

HMS Phoebe

Newsletter

February 2007



Here we are again well into the new year, and hoping every one had a good Christmas and not too much to drink celebrating the arrival of 2007. The thick fog before Christmas was a bit different and one morning it looked like it had been snowing, the frost was almost an inch thick in this area, and kids were making snowballs, amazingly my windscreen was not frozen and the wipers cleared the heavy frost easily.

Hope no one got caught out over the cancellation of flights, it must have been horrendous at the airports, luckily our relations arrived from Las Vegas on time.

Reunion 2007 - I am sorry but the Saturday trip to Faversham Brewery is cancelled. A lot of you will be disappointed I know, but having received the 2007 brochure we find the cost of admission has increased to £6.50 per person, and considering the tour is only for approx one and a half hours, it is too much to expect you to pay, however the visit to Canterbury is still on. Not visiting the brewery will give you more time in Canterbury, there are various interesting sights to visit in the city, I will obtain a visitors guide to detail them. The shopping centre is pedestrians only, and usually on a Saturday there is some event taking place, busker's etc. The Sunday paddle steamer trip is still on, it leaves from the Historic Dockyard about 10am, you will have to make your own way there, car parking is free, may I ask those of you going on the trip and have cars give lifts to those who have not. When the steamer returns to the dockyard you will have the rest of the day to walk round the dockyard. I understand there are more attractions now, RNLI have a large display area, you can go aboard HMS Cavalier, if you are not a claustrophobic sufferer go below on the submarine and experience what submariners endured, passages are narrow so watch out for getting straps and loose clothing hooked up. If the Ropery is open its well worth a visit. The restaurant will be open and serves quite cheap meals.

If you are walking back to the hotel I suggest you leave the dockyard by the Main Gate situated at the opposite end to the car park, cross the road by the roundabout and follow the sign for the Royal Engineers Museum & Gillingham. The hotel is about 10 minutes walk from the Dockyard Main Gate.

(I am still waiting for a reply from the Paddle Steamer company)

VETERANS LAPEL BADGE

This badge has been mentioned in previous newsletters, but the timescale to be eligible has been altered, it now reads:

To those who enlisted in HM armed services between September 3rd 1945 and December 31st 1969.

Application forms can be had from:-

Veterans Services,

Veterans Agency, Norcross, Blackpool, FY5 3WP.

(or phone: 0800 169 2277)

Further information on any issues affecting veterans' lives, can be obtained from the free national veterans help line 0800 169 2277. Or on line: < www.veteransagency.mod.uk >

Too many reminders for subs are being sent out, if you can't remember if you have paid or not, just give the treasurer a ring: **01235 211501**. A dated record of each payment is made on your record card as soon as it is received. Lil does not mind how often she is asked to check. We can accept standing orders too, if that is the way you would rather do it, phone Lil for the account number you require, this will be noted on your record card.

ATM mugging:

It is rumoured that if when using your credit card at a ATM machine and a person threatens you with a weapon demanding you enter your pin number and withdraw cash, you can enter your pin number in reverse order! which will still pay out the money but also inform the police, who will respond. This is not so, it is false. For one thing the police would not be able to respond quick enough to catch the crook, also entering the wrong pin number would come up with an error, entering a wrong pin number three times and your card would be withheld by the machine. What if you have a pandemic number such as 3773 how can you enter that in reverse? Although this idea was put forward to banks in 1993 by an American maths professor it was proved to be unworkable. If unfortunately you are threatened, do as you are told, its not worth risking your life for.

(Scams and Falsehoods can be checked free at www.snopes.com)

The following EU Directive has come into force:

“Vehicle Manufacturers will be responsible for disposing of their own brands when they are no longer needed, and will issue owners with a certificate of destruction”

Car owners will be able to have their old cars scrapped for free under a scheme that begins on New Year's Day. Manufacturers will be responsible for disposing of their own brands when they are no longer needed, and will issue owners with a certificate of destruction.

No details as yet where these sites will be situated, but I reckon present scrap yards will be employed by manufacturers to accept their make of vehicles for scrapping. Although scrapping will be free, there is no mention of whether this includes the collection of the vehicle.

