

INTERVIEWS WITH FORMER BRITISH SEAMEN – PARTICIPANTS OF THE ARCTIC CONVOYS

INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF TAYLOR

Please tell a bit about yourself, how and why did you become a naval seaman?

I was born in Bradford, Yorkshire. I joined the Navy because of the war - that was the only reason. A holiday camp was taken over by the Navy where I did the usual training, like learning to row in the swimming pool! I was trained as a telegraphist and my first ship was a trawler based at Lowestoft and used for mine sweeping. There was no sleeping accommodation on board so we were billeted in an empty hotel - the only meals we had were spam and chips which we had three times daily! I can still eat it - believe it or not!

I was then transferred to Kyle of Loch Alsh in Scotland, a beautiful place to join one of the 50 Yankee lend-lease destroyers renamed *HMS Wells*. As a telegraphist, the higher the grade you obtained qualified you to a smaller ship where there were greater responsibilities, we were to escort two minelayers the 1st mine-laying squadron - and we laid mines in the Denmark Straights from Greenland down to Iceland in the Arctic.

This was my first trip into the Arctic and as a consequence of the atrocious violent and freezing weather, I was very sea-sick. An old hand gave me good advice to get up on the upper deck and in order to dodge the heavy seas coming in-board I had my meals under the torpedo tubes. We were glad of the long underwear - real passion killers - to keep us warm - the temperature being 50 below zero and the waves 80-90 feet high. You were cold and wet most of the time. After laying the mines, the two mine-sweeping cruisers left at high speed to return to base. Due to the heavy weather and our slower speed, we arrived at the base two days later.

As the ship was due for a boiler-clean I was transferred to a V & W destroyer *HMS Wrestler*. This was an old ship built about 1918. We saw service in the Mediterranean and returned to the UK in December for our first convoy to Russia. These were an absolute nightmare because of the high seas, freezing temperatures, U-boats and constant air-attacks. One of the big problems was the icing up of the guns and equipment on the upper deck - the spray coming in-board turning to ice which had to be constantly chipped away to prevent the balance of the ship being upset. I took part in seven convoys to Russia - another shipmate did twenty-one!

We came eventually to D-day. Most of the destroyers including the "Wrestler" which had taken part in the Russian convoys took part in that invasion on the 6th June 1944. Later on that date we hit a mine and took no further part. After being picked up I returned to Portsmouth and was drafted on a new frigate - *HMS Loch Achray* and joined the East Indies Fleet until the end of the war, returning to base in the UK, prior to discharge.

What was your feeling about Germany back then and was there an anti-Nazi sentiment?

We were very young men back then, only 18. We knew that Hitler and Germany wanted to take over Europe and so forth. Neville Chamberlain the Prime Minister, was the kind of individual who could be described as a weak sort of man, easily manipulated. It was a good thing they replaced him with Churchill. Without Churchill England would have gone under. It was his leadership, his determination, his speeches, that kept Britain going at that time.

Germany? I didn't have much against Germans. Their leaders were the problem and the regime that was in Germany at that time. Ideological anti-Nazi feelings? I was not aware of them that much, but in 1937-38 we began to get concerned, all those marches were taking place and it became obvious that something was going to happen. It eventually did and our feeling changed then very much to the anti-Nazi.

What did we think about Russia before the war?

We did not have much information about Russia. We knew that Stalin was a hard sort of lad in Russia at that time. It was relief to us to find out that Germany invaded Russia. It had a great effect on the result of the war and it also brought Britain and Russia together, and it was the start of the Russian convoys.

What kind of relationships did you have with the Russians?

We were on small ships. We never went past Polyarnoye and there was not much to see. We only had a few hours ashore just to have a look around the place. We were not welcomed all that well by the local people. They were seemingly mistrustful of us. We never talked to each other there was no provision made. We were not invited to their homes, we were not allowed to go out of the area there could be a trouble with the army, with the guards I can remember a later visit when things had changed since the earlier days. The decided to get on a little bit better with us There was a concert party. We did have an aircraft carrier with us, one of the ones converted from merchant ships. The concert was held in a hangar of the carrier, and we were allowed to send two people from each mess. We had about 10 messes onboard, so about 20 blokes went on that ship. I never got there so I have no idea what happened. I know that when the concert was over the blokes began to clap their hands and whistle, they did not know it was a sign of misappreciation in Russia.

How did we get along with the Russians? We did to a degree, but it was very difficult because of the language. When you meet somebody in the street what do you say? But once we did bring some Russian seamen with us, and that was very interesting. Two of them were placed into each mess of the destroyer. By the end of the trip, we were able to speak quite a bit of Russian, and he of English and we found it very entertaining. I gave one of them my hammock billet. We found them very amusing blokes. We got along very well together.

What was the aim of their trip to England?

They were going to UK to bring back another ship. An American battleship was handed over to the Russians□ I was on watch that particular day when they took the Russians onboard to give them an idea. They were on the way back and I was watching them and noticed that they were moving too fast. I felt there was going to be some trouble. They slowed down at the very last moment but hit the jetty and there was timber flowing all the way around! I never saw that ship again but that was very amusing.

Which day of the war do you remember the most?

There were, probably, several of them. I will always remember the first day of the war when Chamberlain said, 'This country is at war'. We were only young then and no one knew what was to come and how long it was going to last...

The other one was, probably, the first Russian convoy. The next one - *D-Day*. Then we hit a mine and that was the end of it and I didn't see anymore of the invasion.

Did you like the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses* and wasn't there a bit of exaggeration in them?

I quite liked them. There is a little bit of exaggeration, but unless you've experienced these hardships yourself. I remember seas 80 foot high and our ship coming up and literally falling down like this (*Geoff showed it falling forward nearly vertically - VK*). Three of us had to wash the mess - one held the bucket, another □ the mop, and another one was washing the floor. There was exhaustion, very little sleep. A little bit is overdone, but not really, it's true. I don't say that relationships between the captain and the crew was that terribly close, we knew each other, but

you don't see much of the captain, you've got your own job, you've got your own officers, not that much of supervision - you do what you've got to do.

The Cruel Sea. I think sometimes it would have happened, I think, you mean those survivors in the water? The submarine was more important. It was only at that war. It may have happened.

But those seamen were foreigners, and, if you remember, it was emphasized in the movie. Do you remember foreigners in the convoys? Were there any foreigners in your crew? What was their nationality?

There were a few of them. I remember Norwegians.

French? Polish?

We had French and Polish ships working with us. We had crews to help the language problems.

In *The Cruel Sea* there were Australians mentioned. Do you remember any Australians in your crew?

Yes, two or three on our destroyer. It was quite common.

Did you have a chance any of your former enemies or allies after the war?

No, I did not.

I went back to England and joined the police force there. Jobs were not easy to come by. A lot of people were looking for a job at that time, jobs which were no longer required. Jobs on ammunition factories, all that kind. Many factories were bombed, car factories and alike. Eventually I came to Australia in 1946. I resigned from the metropolitan police in London and joined the police force here. I couldn't see much future there.

I worked in the East End of London which was a rough place at that time. I was not lucky enough to get a job in A, B or C division which worked in all those glamour parts of London.

Dulstone was a place a couple of miles away, and there used to be political meetings there. It was held there since it was a Jewish section. A lot of Jews lived there. It was a rough place to start with. This bloke, Oswald Mosely's right hand man and his name was Geoffrey Ham. I will never forget this bloke. I remember him saying in one of his speeches: There isn't such a thing as a British Jew, an Eskimo Jew or a German Jew. There is one Jew who is a Jewish Jew and we don't like him! And then the crowd erupted, fighting was going on. I said to a bloke who was standing next to me, a little Jewish bloke: 'Get out of here. Look, there's going to be a big upheaval here. Get out before I've chucked you out!' I told him two or three times, then I grabbed that silly idiot, but he hit kicked me on the shins. Eventually he got 4 months of jail for that, for the assault on police.

Please tell me whatever you want about your experience?

One thing that really came back to mind was one in the Atlantic convoy. I never got as far as America. We would go halfway and then turned around. One occasion stuck in mind till the rest of my life. A merchant ship was torpedoed, we picked up the crew and shortly afterwards I spoke to one of the crew. He was from Liverpool and the convoy was going that way. It was pay and that sort of thing we were talking about and he said that the moment his torpedoed ship went down his pay stopped. I could not believe, but then I asked many others and it was in their contracts. That fellow lost everything, and I never forgot it. What a rotten system we must have had that would do that.

