to prove the point of a joke being bandied at that time. It was the story of the Londoner who joined the Navy and went to sea, so his family gave him a white feather, the British symbol of cowardice. I believe that it was only a short time after that leave that HMS Phoebe was detached from the Home Fleet and ordered into the Mediterranean.

II. Mediterranean

Getting into the eastern end of the Mediterranean, at that particular time in the war, was much easier said than done. The trick was getting past the Strait of Pantellaria near the centre of the Mediterranean. This is that relatively narrow stretch of water between Sicily and the North African coast. There, the enemy could concentrate enough submarines, motor torpedo boats, and aircraft to inflict considerable damage on any ship willing to take the risk. There was a small convoy of very fast ships exposed to that risk. The objective was to provide vital supplies for the British Army who were fighting in the North African desert, but this convoy, with the Phoebe as part of its escort, was to occur some months later. The only way to be reasonably sure that you would arrive at this destination was to take the long way around the continent of Africa. We made stops at Gibraltar, Freetown in Sierra Leone, Durban in South Africa, Mombassa in Kenya, and Aden in the Red Sea, before proceeding up the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal to Alexandria in Egypt. This was our introduction to a theatre of war that had already grown into a primary area of naval activity, and would become even more hectic in the months to come. Even then, the Eastern Mediterranean had been tagged with the ominous label as being the graveyard of British cruisers. I believe the veteran of the cruiser force at that time was HMS Gloucester, who had looked us over and given us about six weeks. That estimate had a tragic sequel, which I will relate in an upcoming section.

At the time that HMS Phoebe entered the Mediterranean Sea, there had been certain recent developments there, and many other important events occurred within a period of a few short weeks. I am not positive of the chronological sequence, but I seem to remember many things happening at the same time. The German Army, in the form of the Africa Corps under General Erwin Rommel, had not yet arrived in North Africa. Maybe he had recently arrived and had not yet built his formidable fighting force, or his equally formidable reputation. The German Army had come to the assistance of their Italian ally, and were invading Greece. The British Army in North Africa had been ordered to ship some of their forces to Greece, which may have been a nice gesture, but possibly a foolish one. I don't profess to be any kind of military expert, especially from a forty-five year distance, but the force was woefully inadequate to stop the German juggernaut; additionally it caused a catastrophic weakness in their North Africa force, upon which Rommel was about to pounce.

We did manage to explore the sights of Alexandria, Egypt, before we got too deeply involved in the fussing and feuding between the British, Germans, and Italians. Alexandria was a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there. There were strange sights, and even stranger smells. Even the local beer was made from onions, and you had to get past the smell, before you could get used to the taste. It was a far cry from what we had seen when we went ashore in Scotland. Yet something that we took for granted after we had been there a short time.

The Phoebe anchorage in Alexandria was right next to HMS Medway, a submarine depot ship. I believe there were enough spare parts carried by the Medway to build a complete submarine from scratch. The ship also had replacement crews, and crew quarters, for the various British submarines that returned from patrol, and it was an impressive sight to see a submarine return, sometimes after days of being overdue, to come past the Phoebe with insignia streaming showing how successful the patrol had been. On one occasion, I went aboard the Medway to visit a friend who was part of that ship's company. There were several submarines tied alongside the Medway, and one of them happened to be going outside the harbour, where it was to submerge and test some equipment. Since I mouthed off that it might be an interesting experience, my friend obtained permission for me to go with her. I had already been told that the submarine was HMS Thunderbolt, and had formerly been HMS Thetis. Like everyone else at that time, I also knew that HMS Thetis had gone down off the coast of England while undergoing sea trials, with the loss of about a hundred men. Sometime after, the ship had been salvaged, refitted, and sent into service as HMS Thunderbolt. I knew all this before I went aboard, but what I didn't know was that I was to remain in one place when the ship got the order to dive, and this one place had a knowledgeable individual who stayed with me. He felt obligated to spend the entire time we were submerged in explanations of how many bodies were recovered in this spot, and that spot, and how many were recovered in the very place we were occupying just then. I must admit that I began to wonder whether this was the most intelligent thing I had ever done. Shortly after my brief experience with submarine life, HMS Thunderbolt went out on patrol and never returned.