Seasonal Cards: Lilian and I would like to thank all of you who sent us cards for Christmas and the New Year, we had in total 167 cards, at least half of them came from shipmates, some only had Christian names on them, but we were however able to put surnames to some by looking at the post mark. It is just great to have received so many.
A big thank you again. Roy & Lil.

Bereavement - Mrs Taylor

All members offer their Sympathy and Condolence
to S/m Peter Taylor and family for their sad loss.
Our thanks to S/m George and Josie White who were
able to attend her funeral.

68 Years before the 1982 Battle of the Falklands there was another sea battle fought there. (Edited Version).

Battle of the Falklands December 8th. 1914.

At daylight in Port Stanley on December 8th, 1914, the battle-cruisers *HMS Invincible & Inflexible* along with the cruisers *HMS Bristol, Carnavon, Glasgow, Cornwall* and *Kent* were coaling ship. The armed merchant cruiser *Macedonia* was out side the harbour on guard, also in harbour was the slow pre-dreadnought *HMS Canopus*. Just before 8 a.m. she signalled "Enemy in Sight".

Diary of Capt. J D Allen, RN, HMS Kent.

"No time was lost and at twenty minute to nine, the *Kent* was under way and steaming past the flagship, a general signal to all ships to raise steam for full speed had been made, the flag ship told *Kent* to wait at the harbour entrance for further orders. From aloft one could see over the land two cruisers approaching, one with four funnels and one with three. We discovered later that these were the German cruisers *Gneiesenau & Nurüberg*. All our ships were busy getting clear of the colliers, raising steam and preparing for action. In the *Kent* we were already prepared for action, 3 ensigns and the Union jack were hoisted.

The *Gneiesenau & Nürnberg* came steadily on towards the harbour until only 1400 yds away from the *Kent*. Suddenly we heard *Canopus* open fire on them with her 12" guns across the land, we saw the shell strike the water a few hundred yards short of the German ships, which surprised them, they must also have seen the masts of *Invincible* and *Inflexible* as they turned round and made off. Three more cruisers were coming up from the South; these were the *Scharnhorst, Dresden*, and the *Leipzig*.

HMS Glasgow, Invincible and the *Inflexible* came out, followed by the *Cornwall* and *Carnavon*. The Admiral now signalled for *Kent* to shadow the German ships, keeping out of range. Shortly the *Glasgow* passed us at full speed, then came the *Invincible* and *Inflexible* sending up great columns of black smoke, then the *Carnavon* and *Cornwall*. It was a magnificent sight to behold in that smooth sea and bright sun.

The German ship were straight ahead, steaming in line abreast. At 1020 a.m. the signal was made for a general chase, and off we went as hard as we could go. It was just a question of who could steam the fastest. *Invincible* and *Inflexible* were increasing their speed by the minute and soon passed us, their 25 knots making them rapidly gain on the enemy. At 12.55, *Inflexible* opened fire with her fore turret, at the :*Leipzig*, minutes later the *Invincible* fired at the same ship. The first shots fell short, the *Leipzig* was still out of range, at 1.20 p.m. a 12" shell exploded alongside the rear most enemy ship making the light cruiser *Leipzig*, *Scarnhorst* & *Nürnberg* turn sharply away to starboard. Seeing this, the *Kent*, *Glasgow* and *Cornwall* turned and gave chase. This course change found us steaming across the German big ships wake who were about four miles away. We had a splendid view of them without any risk of being hit ourselves. It was a wonderful sight, the German ships 6 inch" & 8 inch" guns were firing salvo after salvo with marvelous rapidity and control, flash after flash travelled down their sides from head to stern. We could not see much of our own battle- cruisers due to the amount of smoke they were making, but it was evident they were keeping up a rapid fire, we could see their shells bursting all around and on board the German ships.

The battle became separate engagements, with *Invincible* and *Inflexible* engaging *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. The fastest German ship *Dresden* escaped; *Cornwall* and *Glasgow* engaged the *Leipzig*, leaving the *Kent* to go after *Nürnberg*.