The conditions onboard were absolutely dreadful. Overcrowding was one of the biggest problems we had on destroyers. □ They had double the crew they had at the normal peace time. We were on 4 hours on, 4 hours off roster, and 4 hours was the maximum amount of sleep you would

possibly get. The first ship I joined was the American destroyer HMS *Wells*, a very good destroyer. Depending how long you've been on board of the ship you'd progress to a position for sleep. If you were only new you'd sleep in a hammock. The next one slept on the lockers. The next one slept on the table. The next one slept on the deck. When the first rain came in and I was wet through. It all came through the hatch - I spent nearly a year on that ship and graduated to the lockers.

The other problem we had on American destroyers was amount of sulfur sucked down the air vents (there was no air-conditioning). We woke up ill because of the bad design of those ships. The design was bad and the conditions were dreadful.

On destroyers there was only one cook for 180 men. We received certain foods from the stores like flour, sultana, tea, coffee, sugar. You would prepare it and bring it to the galley and it would be cooked for you. By the end of each month we received a mass bill - the amount of money you had spent on food. If you had spent less there would be mess savings. Believe you or not at the end of the month we would get mess savings. But the food was actually dreadful onboard of those ships.

How did you eat compared to the British civil population - better or worse?

A lot worse.

We used to take bread at ports - Scottish ports like Glasgow or Clyde - as much bread as we could. And it was moldy in a couple of days. We used to put it into a dish and eat it with sugar and sultana. That was what we used to eat. Some ships, particularly cruisers would bake bread and some was given to the destroyers. But we were about seven miles from the cruisers and we never got any bread from them.

The food was dreadful, and if you wanted to eat extra variety you would buy it in N.A.F.F.I. It was particularly dreadful in the early days, towards the end it improved. Our daily allowance for meals was 1.11 per day.

What about alcohol?

We had a rum tot at 11 o'clock every morning. Only a little - about 50 grams. They poured water in it to break it down. The reason for it was that after that you couldn't keep it. It was the only thing which was worth living for. Believe you or not but eleven o'clock in the morning was the highlight of the day!

The most sleep you could get was only three hours. We had problems in getting water. I remember this was actually in the Mediterranean - down there for the invasion of Sicily. We had one water tap and it was locked. I found out possibly from somebody that if you hit it from the bottom and pumped it you would get a dribble of water out of it. It was sticky hot on this particular occasion. I was on the watch which was from 8 o'clock at night till midnight. The ship was quiet, everybody was down below. I kicked it from the bottom and pumped it, and the officer of the watch came down. - What are you doing, Taylor? I got seven days of punishment when you do all your work in your spare time - the hardest punishment you could get on a ship - for stealing about that much water.

Was it justified, what do you think?

I'll tell you what - it was a nightmare. I should not have done it. I knew it was a wrong thing to do. That's how severe the conditions were! No way on earth there would be any ships today with shortage of drinking water. There were too many people on board - much more than it was built for to start with. We were on two watches - 4 hours on, for hours off and 3 hours was that amount you could sleep.

Can you tell me about any action against, say, enemy airplanes or U-boats?

The first what comes to mind is the invasion of Sicily. One of the battleships, I think, it was *Warspite*, started bombardment. There was tremendous noise like of coming train, noise of shells flying over the ship we were about at six hundred yards□.

Another funny one I remember was during the first Russian convoy. We all brought onboard our long underwear. One of the stokers used to be a jockey - a very small guy. When he got issued with his long johns he standing on the mess table managed to button the waist above his head. And there were howls of laughter from the rest of the crew!

The moral was very high but some officers who had come from RNVR (particularly the first lieutenant) were very inflexible, they would get upset about minor things that were irrelevant like chips of paint missing, etc.

We used to have problems with German long-range aircrafts which were circling the convoys out of the range of our AA guns. They were reporting our position to the U-boats. And once a senior officer said to me: Signal the bastard to circle it in the other direction - it makes me dizzy. And the German did it! It was quite amusing.

On one occasion we came back to Scapa Flow and one the shipmates found out that all his family died in a bomb shelter in London. That's why when we were on duty no news from home was broadcast over the ship even though the communication people were able to listen to radio news from England. The reason for was not to undermine morals. The only time they would give you news was when it was a moral booster.

You would hear about other destroyers in other convoys being sunk and you look at the hull of the ship next to you and you would think that there is only one quarter of an inch of plate between you and a next torpedo. The only thing stopping you dwelling on being killed was the activities of the mess deck.

We were issued with chocolate which had lumps of white fat in it. Each sailor had a knife he had to carry and we would shave the chocolate with the knives to make a hot drink. It was my turn to go down to the galley to get boiling water and as I got to the bottom to the stairs to the galley the ship rolled badly. I grabbed the stanchion at the base of the stairs to brace myself. When I got back with the boiling water one of my shipmates asked where from all the blood came from. It happened because the palm of my hand had got frozen to the stanchion and because I was not wearing gloves. And I could not go and get treatment as I should have carried gloves.

Icing was a big problem. We would have to chip it off every 4 hours and traverse the guns to stop the mechanism freezing. There were records of smaller ships capsizing and once a Russian destroyer with too much ice on her superstructure went down as well. On one trip we had a scientist onboard who was experimenting with anti-freeze grease. By the time he recovered from sea sickness all the grease he had smeared over the guns had been washed away and so he was unable to observe the effects of his experiment. Ice did not affect bigger vessels - cruisers and larger were not affected so badly.

In Polarnoye when we on watch at night we had to patrol the wharf around the ship. And one night I noticed a bloody great bear amongst the crates. I went to get some friends to deal with it but when we returned we saw the Russians leading the bear away on board of a Russian destroyer because it was their mascot!

INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD SLINGER

(MAY 2003)

Tell me something of your life.

I was born in Yorkshire England in May 1921. At a young age I wanted to join the Royal Navy however this was not possible at 14 years of age I was working as a butcher's apprentice. My wages went to supplement fathers as I had two sisters still at school making; a living was very difficult, as times were hard.

It was not until 1939 that my desire came true, my cousin Leslie who was almost a brother to me had be able to join as a boy entry at 16 years of age, and was now at sea on board HMS Suffolk. He was later killed on HMS Barham in the Mediterranean.

The Prime Minister came back from Munich waving a piece of white paper saying peace in our time, I remember my father saying he is a bloody fool if he believes that Hitler will take any notice of a piece of paper. So in 1939 I volunteered for the Navy the first week war was declared at 18 years of age. My father also served in the airforce training air crews to release pigeons when they were shot down, He was a pigeon fancier for many years. He had served in the 1914-18 war joining up at 18 tears of age. We considered it our duty to defend our beloved England from what was certain invasion if Hitler had his way.

How were you trained for war?

I was trained at HMS Raleigh in Torpoint Devon. Then transferred to Portsmouth to await my transfer to a ship, preferring a small destroyer, which was granted.

Portsmouth like many cities in England was very heavily bombed. During one very heavy raid we were sent out to help in rescuing people who were trapped in houses that had been bombed. Returning to Barracks we found that it had also received a direct hit on an air raid shelter and some 12 WRENS (Women Sailors) had been killed. I was then to take passage on HMS Maidstone a submarine depot ship to Gibraltar to join HMS Faulknor my home for the next three and a half years.

What was your position on the ship?

Seaman did two or three jobs, I was a quartermaster one of four who steer the ship at sea, and do watch keeping duties when in harbour. I was also bosun party taking care of the rigging and upper deck repair work. When in action I was on No 1 gun (the forward gun,) as communicator and sight setter.

Did you see a lot of action?

Yes, plenty. I was in action on the very first day I joined the Faulknor. We were the destroyer screen in the Western Mediterranean and Bay of Biscay for Force H, the Battle cruiser *Renown*, aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the cruiser *Sheffield* with the 8th destroyer flotilla, the *Faulknor* being the leader.

The destroyers caught a German prison ship with many captured British merchant seamen on board, on sighting us the Germans put the prisoners into lifeboats then sailed away some distance and scuttled her. She was called the *Alsator* a sister ship to the *Altmark* which had been captured by the Royal Navy in Norway the prisoners were badly treated whereas these prisoners had been well treated and asked if we would treat the Germans with the same respect. We picked up numbers of the Germans to convey them back to Gibraltar some two days away and we became friends with many of them they were boys like us and doing what their leader had told them to do. Some are members of the Faulknor association and attended our meeting every year.