Our first serious involvement with the war going on in the neighbourhood, was when we had to assist in the evacuation of Greece. The British had decided that it was time for another evacuation, and we had got very proficient at this after Dunkirk. We liked it so much that the very troops we took off Greece, we put them in Crete so we could evacuate them later. We made three trips from the mainland of Greece, under cover of darkness, and put the troops ashore on the island of Crete. I believe that our evacuation point in Greece was a place called Calamata on the southern coast. We would go in as close as we dared, and put the ship's boats into a ferrying operation from the ship to the shore. The entire ship remained in a high state of alert for we knew the Germans were very close. The first priority was given to what they sublimely called the walking wounded. When these soldiers realized that if they were unable to walk to the shore and board a lifeboat they would then be taken prisoner, it was remarkable who walked, and crawled. They came with the most terrible wounds imaginable; they came with stumps for arms; they came with shrapnel in their heads and torsos; and they even came with face wounds where they were unable to see, and were led by others. They had been treated mostly with emergency field dressings, and been beating a retreat that way for days. They were all so tired that once on the ship, they went to sleep right where they fell. I remember one fellow who was sitting at a table in the Sick Bay, and was soaking the stump of his amputated arm to remove a dressing that had been stuck there for days. Every time I turned away to attend to some-one else, his head would bang on the table as he gave in to his total exhaustion. The Sick Bay staff would spend all night, and all the next day, doing what could be done for them. Sadly, other than putting new dressings on old wounds, and removing some shrapnel where possible, we could give them only rest and relaxation until they received proper hospital attention.

The excitement of those times is well illustrated by an incident that occurred to the Phoebe when we were in Suda Bay, Crete. We had disembarked the troops, and were in process of refuelling and reammuniting. The ammunition ship was tied to us on one side, and the oil tanker was moored to us on the other. After so many hours of being at battle stations, some of the crew were being given some free time so they could clean themselves up somewhat, and get a little refreshment. I happened to be on deck looking at the partially submerged wreck of HMS York, which was a fairly heavy British cruiser and which had been damaged by enemy attack, when we heard the noise of an airplane diving at us with obviously nasty intent. It had kept a low altitude as it had approached the mountain by the side of the bay, then climbed over the mountain top before diving, so it would have the element of surprise. Surprised we were, so much so that one of the ship's gunners, who had happened to be walking past as he returned from the showers, had nothing but a towel wrapped around him when he climbed to operate the gun and return the fire. Of course, the towel fell off, and it was indeed a strange sight to see a naked man swivelling to keep aiming at the aircraft. I can only assume that it distracted the German air crew, for they missed us entirely with their bombs. With all that ammunition and fuel around, we would have made a pretty loud noise if their aim had been better.

This same evacuation scenario was repeated after the Germans had obtained a foothold in Crete. The Phoebe had made three trips from Greece to Crete, and then we made some three trips from Crete to Alexandria. Some of the very people whom we evacuated from Crete knew their way around the ship because we had already evacuated them from Greece. While all this was going on, there was heavy fighting on land, and at sea between the German Air Force and the British Navy. The Germans were using their Stuka dive bombers with great effect, and were enforcing the notion that this was the graveyard of British warships. Some of the Stukas even had sirens fitted on their wings so that when they dived to attack, the scream of their engines and the wail of their sirens would paralyse the gunners into immobility. It seemed that our normal operating procedure was to get the troops aboard under cover of darkness, then to steam at full speed to get as much distance as possible before daylight. At dawn, the German reconnaissance planes would be out scouring the waters looking for us. When they had located us, then reported our position to their bombers, who would fly out to the interception point and attack. Naturally, the more distance we covered, the harder we were to find, and the more difficult it was for their bombers to be able to get out to us, to attack, and then to return.

Such was the situation one beautiful sunny Sunday when we were making haste to put that distance between us and the German Luftwaffe. It was very reminiscent of another beautiful sunny Sunday during the previous year, but that event has already been recorded. Phoebe was racing at full speed toward Egypt in April, 1941, when we were attacked by some fifteen Stuka dive bombers. They dove at us from all directions, but mostly came in out of the sun, so the sun would be in the eyes of our gunnery crews. The Phoebe maintained its speed, but did all sorts of twists and turns to take evasive action, and forced everyone to cling to something solid so as not to take a dive into the ship's side, or beyond. The beautiful blue Mediterranean sky became black with gunfire bursts, and the air became acrid with the smell of cordite. How the ship survived such a concentrated attack is somewhat hard to fathom. But despite the tall columns of waterspouts that were springing up around us, we did make it safely back to base.