It was now near 4.0clock, the *Nürnberg* was still some distance ahead. Should we be able to catch her before dark? Orders were given for the engine room to make a supreme effort to increase speed, officers and stokers responded. There was little we could do on deck, so we assisted the stokers by smashing up all the wood we could find, spars, ladders, lockers, hen-coops, targets, and anything else suitable to burn. We were doing 25 knots now and gaining on the enemy. At 5 p.m. the *Nürnberg* opened fire with her after guns, we were confident if we could get close enough to open fire we could sink her. It was disappointing that we were being fired upon but could not reply until our guns were in range. It was only a matter of time now, the *Kent* could

put up with a few hits at such long range, it only made us feel more determined, several shots had gone through our rigging and funnels, but nothing more serious than that. It was raining lightly now and becoming misty, light was getting bad. We altered course to port, and opened fire with the fore turret and the two foremost casemates. The bad light made it difficult to see where the shots had fallen, but as far as could be seen they were close.

One shell hit the *Nürnberg's* after steering compartment below the water line, about 5.35 p.m., two of her boilers burst reducing her speed to 19 knots. The range was now closing fast, and at 5.45 p.m the *Nürnberg* turned, she had evidently given up hope of escape and meant to fight. As she turned she started firing her port guns, *Kent* turned to port too and opened fire with her starboard guns as soon as they could bear, both ships were firing as fast as they could, and getting closer. *Kent* steamed much faster than *Nürnberg* now, the range was down to 4,000 yards. Both ship were firing independently. We could see our shells bursting all over the *Nürnberg* and she was on fire, the noise from the guns and shell bursts was tremendous. It was hard to understand how the *Nürnberg* could survive so long. Obscured by smoke, we thought she had sunk, but as the smoke cleared, there she was still firing her guns. She turned away from us as if she was unable to face our heavy gun fire, her foretop-mast gone, funnels riddled with holes, her speed reduced, and only two of her port guns were firing. At 6.10 she turned towards us steaming very slowly, we crossed her bow raking her with our starboard guns as she came bows on, our 6"inch guns destroyed her forecastle guns. After crossing her bow we turned to port until we were almost on a parallel course with her, firing broadsides with our port guns into her. At last the *Nürnberg* ceased firing, we ceased firing too. She was stopped about 5,000 yards away and burning furiously. We steamed slowly towards her, making sure she could not fire a torpedo at us, her colours were still flying, she showed no signs that she was sinking, there was no doubt that we had to sink her, at 6.45 p.m, we opened fire on her, after five minutes of being repeatedly hit she hauled down her colours, our firing stopped immediately. We could see now she was sinking.

Our boats riddled with holes could not be used, men manned our upper deck with heaving lines, life-buoys, rolled up hammocks, and anything that would float. *Nürnberg's* crewmen were jumping into the sea and swimming towards the *Kent*. At 7.26 she heeled over onto her starboard side, hung there for a few minutes then turning over she sank. We steamed slowly into the place where she went down, it was a ghastly sight, the sea covered in debris, men clinging to anything that floated, some weakly swimming then disappearing below the waves, without our boats there was little we could do for them, our men shouted encouragement throwing things over the side for the swimmers to cling to. Only twelve men were picked up, of them only seven survived. A north-west wind had sprung up during the afternoon, the surface of the sea was very rough, and the water was very cold. We steamed back to Falkland Islands arriving the next afternoon, December 9th, and met the *Macedonia* coming out to look for us. We signalled to the Admiral "Sunk *Nürnberg*, regret to report 4 men killed, 12 wounded. Picked up 7 survivors. Wireless telegraphy damaged". All of Admiral Von Spee's squadron, with the exception of *Dresden*, had been sunk, together with two German colliers. In no other naval engagement of the Great war was there such a satisfying and decisive victory for the British.

On 15th December, *HMS Kent* with *HMS Glasgow* left Port Stanley to search for the *Dresden* and was present when *Dresden* was scuttled at Juan Fernandez on March 14th, 1915.