Did you meet any Germans? What did you feel about them?

Yes we assisted in sinking about 10 or 12 U- boats during the war, and with the crew of the *Alsator* on board for two days, who were very frightened when they got back to land they would be shot. We told them not to worry as England did not do that to prisoners, we did not hate them as they were mostly like us.

Our main duty was to supply Malta with food and aircraft which were flown off the *Ark Royal* some distance from Malta. The food convoys were quite hazardous and were heavily attacked by aircraft both Italian and German. Force H also took part in the sinking of the *Bismarck* the German heavy battle cruiser. In 1941 having suffered many near misses by bombs and continually at sea the *Faulknor* was dispatched back to the UK for an extensive refit and then to do some 21 convoys to Russia.

What was it like on these convoys?

Life was very hard for the small ships like destroyers, Frigates and especially hard for those on minesweepers. Waves were often 15 to 20 feet high and temperatures of minus 30 degrees were common in winter months. The *Faulknor* as with other ships were based in Iceland. The pack ice in winter drove the convoys closer to Norway where the Germans had over 250 aircraft based to attack the convoys. Convoys were heavily bombed and also attacked by the wolf packs of the U. Boats that sank many ships.

Were you frightened about going on these convoys?

I don't remember being frightened as such, though one was often apprehensive, I had joined to fight so accepted what was required of me. Thinking more of what would happen to my family if we were to lose the war. It was I believe the most dreadful aspect of war having to fight the cold and atrocious living conditions as well as a very determined enemy. German heavy units were also based in Norway and within easy reach of the convoys. The *Tirpitz* without doubt the best warship afloat and supported by a number of other units were a constant threat. The *Lutzow* and the *Hipper* and several destroyers sailed to attack a convoy JW 51B and this was to be the start of what became known as the battle of the Barents sea. There was to be another battle by opposing naval forces in 1943 known as the battle of the North Cape. The Germans suffered heavy losses.

What was the largest action you took part in?

This was without doubt, *PQ18*, which up to then was the largest air and sea battle to take place. Sunday September 13, 1942. We lost 8 of 9 ships in the starboard column in 15 minutes by torpedo planes. We were to lose 13 ships altogether. The Germans suffered heavy aircraft losses.

How many convoys did you do?

I did a total of 21.

Where did you dock in Russia?

Small ships did not go to Murmansk or Arkangel, we went to Polyarnoye in the Kola Inlet. This was to us a miserable place, but we did not stay long 4or 5 days at the most.

How did you find the Russian people?

There were but a few civilians and a couple of destroyers astern of us, we had little chance to mix as soldiers patrolled the Jetty and kept people away. One little girl she seemed very well dressed in a fur coat and was about 5or 6 years of age. Some of the crew had some chocolate that they were saving for their own children and offered her some, she looked over her shoulder at the soldier who just stared at her so she declined the offer. I went to the soldier and offered him some cigarettes and nodded for him to move away, which he did then the little girl took the chocolate. Some of us were invited to what must have been the Village hall, a large timber and iron shed to watch a concert by male Russian dancers, which was very good. I played chess with a boy about 12 years of age, and he defeated me in 5 minutes we mixed with the people who were friendly but it was difficult with the language barrier.

In 1942 we arrived in Polyarnoye on Christmas day having been out of food for three days , however someone back in England had been blessed by the festive season and had sent supplies to us on the Cruisers which covered the convoy, having left England later. We had lots of good food so on the boxing day we celebrated, later some of us went on board the Russian destroyer with some of the food and beer and rum celebrating with the sailors who were very friendly.

One had to carry me back on board as I was drunk on the copious amount of Vodka they had plied us with as they drank our beer and rum.

When at sea we had to, when closed up on the gun to chip ice off and keep tuning the guns to keep the free. Also about every four or five hours everyone had to turn out night and day to chip ice from the ships so we did not capsize as one Russian destroyer did and went down with all hands. Large ships did not need to do this as they could carry the weight.

Ted did you have any hatred of the Nazis before war and during the war?

Yes, I hated the real Nazi as they were fanatics obsessed with ruling all of Europe. Though the many German sailors I met were just like us and our age we got on very well with each other.

How much did you know about Russia before the war? What were you taught about Russia by the media or at school?

I have little knowledge of what I knew I think all I remember that we knew where it was on the map but little about the politics until the Stalin era. Having left school at 14 and not interested in politics. I never had any desire to visit it though was very interested in other parts of the world that's why I wanted to join the Navy. During the war we all admired the way the Russians fought against heavy odds and at Stalingrad .

Which day of the war do you remember most?

Having seen a lot of action in various theatres of the conflict. I remember most was the day some six destroyers was sent to Norway to waylay the Tirpitz as she left a port in Norway to make her way to another. We were to attack and torpedo her. Six small destroyers against such a large and formidable warship with other large warships, and a big escort of destroyers. I doubt if we would have survived especially as we knew the German gunnery was as good as ours was. However due to circumstances we were unable to engage, and we were heavily attacked by Stuka bombers and later by JU88 aircraft. We managed to avoid being sunk and returned to harbour. The satisfaction of being able to save Malta from invasion and starvation was most gratifying. As well as with other warships meeting the large Italian fleet and escorting it to Malta after they had surrendered.

Of course you have read *The Cruel sea* and *HMS Ulysses*. Did you like the books, and do you think they was any exaggeration in them?

I have not read *Ulysses*, but *The Cruel Sea* was very real and portrayed life on destroyers well. Some of the American films relating to the war are utter rubbish.

Were you under *Stuka* attack?

Yes, many times and we shot down quite a few. You did not have time to be frightened as you were so busy firing the guns you were washed out afterwards. Navy losses were due to Stukas and mines.

What about the situation in *The Cruel Sea* when they depth charged a U-boat with British seamen in the water?

I believe there was a report of this happening, but I would be inclined to think it may not have happened. Having taken part in many attacks similar I believe we would have waited, keeping

asdic contact until the danger to the men in the water were safely clear. Although circumstances in war make decisions very difficult for ships Captains.

Can you tell me of the living conditions on destroyers?

Life was very hard and cramped. My mess was some 18 to 20 feet long and about 8ft wide, there was twenty men in the mess including their lockers about a foot square along the ships side these doubled as a seat. We had canteen messing which means you have an allowance of One shilling and eleven pence a day for food. If you did not eat that amount you got the balance in your pay however if you over spent you had to pay the difference. At sea the living conditions was atrocious with water up to a foot deep in the mess deck and the toilets often got blocked up so the smell was terrible at times. Sleeping conditions had to be seen to be believed. In such conditions the camaraderie was tremendous with everyone pulling together. Food ran out after four or five days and then it was biscuits.

In the Sicily invasion we were so short of food and fresh water we sent a deputation to the Captain who said he was very annoyed that the planners had forgot we had to eat. He also was without food and sent a signal to Admiralty for urgent supplies.

Thank you Ted. I feel sorry that my father who fought against the Nazis too never had a chance to talk to a man like you.

INTERVIEW WITH BEN TITHERIDGE

(JULY 2003)

Please, tell a little bit about yourself, how did you become a naval seaman?

I was born in 1920 in Portsmouth, England, and my father was in the Navy. I grew up in the Naval environment, if you like, as Portsmouth, was the main naval depot in England. When I was a boy I lived next to the beach I used to go across the road for a swim and see the ships going in and out of the harbor. I went to a naval school when I was 11 years old and of course it was always planned that I would join the navy when I was old enough. And that was what I did when I passed my examination and joined the navy as the artificer apprentice. I had done two years of the apprenticeship by 1939 and when the war broke out I went to sea and fought the whole period war.

I was an artificer in the engine room department for the whole war and was lucky enough not to have been pushed into the water (*Ben laughs*).

What kind of feeling did you have towards Germany back then?

My feelings towards Germany? They were fighting us and we were fighting them. The desire to protect your home is a natural occurrence. I just went to sea and did what was required from me.

What did you think about Russia?

I didn't even think about Russia before the war. I knew it was a country, a large country, not very rich, governed by a dictator □ We knew it was not very democratic.

What about anti-Nazi feelings?

Not as such. Everybody knew that they wanted to expand. But apart from the political part it was of no importance. The war broke out □ I was already in the Navy.

Which ships did you serve on and what was your duty?