It was during that particular attack that our Gunnery Officer got a little perturbed. Since my battle station was in the Sick Bay, and I had nothing to do until the ship was hit, I had semi-official permission to be on the bridge and take pictures. It was tacitly understood that I should stay out of everyone's way as the ship was fighting back, but in the excitement of the moment I got in the Gunnery Officer's way. He has to rush from side to side as the attacking planes came in, and bark orders through his headset. He ordered one turret to open fire, and another turret be aimed on the other side as the plane passed overhead, so

they would have an opportunity to send a little something up the German's tail-pipe. Somehow, we had a collision in the middle of the bridge and I could tell from his language that he was very annoyed with me. To make matters worse, one of the seaman boys happened to come up on the bridge at that particular time with a large pot of tea and a handful of mugs. Incidentally, the ship did have some twenty or so boys who had signed up to begin twelve-year hitches, starting from the time they had attained age eighteen. At that time, they were mostly sixteen and seventeen year olds, who had not yet even started to serve their time. Anyway, this particular seaman boy had received orders that at this time on each day, he was to make the pot of tea and bring it up on the bridge to the signal staff. He was not the type to question any orders, and obviously he didn't think that a little air attack would prevent his superiors from enjoying a nice cup of tea, so he was carrying out his appointed mission. He wasn't aware that I had just collided with the Gunnery Officer, and that said officer was in a very foul mood when he collided with the tea-pot on his return trip to the opposite side. I was hiding around the corner and keeping out of the way, when the Gunnery Officer told the tea-pot carrier to put the 'something' tea-pot down, and then go get lost. Again, our brave seaman boy followed his orders to the letter, and immediately put the tea-pot and cups down right there where he was told, in the precise middle of the bridge, then with a suitable wooden expression, went down the after stair-way.

It was easily predictable what would happen when the Gunnery Officer rushed back across the bridge, but then, it must be difficult to be rushing around with a cumbersome head-set trailing the cord behind you; talking and listening to several gun-crews at once; keeping your eyes on the sky for attacking airplanes; while watching out for teapots underfoot as well. At that point I also felt it prudent to leave the bridge, particularly when I heard him shouting to the captain that people were taking pictures and serving tea, and what did they think this was all about. With that kind of ill-humour, I began thinking that this was no place to be, and so I, too, took my wooden expression down the after stair-way, and got lost.

Two final notes on those trips. In one case, HMS Gloucester was sent out from Egypt to join up with us to provide more anti-aircraft protection, but she was attacked and sunk before she got that far out to our position. This was approximately at the end of the six-week period that the Gloucester had given the Phoebe, but there was no joy on that account for any of us. The other incident was when we reached the pier in Alexandria to disembark the troops. I was amazed to recognize Lord Louis Mountbatten and Admiral Andrew Cunningham standing together, and waiting for our return. All ranks in the British navy had a great deal of respect for Lord Louis, and he, too, had just lost his ship, HMS Kelly, in an attack very similar to the one that we had experienced.

After the Greece and Crete affairs, the Phoebe performed a variety of tasks in the Eastern Mediterranean. We happened to be in Haifa when the ship made an emergency departure, leaving a large portion of the crew ashore enjoying some unexpected free time, because there was insufficient time to wait for their recall. A large enemy land convoy had been reported as moving down the coast road toward Beirut, Lebanon. HMS Phoebe left Haifa during the evening hours and steamed all through the night at top speed so we would be in position by the following dawn. As soon as there was enough daylight, we ran directly into the direction of the coast, and found the enemy convoy in a very exposed position. They had the sea on one side, and the cliff face on the other, and absolutely nowhere to go for cover. It was not a pretty sight to see large trucks being tossed in the air like toys; rock slides being brought down on the vehicles; and a great deal of human life being destroyed. I suppose that from a military point of view, the operation was a complete success and contributed to the overall objective of killing the enemy before he kills you, but still one can not derive a feeling of great exhilaration from seeing human life destroyed.

It still surprises me as to how one can get so used to the din of all guns firing, the smell of the explosions, and the noise and chaos of a ship responding to an attack. When we were in harbour in Alexandria, we had to take our turn at harbour defence. This entailed leaving the harbour and patrolling at a point just outside, so we would be in position to prevent surprise attacks coming in low over the water. I learned later there was a series of attacks, lasting for several hours, which occurred after I had gone to sleep. At breakfast the following morning, I heard discussion of this plane doing this and that plane doing that, and so much vibration on the ship that rivets had been popping out of the steel plating. All this was news to me, for I had slept soundly, and without any assistance from the daily issue of the King's rum.