2007 Reunion:-

The latest report (Jan) from the King Charles hotel is that 32 rooms have so far been reserved. We are half way to reserving as many rooms as the last time we were there. Be aware that a wedding reception is also being held on the Saturday, guests will no doubt be reserving rooms, so my advice is to book ASAP. S/m Colin Critchley stayed here a short time ago for a reunion, he reports an enjoyable stay, but the bar was a bit expensive. (Regret to say this is quite normal for hotels).

I expect the hotel now conforms to the no smoking ban in public places. I have another regret to announce. Once again I forgot to write down the names of those who informed me they would like to go on the coach trip and/or the Paddle Steamer trip, can you please tell me again, this goes for everyone who wants to go on either/both trips. I have ordered a 49 seat executive coach for the Canterbury trip, seats will soon be taken, get your name down ASAP. I would also like names for the Steamer trip ASAP so I can inform the operator how many places are required.

A wet bar and snack bar should be open on board?.

Phone me for coach/boat places - 01235 211501.

(I recommend not falling into the river, its a 14 knot ebb tide).

Cruiser "Oppo"

Do any shipmate's who were aboard the cruiser, probably during the early/late 1940s recall the name of Leonard Skilton, he could have been RN or a RM at the time. I have had enquiries from his son in Australia, along with a photo of the cruiser coming alongside at Venice, the caption on the photo said it was taken on 26th February 1941, she is not in her war-paint, and we were at war with Italy in 41, it could therefore be one taken after the war. A photo I have of the cruiser alongside in Venice, looks like it was taken by the same photographer on the same day.

The Photographer was a Frederico Baschetti of Venezia.

Does anyone have a ships company list for 1946 & 1948 Commissions. Is the name L Skilton on either??? (I have mislaid my 1948 list).

I am sorry if this newsletter may be late arriving but my health took a downward turn while I was away in Cornwall for a few days. For some months I have had a breathing problem, panting whenever I did anything, even getting in and out of the car made me out of breath. My Doctor sent me for an x-ray, then a test by a consultant, but nothing showed up at either. We went down to Cornwall on Saturday 13th Jan, and on Sunday night at about 11 pm, I was in agony sitting on the side of the bed trying to breathe. I had no pains just this fight to breathe, paramedics were called, they did their best to alleviate the breathing then I was rushed to

the West Cornwall Hospital. The diagnosis , Fluid on the Lungs, also a heart attack!. I had various injections and drips inserted for the heart attack, finishing with a face mask that sealed itself to my face, oxygen etc was pumped in to displace the fluid in the lungs, at the same time a catheter was inserted for the fluid to drain into, I wore the mask for several hours until the fluid was gone, then I was placed in the recovery ward for 3 days before being moved to the general ward. I was supposed to go to the hospital at Truro for a Cardiogram, but the ambulance broke down so I had to wait until Monday for the check up. I was released that evening, just seven days after being admitted. Although only a small hospital, and greatly understaffed, I found the treatment I received first class. The Doctors and Nurses were all excellent, only one complaint, the meals were not very good. After a few days to recuperate, my son arrived on Saturday to drive Lil and I home to Oxford. Our thanks to everyone who sent cards or have been in touch by phone and email, I am as well as can be expected, no breathing problems or heart pains. A newly prescribed tablet named Inisopril was causing me to cough continuously day and night, this has now been replaced and the coughing has almost stopped.

A couple of years ago I joined a Hospital Insurance Plan, a daily sum is paid for each day/night I spend in hospital, this will be the third time I have claimed, but I forgot I had increased the monthly subscription, this time the payments are trebled. Well worth looking into if you're not insured.

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The up-dated members list due out this month has been put on hold for the moment, I hope to have it done in time to go out with the April newsletter.

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Cats at war

Cats do not have a natural or important place in mankind's wars in the same way as dogs, horses and some other animals do, since (as cat owners will know!) it is very difficult to get a cat to do what you want. There were stories that the Americans tried to use cats during the Vietnam war, but they were too easily distracted and either started playing or disappeared into the jungle! There is one function that cats have fulfilled since time immemorial, though, and that is as ship's cats, where they both kept the vessel's stores free from rodents and acted as mascots and companions to the crew.