The first ship I served on was a destroyer. My duty was the engine room department - maintenance, repairs. It was a relatively small ship and a happy ship *HMS Hotspur*. I was only a young artificer at that time and still under training. As the war dragged on I qualified as a full-time engine artificer.

Did you visit the USSR?

I did visit the USSR in Murmansk. I was already in the cruiser Sheffield. I did several Russian convoys and went ashore in Murmansk when it was cold, wet, snowy and there was not much to do anyway. So we just went for a walk and came back to the ship. No pretty girls.

It's a question asked pretty often - did you have a chance to mix with the Russian girls?

No, no. They were not social enough, were not interested in, really.

Did you meet Russian people?

Yes, we had a Russian concert party onboard, in one of our aircraft hangars - we carried aircraft - *Walrus* aircraft. It was really a good concert.

Did you have a chance to talk to the Russian seamen?

No, not really. We got along well with them, there was no animosity. They were allies and we were helping them. I don't think Russians were really inclined to mix with us. They seemed to be distant, you know. We didn't talk Russian, their English was not that good. Officers, perhaps, were more interacting.

Which day of the war do you remember most?

I think when the war started - September the 3rd, 1939.

Actually, England entered the war because of the German invasion of Poland. England was not directly attacked. Do you think it was the right thing of your Government to do so?

Yes, it was.

What was your impression of the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses*?

Yes, I've read *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses* and I found them realistic.

Was there any exaggeration about the harshness of life on a cruiser during Arctic convoys?

Well, no, but the destroyers were better.

Better?

Oh, yes. It's a smaller ship, everybody knows each other, everybody got along all right. I did two stints on *Hotspur*.

Please, tell me more about the conditions of life in *Sheffield*?

We were in a mess of about thirty artificers. There was a lot to do - keeping watch, doing repairs. But conditions were more relaxed on a small ship. You've got only 4-5 artificers in a mess and you know everybody - say 150 as opposed to 800 on a cruiser.

I'm asking about it because Ted Slinger and Geoff Taylor told me a lot about the harshness of life on destroyers, how cold, wet and they were all the time, how miserable was food...

But on small ships everybody knew everybody else, it's happier.

Did you have to chip ice off the upper deck?

No it was washed off by steam from a hose.

I've heard that British ships were overcrowded during the war because there was a lot more equipment that they were initially designed for. Is that right?

Oh, yes. A lot more people than you would have in peace time, but it was comfortable enough. In terms of food on destroyers you would have more choice, different conditions. If you had a good messman the food on a destroyer was better than on a cruiser.

How was your food compared to the rations of the civil population of England? Who was better off?

I think we were. We were rationed of course, but not so strictly.

What about alcohol?

We had a small shot per day - about 70 grams. Junior ranks would have it as grog - rum watered down. And in chief and petty officers mess we would drink it neat - it was much better. It was not allowed but you could keep it in a bottle.

Another question about *The Cruel Sea* - the situation with survivors in the water when a U-boat was depth-charged. Was it a real situation?

It could have happened. If there was definite contact with a U-boat they had to attack it. It was more important to get the U-boat.

Did you have any German POWs onboard of your ship during the war?

I remember we picked up a German airman from the water. We just took him onboard, made sure he was OK, and when we hit the port we handed him over to the military.

Please tell me what you feel like you want to tell.

I remember on one occasion Sheffield was based in Gibraltar and we were ordered to steam off to North African coast. Our task was to apprehend any merchant ships steaming to the African coast. When we got to a certain point to engage them, to question them, they were in their own territorial waters and the shore batteries fired on us and Sheffield returned the fire. The French didn't like that and when we were steaming back to Gibraltar they sent out a few aircraft to bomb us. It was in 1942. They bomb us all the way to Gibraltar.

Did they hit you?

No, no. When we got back to Gibraltar the chief commander of the base said: you brought them in - you get rid of them.

I did two stints on *Hotspur*. First was when I was only 19 - we went to Norway and took part in the first battle of Narvik. (Ben showed a painting on the wall) This is the first battle of Narvik, this is *Hotspur*.

Did she get any damage?

Oh, yes. About 17 killed after seven direct hits.

Did you lose any of your mates?

No, no. They were mostly seamen. Engine compartment is usually lucky enough to be protected.

How high was the spirit? The war had just broken out...

Oh, yes. I was destined to join the Navy, and the spirit of British Navy was always high.

The Germans suffered heavy losses then. Did you take any survivors onboard?

Yes, I can remember once we did only to transport them to a British port.

Did you have a chance to talk to them?

No, no. They were kept under guard. After that I served as a senior artificer and the ship was mostly on the convoy duties - over to Newfoundland and between Ireland and Newfoundland.

You served in *Sheffield* - a famous ship which took part in hunting down *Bismarck*. Did you know that it was the mightiest ship in the world then?

Yes, of course. We shadowed *Bismarck* and when the fog lifted they fired on us.

Was it scary?

M-m-m, I guess so. We were in the action station and could hear the fall of shot sounding like depth charges. I was off the watch in the engine room in the fore part of the ship on damage control. One of the near misses shattered the picture of the King and Queen on the wall of the wardroom. Their gunnery was pretty good.

Did you know that *Sheffield* was equipped with a new radar?

Yes, we did. We were one of two ships, I think the *Rodney* would have it. We had it on the mast, we could see it. We knew that's why we were so vital for the force of Gibraltar - Force *H*.

Do you remember any *Stuka* attacks?

No, I don't remember any, but we were under attack from the Italian high level aircraft in the Mediterranean. They were very good in high level bombing. We didn't incur any damage only due to the good seamanship of the Captain. Seamen on the watch would report on any attack to the Captain and he would change the course. Had we been on the same course, we would have copped those bombs.

I was fortunate □ I didn't have to swim for life...

INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS CRADOCK

(AUGUST 2003)

Please tell a little bit about yourself.

I was born in London in 1921. When I was at the age of 15 there was a depression, not a lot of work for anybody to do and I eventually in early 1939 joined the Navy as a boy seaman. After the war broke out I went through the war serving in its various theatres and in one period of time in convoys to Russia.

Apart from the Russian convoys I was involved in work in South Atlantic and Mediterranean. I was involved in a bit of land fighting in Norway. One of the ships I was on was *Sheffield* which was involved in escort duties during the Russian convoys when they started and we did quite a number of those. In 1942 on the way back from Murmansk we hit a mine off Iceland and were badly damaged, but we managed to keep the ship afloat. Eventually the ship returned to England for repairs, and I was transferred to another ship called HMS *Ajax* and went out to the Mediterranean theatre of war. Out there we were hit again in a harbour in North Africa, and I was transferred to another ship HMS *Dido*. After serving in Mediterranean in Malta convoys we were transferred back to United Kingdom. We were then put on escort duties to the Russian convoys, and we did a number of convoys with her. We were also involved in the surrender of German fleet in Copenhagen.

Please, tell about your feelings towards Germany in the beginning of the war. Was their only desire to protect your homeland from the enemy or some ideological anti-Nazi feeling?

It was long ago. It depends on one's age and when you are very young you don't realize what was going on. I heard rumours, you read newspapers, but I don't think that at that time I had any particular attitude towards the Germans or Germany. Obviously once I was in the service, we were told that the war was about to be declared. Obviously as a serviceman my main duty was the defense of my country □ I was in the navy and that was my job and that was all I was interested in. But as any personal feelings I think they intensified as the war went on. My city - London - was badly bombed and then one got a personal animosity towards the enemy, and one desire was to finish them off.

England was not directly attacked by the Germans. England declared war on Germany because Poland had been attacked. Was it an absolutely right decision of the British Government to enter the war?

Yes, I do not have any doubts at all. Once it started my only ambition was to get it finished.

Please tell what you thought about Russia before the war, then during the Hitler-Stalin pact and after the German invasion into the USSR? How was it changing during the war?

In regard to what I think about Russia before the war we knew very little of it - only what we read in the books and the press about it. I got the impression I suppose that it was a very hard country, ruled fairly rigidly. We had no experience of the Russians or Russian life - only what we were told at schools.

So, you were given some kind of perception of Russia which was anti-communistic, I suppose...

Yes. And when I was young I got kind of a picture of Russia covered by snow and very cold which I found out to be true when I came to Murmansk (*Dennis laughs - VK*). At that time, we didn't do much traveling and didn't know much about other places and people.