Another task that was required of the Phoebe was to assist in the escort of a convoy that was trying to run the gauntlet of the Strait of Pantellaria. This convoy consisted of four fast ships that had left England with vital supplies intended for the British Army, who were trying to hold back the Rommel onslaught. We had heard that each of these four ships had been loaded with identical cargoes, so even if only one ship got through, the run would be deemed a success. I hope this was true, because there was only one ship left by the time that we arrived at the spot where we relieved the escort from Malta, and completed the final leg to Alexandria. It was reported that the Phoebe survived more than fifty bomber attacks from the time we entered the Mediterranean, until we were hit by an aerial torpedo outside of Tobruk.

III. Tobruk

While the war was not going too well for the British Navy, it was going even worse for the British Army in the Libyan desert. All the gains that the army had made across Libya, had been reversed by the Rommel drive toward the Egyptian border. The only bright spot in the military picture, was that during the British retreat, they had left a garrison in the port city of Tobruk. This eventually proved to be a brilliant stroke of military ingenuity, for without this thorn in the side of Rommel and his Africa Korps, the Germans would probably have been in Egypt itself. To enable the garrison in Tobruk to survive the constant barrage and assaults by the German Army, there was a continual need for supplies and ammunitions, and the only way that these could be replenished, was by ships coming from the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Since these ships were subjected to everything that the enemy could throw at them, only extremely fast ships were selected. Another requirement was they had to have a good escorting force, and even then the most dangerous part of the trip was conducted under cover of darkness. I believe that the ships carrying the supplies were mostly very modern mine-layers, which had the speed capability that was required. While the supply ships were inside the harbour being unloaded, the Phoebe and other escorting vessels patrolled the sea outside, until the convoy could be re-assembled for the wild dash back to Alexandria. We had made several runs of this type to Tobruk, when our luck ran out and we were hit as we patrolled outside the harbour.

Again, it was either a guardian angel, or the fickle finger of fate, that put me some place other than where I should have been. When the ship was at battle stations, my duty area had always been in the sick bay, in the forward part of the Phoebe. The other medic always manned the auxiliary first aid station in the after part of the ship. There was usually a double set-up for most operations, so if one place suffered damage, coverage could be given from the alternate site. The only time this was changed, was when my opposite number was sick, and was confined to the sick bay. That was the one occasion when I was assigned to cover his station, so he could remain in bed, but that was also the one occasion when the ship took the hit.

We had escorted the supply ships to Tobruk harbour, and were doing our patrol routine outside at the time. Since I was deep down in the ship below the water line, and all water-tight doors between our group and the open deck above were tightly sealed, we knew little of what was going on. We heard the guns firing, and felt the ship taking the usual evasive actions, but it seemed just a normal type routine. That is, until we heard a loud explosion, and could feel the ship give a tremendous shudder. At the same time, the ship went way down on one side and only partially righted herself. We were all thrown into a heap on the starboard side, and because all the lights had gone out, it took some time to untangle ourselves.

In a reasonably short time, the auxiliary lights came on, but we had to remain at our stations until we had orders to do otherwise. We heard through the loud-speaker system, the various orders being given for the lifeboat crews to assemble on the upper deck, which gave us the impression that some personnel were getting off. We later found that boats, torpedoes, and other gear on the starboard side were being jettisoned to lighten the ship on that side so she would not list so much. Shortly after, I received orders to report to the sick bay, and left the after station and went forward.

It seemed that the Phoebe had been making a fast turn to avoid a torpedo that had been fired by an attacking airplane, when she was hit by another torpedo fired from a different quarter. The torpedo had hit the ship below the water-line, and had ruptured one of the fuel tanks; as well as an ammunition magazine compartment below one of the main armament gun turrets. These compartments had then filled with sea water, which was responsible for our heavy list to starboard. The hit on the ship was not too far from the sick bay, and although there were no casualties in the sick bay itself, the place was evacuated. Personnel entered the place at their peril, owing to the fumes from various chemicals that had been released from the shattered containers. Some medical supplies were obtained later by personnel equipped with gas masks, but these were not always in a usable condition.

My opposite number, the other medic, who had been minding his own business in his sick condition, had gone through a very traumatic time. Even though he had personally felt so lousy, he had been putting splints on broken limbs, trying to stop severe bleeding, and generally doing his best for those who had been injured. By the time I arrived to assist, he and the doctor, and the others who were available, had pretty well accomplished all that had to be done on an immediate basis. It was more a matter of cleaning up, making those who had been hurt as comfortable as possible, and trying to get the sick bay back into a usable condition. The ship spent many hours after that limping back to Alexandria at a reduced speed, but fortunately we did not experience any further attacks in our weakened condition. I believe that our escort on the return trip was HMS Ajax of Graf Spee fame.