They were especially important in wartime, when men were far from home for extended periods and welcomed feline companionship.

Sadly, since 1975 the British Royal Navy has banned cats, and indeed all animals, from its ships.

Bismarck, the German battleship, was sunk on 27 May 1941. Of more than 2200 men on board, only 116 survived, together with **Oscar**, the ship's cat. He was picked up by the British destroyer HMS *Cossack*, but that too was torpedoed a few months later, on 24 October, with the loss of 159 lives. Attempts to rescue the ship failed, and it was abandoned and sank two days later. Oscar survived again, was taken to Gibraltar, and then was taken on by HMS *Ark Royal*. His stay there was even shorter, as the aircraft carrier was torpedoed by U-81 on 13 November, eventually capsizing and sinking only 30 miles from Gibraltar. Yet again Oscar was lucky, but there were no more ships for him, as it was decided that his presence was certainly not lucky! Now known as 'Unsinkable Sam', this great survivor among cats stayed as mouse-catcher in the Governor General of Gibraltar's office buildings until he was taken by a brave ship to Belfast, in Northern Ireland (although some reports say Plymouth). There he lived until his death in 1955, at the 'Home for Sailors'. A portrait of him has a place of honour in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

HMS Argonaut. Ship's cat **Minnie** from this cruiser was one of the most travelled of naval cats. She joined the crew early in 1944 from Tyneside, in north-east England, and among many other pets that came and went she stood out and became indisputably 'the ship's cat'. A bit of a loner, she took no special friends and seemed to regard the whole ship as her domain; she'd sleep on the mess-decks just as happily as in the captain's cabin. Minnie was a tabby, with immaculate white paws and breast. Her first action was at the D-Day invasion of the Normandy beaches, where none of the pandemonium appeared to affect her routine of sleeping, eating and doing her rounds. Subsequently she sailed with *Argonaut* to the French Riviera; to Palermo, in Sicily; Colombo and Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); the Dutch East Indies; Sydney and Fremantle in Australia; several of the

larger Pacific island groups; and when news of the Japanese surrender was received in 1945, her ship was off Tokyo.. Lengthy peacetime voyages then followed; but after 2½ years 'before the mast' Minnie disappeared while the ship was in Singapore. She had previously gone missing in Hong Kong, where she was eventually found aboard another warship in the harbour, so it is thought she may have become fed up with *Argonaut's* long and monotonous voyages and sought adventure elsewhere. The ship waited until the last minute before having to sail without her, and she was sorely missed. A signal was sent to the Commander of the naval base to request her return to the UK if found — but she never was.

HMS *Prince of Wales*. In August of 1941 Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, was meeting President Roosevelt of the USA on board this battleship while it was positioned off the coast of Newfoundland; they were discussing the Atlantic Charter. Churchill noticed the ship's large, black cat **Blackie** apparently about to desert in favour of the American ship *Augusta*, moored alongside, whereupon he immediately bent down to stroke the cat and stopped him from leaving. Churchill was very fond of cats and at the time had his own 'Nelson' at home.

Blackie was, of course, straight away renamed **Churchill** and was a much loved mascot. When the ship was sunk later that year off Malaya by the Japanese, with great loss of life, Churchill the cat managed to make it ashore with some of the crew to Sime Road Royal Air Force Station in Singapore. He settled in with them, shared their rations and moved camp with them. But in February 1942 orders came to evacuate Singapore within hours and Churchill, off on one of his hunting trips, could not be found in time. Despite extensive searches, he finally had to be left to his fate.

The story is told of a cat called **U-Boat**, from a ship of unknown name, who loved to take shore leave — sometimes for days — as soon as his ship reached port, but with a cat's uncanny instinct would always return just before sailing time. One day he misjudged his timing and missed roll call — so the ship had to get under way. As the crew looked back, they saw U-Boat running helter-skelter along the dock before making a death-defying leap onto the deck. He promptly sat down to wash himself and regain his composure, to the delight of the crew who were so pleased to have their 'good luck mascot' safely back.