You mentioned Stalin-Hitler pact. It raised some concern and certain fears as to what might happen. After the Germans invaded Russia, the perception was: They must be on our side now, we are supported. I suppose that was on the agenda, that's what I would imagine we felt at that time.

What kind of ship did you serve in and what was your duty?

I served on cruisers. I was a boy seaman in the *Sheffield* and stayed there till 1942. I was electrician by trade, and my main duty was gun controls, radio, explosives. I became a demolition expert (*Dennis laughs - VK*).

During the Norwegian campaign we put some troops on the ground, but they were so outnumbered that they couldn't last long so we were sent in to help evacuate them. We went ashore to cover them when they retreated. A part of my job was to blow up a couple of bridges. In my memory it was wintertime, snow, and to try to win the war floundering around in the snow was hopeless. We were badly equipped and I still remember those young kids whizzing around on skis when we were struggling to get through the snow.

The *Quislings* were very active at that time. We were based in a school for a while and one day we were trying to brew some coffee or tea, and a young girl came down from the farm with a bucket of goat's milk. We thought it would be very nice to make our tea with it. So, we put it on the fire and started to boil but a medical officer came past and asked: What do you have there? □ Milk. And he said: It's full of arsenic, as he could smell it.

So, they wanted to poison you?

Yes.

What was the general attitude of Norwegians towards you? Were they hostile?

No-no. They were friendly but this was an element of *Quislings* and she (*the girl - VK*) was one of them and any opportunity they got they had a go on us.

Did you visit the USSR during the war? Did you encounter the Russians and, if yes, how did you get along with them?

The only time I stepped on the Russian soil was in Murmansk when we were refueling. All contacts we had were very limited. I think it was a period of suspicion between the Russians and us as the Second front had not started yet. I suppose in a way they were resentful - they didn't think we had done enough. I could understand their feelings: they were facing the bulk of the German army and got a lot of hammering and what could appear we took only a few ships out there and they were hoping to have a bit of land support. But, again, it all depends on what they were told, the same with us. When you get down to the lower levels you can only form your opinion of what you are told. Some time the information you were given was very selective. But we had no trouble with people we got in contact with.

Did you have a chance to talk to some Russians?

Not really. Funny enough, most of the contact was made with a supply ship, you see. Most of the crews were women! In fact, we were frightened as they were big women with muscles (*Dennis shows how big muscles were and laughs - VK*).

Did you or any of your mates have a chance to mix closely with Russian women?

Not really. No.

Were the women interested in?

No, we had only a very short period of time ashore. There was no chance anyway.

And those women were your only chance to socialize with the Russians?

We were allowed to go down to get a certain point of view but, I suppose, there was a certain attitude of suspicion and they were told not to fraternize. It's quite understandable.

What about later on when you served in the *HMS Dido*?

No. We pulled in only once for a couple of days to refuel and that was it. I also served on *HMS Ajax* but only for a month. We were sunk in a harbour in North Africa.

Dennis shows photographs:

These photographs of the V-Day were taken when we sailed into Copenhagen to accept the surrender of the Northern Fleet. These are German senior officers on the deck of *Prince Eugene*, here they are coming onboard of *HMS Dido* to surrender. When we were there General Montgomery came over for a review.

Once we were there we were the first Allied force to get into Copenhagen and we were given a task of clearing the city of the Germans left there. We joined the local resistance group and were allocated to the leader of one of them. When we got there, he turned out to be a woman! She was a reporter in a newspaper and also the leader of a Resistance group. She took us around the city to chase up those people - the *Quislings*. And she was ruthless! She shot many of them.

Did you see that?

Yes. She shot quite a few. That's she on this photo.

This is a photograph taken during one of the Arctic convoys - typical freezing conditions. This guy is chipping ice off.

Ben Titheridge showed me a photograph with them washing ice off by steam from the engine room. But there was ice chipping as well?

Oh, yes. These are photos with damage done to the boats by the waves.

This photo was taken during the Spanish conflict. We were picking up refugees and taking them down to Gibraltar. And you see we had to put our colors on top of the turrets just to make sure they (*hostile aircraft* - VK) knew who we were. These are photos taken mostly in Mediterranean during the convoys. This is an air attack from the Italian Air Force - pattern bombing from great heights. These all are near misses. This is a German supply ship we sank in the North Atlantic and these are the survivors we picked up.

Did you have a chance to socialize with those Germans?

No. But we treated them well. We had no trouble with them.

This is a photo of *Sheffield* taken from another ship; these are shells from the Italian ships. You can see they were close enough. This is me at work (*Dennis is lying under a torpedo and fixing it up* - VK). And this is a piece of shrapnel from the *Bismarck* which whizzed beside me (*Dennis showed a photo with a large hole in a mast* - VK).

Which day of the war do you remember most? Please tell about it.

We were based in Gibraltar to cover convoys mainly in the Mediterranean and we got a call that the *Bismarck* was out in the Atlantic and had just sunk the *Hood*. So we were detached from Gibraltar to cover the escape route to the South Atlantic. When we left Gibraltar, we were about 3000 miles away from *Bismarck*. Within three days we were within 3000 meters detached to shadow the *Bismarck* and we were a couple of miles from her in extremely bad weather to keep in touch until the main fleet came up. There was a very heavy snowstorm and we hit it. When we got out of it on the other side of the snowstorm the *Bismarck* was lying on the broad side. From the range of 3-4 thousand meters, she opened fire on us with all her main armament. Six shells fell - 4 on the starboard side, 2 on the port side within about two hundred meters. Top part of the ship was peppered with shrapnel. Couple of people was killed but we suffered no main damage. And a chunk of shrapnel went past my ear. An amazing side of it was that the *Bismarck* was accompanied by *Prince Eugene* which was very similar to our *HMS Sheffield* and a carrier which came up with us to launch aircraft to attack the *Bismarck*. And again, because of the weather they took us for the *Bismarck* and dropped six torpedoes on us. But luckily the torpedoes were set a bit too deep ready for the battleship and they went underneath us!

So, they were shot well? I read that they just missed the target but they went underneath! Did you see that?

Oh, yes.

Was it scary?

Of course, you should have heard what our captain told about it. All possible swearing in the world. Those were *Swordfish* planes. How they took off in that weather, God knows. It was an atrocious weather.

Was the whole action scary? The *Bismarck* then was the mightiest ship in the world...

Oh, yes. We knew it was very well built. The thing which let them down - poor sea training. The crew was inexperienced. They did not have any experience of bad weather, manning weapons,

firing in bad weather. They were raw, really. It did not stop them of doing damage - they had a lucky hit on the *Hood*. We were respectful of the way they built their ships, but they were inexperienced. Their submarines were different. They put their surface ship to sea very seldom for training, so we had an advantage there.

Another day I remember was V-day in Europe. We were just sailing up towards Copenhagen and ran into a minefield and two of our men got killed. That was very tragic - to go right through the war and get killed.

After I was transferred to *Ajax* we moved to the harbor in the Mediterranean for anti-aircraft protection. We were only in an hour of flying from Sicily and of course the Germans were flying over 24 hours a day - *Stukas*.

Was it scary? For many people it was the most horrifying experience in the whole war - the *Stukas* attack...

Exactly. One day they came across and, believe it or not, one bomb went down the funnel and blew out in the boiler underneath. It rested us on the bottom of the harbor. You wouldn't see even a bit of damage. We were there for three weeks trying to get the ship afloat again. Anyway, we got to the sea again and were towed to Algiers and they were going to take the ship to America for repairs. It would be very lovely □ to spend six months in America. We were waiting to go but *HMS Dido* went to Algiers and they were short of a specialist electrician. I was the only one available and was transferred to *Dido*. And we went straight back to the harbor, to the very place we were just sunk!

We went right through the North African campaign with the army, landing commandos, we landed a raid on the Southern France coast. They were from the Foreign Legion. Their job was to silence some gun batteries before the invasion.

France pulled out of the war and surrendered to the Germans. What was your feeling about the French? Did you feel any resent?

Yes, there was a lot of anti-French and anti-Belgian sentiment. They caved in too early. There was a lot of it even after the war and I don't think many Britons forgave them, really.

Despite the fact that many French fought alongside the British in Palestine and Africa even before the Allied landing in Algiers?

Oh yes, even today in England there is a certain amount of resentment.

What about the Yanks?

