

Dear Mac,

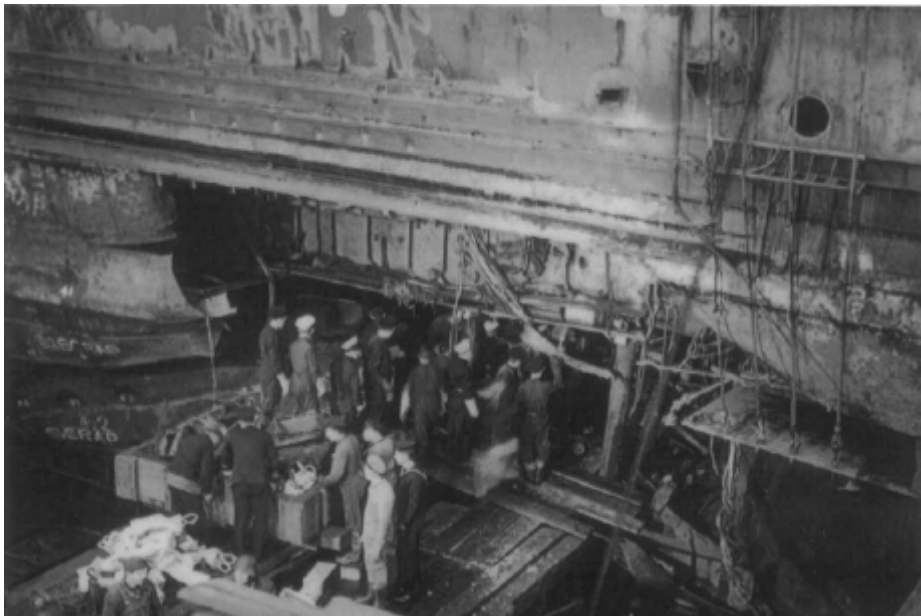
Thanks for your response to my email. If I correctly remember what I read on the website, you live in Scotland. I am writing to you from South Africa. My husband was born in Bexhill, Surrey, but lived in Egypt until he went to boarding school in the U.K. He had not been there too long when war broke out and eventually he, together with his mother and sister, came to South Africa and lived in Cape Town. His life in Egypt had revolved around the Alexandria Swimming Club so he loved the sea. He tried to join the navy in Cape Town, but they sent him away when he tried to lie about his age and he had to wait another year. He did his training at Simonstown Naval Base and his first posting, commission (or whatever you call it) was on HMS Phoebe. I have just recently been sent a copy of the letter he wrote to his mother in April, 1943, regarding the torpedoing of the Phoebe.

*Well, here is the great story of the torpedoing of H.M.S. "-----" that you have all been waiting for. (Censorship obviously made it necessary to leave out the name and he repeated this instruction to his family at the end of the letter again).*

*We left Simonstown on the evening of Sunday October 18th in company with our sister ship and we were told that our destination was Freetown, but that we would stop to oil at Pointe Noire, in French Equatorial Africa, as we couldn't make Freetown in one go. We were in for a big job, details of which would be announced later.*

*Well, everything went off hunky-dory until the morning of Friday the 23rd, when soon after sighting land and while preparations were being made for entering the harbour (I had just come off watch and was having breakfast with Andy), bang went a tinfish, right in the boys' messdeck, one compartment behind and below us. When we realised what had happened everyone made a wild dash to get up top and, needless to say I was in the lead. The hatch over our messdeck was closed, so we made for the marines messdeck, where a scramble was already in progress. I turned back because the gas and smoke that was billowing out from the hole was killing. However, there were too many coming on behind, so I turned back to the ladder and somehow managed to clamber up it and out onto the deck. Everyone was coughing and vomiting because the gas was really the most ghastly and sickly stuff I ever want to come in contact with. The ship was down by the bows and listing to port, but gradually, as the water flooded the damaged compartments, she steadied up a bit. A corvette which happened to be coming out of harbour at that time was quickly on the scene, and it was her arrival that definitely saved us from another 'fish'. Two had originally been fixed, one racing past our bows and the second catching us fair and square. Three fellows had been blown overboard and we stopped to pick them up. It came on to rain and we started to bring out the dead and wounded we could find. There were 16 dead recovered and we buried them at sea before going into Pointe Noire. Our sister ship sped off to get clear of any other subs that might have been knocking around and we staggered into harbour on our own. The next few days were spent in recovering the bodies from the wreckage and flooded messdecks. The messdecks below ours were 3/4 flooded with oil and water and bodies, tables, kitbags, coats; everything was floating around. I volunteered for body party, as quite a lot of my pals were among the dead. It was a rather gruesome job but it had to be done. The effects of the gas were disastrous and fellows who had inhaled too much were dying off like flies. They worked all during the day after the ship had been hit, but the gas was gradually eating away their lungs and they were collapsing all around. We had a mass burial at the Pointe Noire cemetery, and the first day we buried 28. Then on other days there were more funerals, until the total casualties were in the region of 60 dead. We lost one young S.African of 18 from Durban, who, when we went to Durban for that one night was not allowed ashore to see his parents and never had another chance. I don't think I'll go into detail about the work we had to do. It was just a question of getting the ship patched up sufficiently to be able to go across to America. Pumping out flooded compartments, salvaging all we could, clearing the wreckage, barricading up the adjoining compartments and patching up the hole itself as best we could. Unfortunately, the hole was 95% under water and all we could do was lay a new deck at the top of the hole and put a new plate on the outside. We shifted all the ammunition, cables and anything heavy onto the quarter-deck (blunt end) so as to try and lift the bows, and in the end we took out our foremost gun turret (80 tons) and stowed it in a cradle on the jetty, so that it would be brought across by*

*some other ship. That brought the ship up level. Well you know all about our living in the shed and the various forms of entertainment we had, so I won't elaborate on that. We left Pointe Noire on December 2nd and proceeded warily to sea, not knowing whether the ship would stand it or not. Unfortunately a spell of malaria descended on the ship, and when we arrived in Freetown there were 60 odd fellow down with it, including poor old boy (cannot read this word properly but think he is referring to himself.) Two were sent ashore to hospital and eventually recovered there, but on our journey from Freetown to Pernambuco we lost three fellows and buried them at sea. You know the other ports but I'll just repeat them, Trinidad, Guantanamo (Cuba), Key West (Florida) and finally New York. We went into dry dock and I went into hospital, fortunately missing a hell of a lot of filthy work in very cold weather. The hole turned out to be enormous, 60' by 30', and stretched right down to the keel, in fact there was no keel there. No one could quite understand how we had managed to come 10,000 miles with that gaping wound, but we did, and we had the weather on our side.*



The cruiser HMS Phoebe in dry dock, Brooklyn 1943

The rest of the letter goes on to tell how well he was looked after in New York by the wife of a Surgeon. She belonged to the Navy League, and really did look after them very well. My husband kept contact with them after the war and even to this day we are in touch with her daughter and son-in-law.

It has been interesting to learn that this vessel was twice torpedoed and twice repaired in New York. I presume that after she was repaired the first time and returned to duty in the Med, she then came down to South Africa via Suez? (I ask that because of the young man who was not allowed ashore in Durban to see his parents and then was one of the casualties of the torpedo.) Or would it have been down the West Coast?

I hope you won't be too bored with all this, but it has been very interesting to find this website. Actually, our son who is living in New Zealand is a journalist and he was researching some story when he came across this information.

Look forward to receiving your comments

Sincerely,

Val Shimmin.

Webmaster's Note: I have published the letter in full as I have received it. The web-site referred to is, unfortunately, not this one but I hope it encourages others with similar tales to forward them to me or the secretary.