When the Phoebe reached Alexandria, we were immediately placed in a floating dry dock, so the water could be pumped out and the ship made seaworthy. There were to be no repairs made to any inside parts of the ship. The plan was simply to cover the damaged hull with steel plates so we could steam under our own power to a place where complete repairs could be made. However, the first order of business once the pumping had been completed, was to remove the bodies of those unfortunate crew members who had been in the ammunition magazine when the ship was hit. For some unexplainable reason, although the pumping had ceased, there were two or three feet of a mixture of diesel oil fuel and sea water left in the bottom of the magazine. It was still there when I was ordered down to assist the doctor in the recovery.

A naked electric light had been hung from the upper deck, and was suspended into the bottom chamber some three decks lower. A line on a block had also been made available so the bodies could be hoisted up to the deck above. Both the doctor and I wore shorts

when we descended, for we knew that slopping around in a black mixture of diesel oil and sea water would ruin any clothing we wore. When we reached the bottom compartment, we had to go down the last remaining rungs of the ladder, and get used to the slime that was almost to our waist. To say that the scene that met our eyes was awful, would be a gross understatement. This, too, was after our eyes had adjusted somewhat to the darkened conditions down there. There was the constant sound of the drip of oil and water. There were shells and cordite charges hanging perilously out of their storage slots, and the wreckage was strewn on the deck below our feet beneath the oil. We had to shuffle along each aisle, feeling with our legs and feet, until we encountered something that could only be a body. Then we had to take a deep breath, so we could reach beneath the oil, where he could be lifted and carried back to the point where he could be hoisted above.

In a very short time, we were both covered from head to toe in a black, pungent, oily mess, and in that state, and in that gloom, we even had difficulty in seeing each other. Most of the bodies were recovered fairly soon, but there were a couple that we had some problem finding, and a bigger problem recovering. I paused at that point to give the utmost credit to the doctor. I saw him venture into places, where I was extremely concerned for his safety. At one point in the search for the last remaining body, we knew that it could only be at the far end of one of the aisles. This was an aisle that we had not penetrated to the far end. This aisle had shells hanging out on each side and were resting against each other in a mass that reached from the ceiling to a few inches above the oil. The only way to get past this obstruction was to hold your breath, then duck your head under and go forward a distance before you got up again. I knew that this was extremely hazardous, for the whole mass could have come down on him, and could have crushed him, or pinned him under until he died, or maybe both of the above. Fortunately, he did make it and returned back to the obstacle with the last of the dead, and with him pushing from one side, and me pulling from the other, we finished the most unpleasant task.

Only then were we both able to climb out of that depressing place, and rejoin the living in the sunshine above. We both felt that the bodies were much more than just shapeless and inert masses that had to be removed. We did not have to be reminded that a few short hours before, they had been as much a part of the ship as we, ourselves. We thought of those who had died, and related that person to the many memories we had of them when they had been living. One was a fellow that had a terrific sense of humour, and used it to make the ship a far more pleasant place to be. Another was a fellow that was a part-time barber, and had given me a haircut just two days before he died. One was a fellow from New Zealand, accompanied on the ship by his brother, but the brother was uninjured and one could feel his grief for the rest of the time he was aboard. The bodies were cleaned to remove the diesel oil, dressed in clean clothing to restore some human dignity, and taken ashore. They were given a military funeral by the ship's company several days later, before internment in a cemetery in Alexandria.

After a slight rearrangement of the ship's crew, with some of the originals leaving and their replacement by new members, the ship left the Mediterranean. We learned later that the Phoebe was destined for New York, where she would be one of the early British warships repaired under the terms of the Anglo-American Lend Lease agreement. Of course, we had to somewhat reverse the route taken by the ship when we entered the Mediterranean. This meant stops at various ports in East, South, and West Africa, before we crossed the Atlantic to the West Indies, and then north to New York. I believe that the ship had received orders to jettison some ammunition after we had cleared the danger zones, but whether this meant a transfer to another warship, or a transfer to the deep, I am not completely sure. In any event, we did neither, for it was fired into an enemy stronghold in Italian Somaliland, which we happened to pass on our journey. This seemed to be a typical Phoebe farewell gesture, as we departed the friendly seas of the Mediterranean.