We worked with them in many convoy operations and we got along with them very well. We were envious of their facilities on their ships, the way the crews were looked after. But we used to dread doing any close work with them because they were a bit trigger-happy (*Dennis laughs - VK*). They would open fire with the slightest excuse. We probably got more damage from them than we did from the enemy at a time. If they had a radar report on the aircraft even twenty miles away, they would open fire even from their small arms. They used to close their eyes and pull the trigger by swinging the guns around.

Were you hit by their fire?

Oh yes. They were terrible.

Did you have a chance to socialize with the Yanks onshore?

Yes, of course. There was normal rivalry, you know, a few punch-ups in the bar but nothing serious (*Dennis laughs - VK*). Funny enough we used to get into trouble with the Australians very often, but never serious.

I believe you read the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses*. What was your impression?

I found these books reasonably realistic.

Was there a bit of exaggeration, especially about the conditions in the Arctic convoys in the *HMS Ulysses*?

Yes, there was. I also remember in the *Cruel Sea* movie they seemed to be dressed in their best uniform all the time. A bit funny.

Another question. What do you think about the situation when a U-boat was depth charged and survivors in the water killed? Was it justified?

Yes, I think so at the time. Again, at war things are happening you would never consider. It was not unusual as it was not unusual for the German aircrafts to machine gun the survivors from sunk merchant ships.

Did you witness it?

No, I didn't but it was recorded.

Please tell about the war what you would like to tell.

There are no rules at war once it starts. Your object is to destroy the enemy, however. This is it □ kill or be killed. From the Navy point of view we saw the enemy very seldom as opposed to within the army. What killing we did was at a long distance.

I volunteered to join the service before the war at a very young age. We knew the war was coming. Then you get more experience and form your own opinion. We were told what to do and we did. And I can honestly say at time I had no feelings towards people we were killing. We bombarded coastlines and stuff like that □ We did a lot of damage to the coast in the North African and Italian campaigns. We bombarded Genoa and I knew we were killing people, but I knew that was our job. Perhaps after the war when everybody gets more material you are timider about that. War is war - what can you do? You give in or you fight for what you believe in. At the time we believed we were defending ourselves. And the Russian believed in that when they were defending Stalingrad to the last man □

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE THOMAS

(OCTOBER 2003)

Please, tell a bit about yourself, where you were born, how you became a Navy seaman.

I was born in West Kirby in Cheshire in 1922. As a boy I wanted to join the Navy and my father was against it. When the war started, I was on the way but my father refused to let me (refused to sign the paper). As soon as I was 18 I volunteered in Liverpool to be a telegraphist. I was not called up till July 1941 and then was sent to a former holiday camp at Skegnes Mess (HMS *Royal Arthur*). We did six weeks of seamanship and drilling and then I was sent down to London. I was put to live in a private hotel and we did the first part of our wireless training at a commercial wireless school in Highgate, North London.

After that when we moved up to HMS Scotia which was located at Ayrshire (west coast Scotland). We finished our training there and went down to barracks in Portsmouth. Then I was drafted - it was a big draft - and went on a special train to Scotland and we pulled in Greenock on the River Clyde where the *Scylla* was moored. She was a brand new ship with a brand new crew and she did some of the working up and speed trials and all that. Then we went to Scapa Flow and did our sea trial. We were to go on what we knew as a foreign operation.

In early September we set out and went to Loch-Ewe (NW of Scotland) which was an assembly point for the Russian convoys, and from there we went to Iceland where a conference of the senior officers was held. When the convoy was already on its way we went up to join it. Before we joined, we went with a number of destroyers to Spitzbergen, refueled and on Sunday the 13th September 1942 which was the day I will always remember we were coming up behind the convoy. I was on the frequency 500 kilocycles which was the commercial frequency and I picked up during the watch three signals from merchant ships reporting periscope sightings. When we reached the convoy three merchant ships were missing.

Please, tell about your feelings towards Germany in the beginning of the war. Was there only a desire to protect your homeland from the enemy or some ideological anti-Nazi feeling?

Before the war we knew what was happening in Germany, our politicians felt it was of no consequence, we had Moseley - a man in black shirt - people treated him as just a bit queer. Anyway, the war started, we knew that we had to fight them. I don't think any of us really had any bad feelings towards the German people, but we did have it against Hitler because he was kind of a mad man, he wanted control over all Europe and then it would have been the world, wouldn't it? And we were not happy about Nazis.

As to my experience, I felt that the German servicemen were very courageous. Their airmen attacked our ships and really had a go. I suppose ours were the same, but - you know - I felt admiration for them.

Please, tell with a bit more detail what did you think about Russia before the war, then during the Hitler-Stalin pact and after the German invasion into the USSR? How was it changing through the war?

Russia was somewhat an unknown quantity, really. We knew it was a communist country and there were all sorts of stories about communism. I never had an opinion about her (*Russia - VK*) because I did not know enough about her. There were bad feelings about communists. There was a chap nearby who was a postman. He was a communist and went over to Spain to fight [*against fascism - VK*].

Did you know him personally? What kind of a man was he?

He was kind of withdrawn, did not mix with people at all. He seemed rather strange to us, but I never really had any kind of opinion about him. His children went to the same school as I did but he withdrew from people. He came back right, he was not killed. We knew that the German aircraft were supporting them [*the fascists - VK*] in Spain, but we never got the full story.

I always tried to keep an open mind on things, you know. Although we called Stalin *Uncle Joe*, I suppose he murdered tremendous amount of people - terrible thing. Life is far too precious.

What kind of ship did you serve on? What was your duty?

I served on the Russian convoys on a light cruiser *Scylla* (*Dido* class), 5 500 tons. Pretty high speed - she had four propellers. Once we did 43 knots, which was not that bad for the ship. The *Dido* class main armament consisted of 4 twin 114-mm guns plus two 4-barrel *Pom-Poms* and 8 20-mm *Oerlikons*. She was primarily an anti-aircraft cruiser. She was a great ship: I never served in a better one and I never served with a better skipper - he was really brilliant. My duty when I first joined her was an ordinary telegraphist.

After *PQ-18* we took part in the North African landings. Then, when we were in Algiers I took my next step telegraphist exam on the cruiser *Aurora*. We did various jobs in Mediterranean and got a lot of sprung plates because it all was riveted: near-misses had a lot to do with it and we had to go into dock. We left Algiers in late December 1942 and on the 1st of January 1943 we sank a

merchant ship on the way back in the Bay of Biscay (*it was German blockade runner - Rhakotis (6 753 t displacement) on its way back from Japan - VK*). We went into dock for four weeks and after that we sailed back to Scapa Flow. Out of there the ship joined JW53 which was another Russian convoy. It was very quiet - it was not too bad.

Unfortunately, in May 1943 with me having passed to a higher rate I was relieved by an ordinary telegraphist and I went back to barracks. Then I joined a little French ship- a small destroyer *Lafore* based in the Holy Loch on the Clyde to work with ASDIC ratings doing their final training. There was no enemy action. We used to pull out of the Clyde estuary every day, do exercises with submarines and then go back to the moorings. I was up there for 12 months - I was a senior telegraphist.

How did you communicate with the Frenchmen? Did you know French?

There were only two French engine room artificers in the crew. It was an ex-French ship incorporated into the Royal Navy. Amazing but I met one of them here in Australia only two years ago.

How did you get along with French? Did you feel any resent because they had pulled out of the war too early?

I think the French were still fighting Napoleonic Wars (*George laughs - VK*). They would go against anything if Britain was involved. We tolerated them, you know, but they were rather anti-British. I had certain feelings but not to those two. You know, they joined the Royal Navy and this particular one stayed with the Royal Navy for quite some time after the war, married an English woman and now they live over here (*in Australia - VK*). He is a nice little bloke - Gil Maury. But, you know, we took De Gaulle in and fitted out his *Free French* troops and all the rest of it and after that he was so damned arrogant! When he went back to France after the war he was said to be the *Liberator of France*. He was a very arrogant and self-opinionated man and when he became the President of France he would do anything against Britain.

So, there was a classroom built on the forecastle - two long benches with ASDIC repeaters on and thirty boys on at a time. We played war games. Each trainee was given a term in finding himself a submarine, getting a repeater signal and calling the ship onto the target. They would throw hand grenades over the stern and then the skipper of a submarine would report how many 'hits' they had had.

The signalman and I were recommended for leading rate. We went down to Portsmouth barracks and on the eve of *D-Day* I joined an American-built frigate *Lawford*. After the landings on *D-Day* we went on patrol leaving at dusk and returning to anchorage at dawn. We did it the first night, we did it the second night and on the way back the pilot of a rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft thought we were an enemy ship and put two rockets into the starboard side and strafed us with his cannons.

We had to wake up to watch a person one rotated with as there was not enough room for accommodation onboard. I was late on watch because I was sleeping and they could not find me. They found me at about 4.30. I left my wallet, left everything behind and went quickly, took over and at 5 o'clock it happened. All the lights went out, of course and sub-lieutenant in-charge said: □Switch the emergency lights on□. They came on. The wireless office door was twisted and jammed, so we had to go through the escape hatch. There were about twenty of us. We formed a queue and I don't know how we did it but we did. Someone asked me afterwards how I felt standing in that queue: 'Were you afraid? - No. - What were you thinking about? - I was wondering how I would notify my mother that I was all right before she heard that my ship was sunk'.

After the invasion I went back to signal school, did my Leading Hand course and got drafted to Colombo in Ceylon where I joined the destroyer depot ship HMS *Tyne* and came out here to the Pacific.

Did you take part in any anti-Japanese operations?

We did not get into any action. We went to the Leyte Gulf. There we had sentries all around the deck because the Japanese frogmen were still operating - swimming, trying to stick mines to the sides of the ships. The lads were given rifles and hand grenades and were told that if they saw anything moving in the water to shoot at it or throw grenades on it. During the night periodically you would hear metallic bangs and the sentries did not hesitate to throw grenades into the water! It was amusing!

The Americans never acknowledged what we did in the war. They entered it two years late because the Japanese dragged them into it. We did quite a lot out here, but nothing was said about it. Our aircraft carriers were involved in the raids on various islands. We had a fleet in the Indian Ocean tackling the Japanese. When we held our Memorial ceremony on the Monument Hill our chairman of the Royal Naval Association said that either through lack of information or ignorance most of Australians don't even know we were out here. But over 500 British warships and about 25 000 men served here. We had a submarine base in Fremantle, but, anyway it's all beside it.

Did you visit the USSR yourself during the war? Did you encounter the Russians and, if yes, how did you get along with them?

On JW53 which left early February 1943 we hit one of the worst gales which ever happened in the Iceland area. The Sheffield had the roof of one of the gun turrets folded back! We lost the aircraft carrier - she had to go back for repairs. Really apart from that, it was reasonably quiet. There were a few Condors which came over to spot us. We pulled in Polyarnoye and anchored there. On the return one - RA53 - once we were out of range enemy aircraft - we were told that there were wolf packs waiting for us. I was on watch on the bridge and saw a Condor circling the convoy well out of range of the guns. He would dip and come up again. The skipper was speculating what he was doing and one suggestion was that he was dropping mines. As we kept on sailing and keeping an eye on him there was a merchant ship sailing immediately behind us and her guns opened up. We looked out and saw them shooting into the water! And then - puff! There was a circling torpedo, and it still hit the ship - it sank.

That was the only time I got to Russia. We did not go ashore in Polyarnoye, and I had no chance to mix with the Russians at all. It was a bit disappointing, but I heard that the conditions on shore were really bad as the German airfields were only in about 14 miles away from Murmansk. It was bombed constantly. It was rock bottom in regards to accommodation and all those sort of things. Those who had to go into makeshift hospitals were sleeping on boards with very little covering. Hospital staff was very much overworked. I only heard that from some of the guys who went ashore.

We had a Russian oiler which came alongside and it was crewed by women!

And what then?

Nothing (*George laughs - VK*)! Actually, they were very tough-looking women and I should imagine their occupation had made them big and strong, you know. I don't think they were allowed to communicate with us. Some of the guys would probably have tried but I wouldn't.

Which day of the war do you still remember most? Please, tell about it.

It was September the 13th 1942 when the torpedo bombers came in and the 8th of June 1944 when we were sunk.

Were there any casualties when you were sunk?

I think it was about 80 lost - half of the crew. When we got back to the combined operations base we got four days leave and we were wondering what happened to the other half of communication

group. The *Wrens* (Women Royal Naval Service) which were part of the staff came in the courtyard of this old country mansion. They were crying, saying how happy they were that we were alive (we only lost one of about 20 of the communication staff). It appeared that the rest of them had come up earlier and gone on leave and we got back later. We all met in Southampton when we came back off leave, went to the pub and had a good session.

I had an uncle in Portsmouth and one of the blokes knew him and told him: 'I don't think George made it' and put him very quickly out of nerve. I had to let him know soon that I was all right.

We were kitted out and mastered in the courtyard and the Captain (he was in charge of Group 1 Force J which was covering *Juno Beach*) stood there, walked up and down telling how fine men we were, how proud he was to serve with us and all the rest of it. He said: I'm going back and want you to come with me. If any of you feel that you would rather not – don't worry I won't hold it against you - just take one step forward - I will understand. We all knew we were going anyway and we all took a step forward - we were bloody well going whether we liked it or not! We had a laugh.

I believe, you read the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses*. Did you like them? Were they realistic?

Yes, I read both books and I liked them. When I read *HMS Ulysses* I thought it was about the *Scylla*.

And the conditions during the Arctic convoys were really as bad as described in the *Ulysses*?

When we were within the range of the aircraft the attacks were really constant and as communication staff we could not drop down to the second rate of readiness. We got really tired as we had only half an hour off watch each day. Somebody would bring food from the galley; it usually consisted of baked beans on toast with a cup of hot chocolate. Outside the main office there was a big open area what we called a 'flat' and there were cramped lobbies with very minor space to sleep. As soon as you close your eyes somebody would wake you up and say: 'Come on. Back to watch'. We were like zombies after nearly a week of this. But we were not wet as opposed to the destroyers, which really had hard times. Although we had condensation ice on the ceilings and walls and it was cold in the living quarters.

Did you to chip ice off the deck?

I didn't. It was seaman's work. I was in communications and we worked only in our department. If we were on the punishment we would have to do duties.

If we return to *The Cruel Sea* and to the situation when a U-boat was depth-charged and the survivors in the water died, do you reckon it was justified?

You've got to know all the circumstances. As it was depicted in the film - yes, not so much you could do because that submarine was a menace, and there were occasions during the war when life was sacrificed.

During our convoy duty in the Mediterranean we were attacked in 80 miles from Tunisia, they used to bomb hell out of us - Stukas and high-level bombers. And on one convoy - I think we were leaving Bone - we were attacked and lost a sloop. We were not allowed to stop to pick up survivors because you put your ship in jeopardy. We went back there with a destroyer which was either the *Meteor* or the *Milne*. We started pulling the survivors aboard. They'd been in the water for 5-6 hours, maybe. And when they saw us they started to sing a song or a ballad, cheering as best as they could since they were very weak. While we were pulling them aboard Jerry came over. They dropped flares and we were a sitting duck and our skipper ordered us away. And as

we left, they called all the 'rotten bastards' sort of things. I've never found out what happened to them.

When we came to Gibraltar we came across the Americans straight out from the States and asked: When are you guys going to do something in this war? The war had dragged on for two years before they came in.

So, you had some bad feelings towards the Yanks?

Yes, we were not very happy about them. They came to England, they took over. Same things happened here (in Australia). You go to a dance, ask a girl for a dance: 'Oh, no, sorry'. And next thing she would with an American.

So, the girls were after the Yanks?

Yes. Money talks. Unfortunately, we had a few little rows with them. But I met some very nice blokes as well. You can't paint all with the same brush.

Were you aware of the situation on the Eastern front during the war?

Well, when it happened Russia became an ally. We all were very conscious of what was happening there and we wanted the Germans out.

Did you have a chance to see your former enemies and allies after the war? If yes, what kind of atmosphere did it occur in?

I have met one or two Germans after the war, we never discussed it. They were very nice blokes. There was just one here in Perth who used to brag about having been in the *Hitler Youth*. He left his wife and lived with a young woman. He was obviously that way inclined, you know. Once we had a drink and a chat and the next day he came to my place and said: 'George, you have a very nice daughter, but she's very naive. I think I'll take her out for a night to show what it is all about. I told him: 'Bill, do you see my hands (*George showed his pretty big hands - VK*)?. - Yes. - If I catch you looking sideways at my daughter they will take you apart. When I finish with you won't be interested in women.

When I watch some documentaries it seems to me that some of the Germans still regret that they did not win the war. They say: It's a pity we didn't take Cairo. It's a pity we didn't sever this British-Russian link...

Quite a few of them do.

Please, tell whatever you wish to tell about the WW2.

I enjoyed my time in the Navy. There were some bad times but I remember mainly the good times which were more frequent. War is no good to anybody. Nobody wins. Russia was devastated, Britain was virtually bankrupt after the war, France would not be much better off and Germany either. Money that could be spent on people's welfare had been wasted and that I do not agree with. I would rather see no wars. But again, Hitler would annex a country and then say: No further claims in Europe. Then after a while he would annex another country. It was an ongoing thing. Chamberlain came back on one occasion with a piece of paper saying that it will bring peace in our time. But all that was not going to be stopped by appeasement. After a while they would take another country. Something had to be done. There are times you have to go to war. God knows what would have happened to the world had they won.

The Japanese made a big mistake □ they attacked Pearl Harbor. The Americans were dragged into the war. They made a lot of money out of that war. They sold supplies, weapons and materials to people at war. I have heard that they were selling weapons to Germany at the early stages of the last war. But America would be the final target if Germany took control over Russia and Europe.

War is senseless. But if you have a situation like we had with Germany and Japan you have to fight. What's the use of turning another cheek? I used to do it when I was a kid and got the other one slapped too.

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HUGHES

(NOVEMBER 2003)

Please, tell a bit about yourself, where you were born, how you became a Navy seaman.

My name is John Hughes – it- s a Welsh name, but I was born in the south of England in 1920. I left school when I was 13 and half and I worked two or three jobs before I went to a sea training school in Liverpool. I was there for nine months before I joined the Royal Navy and I signed for twelve years. I traveled the world: I left England before the war in 1938 on a two-year commission. We were based in Ceylon when the war broke out, and we went to the Mediterranean to cover convoys to Malta.

I finished in the Royal Navy in 1946 and re-joined the New Zealand Navy in 1948 for a three-year contract. When I finished my contract with the New Zealand Navy the dockers in Auckland were on strike and they called in the Army, Navy and Air Force to the docks. When it was over they locked the old wharves out and started a new water front and I stayed there for thirty-eight years right up until the time I retired.

What kind of ship did you serve on? What was your duty?

I was on the cruiser called *Liverpool* as an *Oerlikon* gunner. I started my Russian convoys in about April-May or June 1942 and I did four trips to Russia. On the fifth trip we were just about to sail to Murmansk but were recalled for a convoy to Malta.

The worst enemy to contend with on the Russian convoys was the weather because we used to go up to the Arctic Circle before we had a run to Archangel. During one trip to Russia and back □ it would take about four weeks - we had a shower only three or four times. Each morning all the bulkheads and deck were covered by ice □ the ship was like an iceberg. At the time we came to Archangel it was night and we woke up in the morning we were frozen in and had to wait for a Russian icebreaker to let us out!

I only went to Archangel once and Murmansk three times. Once in Murmansk we lost four of our crew after going ashore and drinking too much vodka. It was extremely cold; they collapsed and froze to death!

Were any measures taken to prevent it?

After that we were not allowed ashore.

After the Russian convoys we also went to Canada and it was just as bad because we still had to go up to the Arctic Circle. (*John shows a photo taken in icy waters of the North Atlantic - VK*).

Who did the unlucky sailors drink with?

With the local blokes. I went ashore myself but didn't get drunk that much.

Please, tell about your feelings towards Germany in the beginning of the war. Was there only a desire to protect your homeland from the enemy or some ideological anti-Nazi feeling?

I didn't have much to do with the Germans. I disliked them. They were a very arrogant race. Same with the Japanese. I was in the Navy in 1938 when they had the crisis and the Prime Minister of England (Chamberlain) came home saying 'no worry, don't trouble, peace in our time'. But we knew that a war would break out soon, we didn't believe him.

Please, tell with a bit more detail what did you think about Russia before the war, then during the Hitler-Stalin pact and after the German invasion into the USSR? How was it changing through the war?

I did not really know much about Russia and I had no feelings about Russians. After the war started I became very sympathetic with them. Actually, in late 1939 we visited Vladivostok and stayed there for a couple of days. The atmosphere of the visit was fine, we went ashore, socialized a bit with the locals and they were very friendly to us.

OK, but during the war? Were you aware of the situation on the Eastern Front?

I don't remember, I didn't even think about it, really.

Do you remember any attacks of Stukas?

Most of the air raids on the Russian runs were high level ones. The Stukas were coming over when we were not far from Murmansk and it was quite terrifying. We didn't have aircraft carriers during Russian convoys then. We had merchant ships with catapults to launch a Hurricane or a Spitfire. It would go up, shoot a couple of planes down and when it would run out of fuel or ammunition the pilot had to bail out. It happened a couple of times when I was, actually, in the boat crew. We picked the pilots up after seeing them coming down. The first one we got alive after we'd pulled him out, the second one was dead, probably, because of cold...

We were torpedoed on the big Malta convoy not far from Sicily. We had to carry to seaplanes and the tanks fuel for them exploded and blew off the whole bows. (*John shows the photo - VK*). After that we could do only four knots and it took us five days to get to Gibraltar. For three days they never left us alone. We had U-boats, we had Stukas, we had torpedo-bombers. How we managed to get back I don't know. On the stern of the ship I saw a torpedo going past and it missed by that much (*John shows a distance between his thumb and forefinger - VK*).

Did you shoot down any of the attacking aircraft?

Yes, I did. Only once.

Did you feel any hatred towards the Germans at that time?

Well, it was a war and they were just our enemy. When I was on the HMS *Lulworth* an ex-American coastal cutter - we damaged a German submarine off the Azores on the way to Cape-Town. It pulled up and we had a gun battle with her! We finally sank them and out of the whole crew there were fourteen survivors. We took them to South Africa and tried to get rid of them, but they didn't want to know as they didn't have the facilities to hold them. We had to bring them all the way back to Northern Ireland to Londonderry.

Did you have a chance to talk to any of them?

To start with there were some real Nazis amongst them. We pulled them out of the water on deck, and they saluted us *Heil Hitler* (*John shows the Nazi salute - VK*). What we did then - we pushed them back in the water! When we took them on board again one of us said: 'You salute this way (*John showed normal way of army saluting - VK*), not that way. We had them under lock and key for about two or three days and brought them up by two at a time to exercise and at the finish they were really good!

When we came to Aberfoyle at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning the army came aboard to take them and they wanted to blindfold them. We said: 'No, forget about it! They may think they're gonna be shot!' (*John laughs - VK*).

Did you have a chance to talk to those Germans?

Only through the interpreter.

What was that about?

You know - mainly families, where they lived in Germany...

John, you, obviously, were coming back to England from time to time, you saw bombed cities, found out about casualties among civilians? Did your feelings towards the Germans change?

Oh, yes. Not only that. We found out about atrocities in occupied countries, not only to the Jews but to other people. They would shoot half a dozen civilians for one killed German soldier in retaliation. Personally, now I hate their guts, I have no time for them. Same for the Japanese. We took over the surrender of the Japanese in Hong Kong and I saw the POWs, mainly British. I was on the submarine parent ship and we took nearly 500 of them to Fremantle (*Seaport near Perth, Western Australia - VK*). They were in a shocking state - they couldn't walk.

Did you visit the USSR yourself during the war? Did you encounter the Russians and, if yes, how did you get along with them?

We didn't have much time in the USSR. On the third run we were tied up to a buoy in Murmansk, in the river. We had a big Russian tanker coming alongside to refuel us. I was on the watch from midnight to 4 in the morning - actually, on duty on the brow - little brow going between our ship and the tanker. Every member of the crew of that tanker was female! And there was a young girl who was the sentry on the tanker, she had a rifle. I wanted to talk to her but she would point her rifle at me: she wouldn't let me go to the tanker!

Later on I decided to make myself a hot drink and a bit of toast and so I did. On the toast I had some sardines and she could smell it. And her lips were drooling! I said: 'You like some?' She nodded. I had to go to the mess deck to get some more sardines. I was due to hand it over to her, when the officer on the watch came out. She took it but afterwards I was in trouble because I had broken the regulations. The officer on the watch (lieutenant) reported on me but I got away with it, not even with a critical comment from the commanding officer. When they finished we sent two or three cases of herring or tinned fish to the tanker - the Captain ordered to do that.

Did you hear about brothels for the Allied seamen in Murmansk or Archangel?

No, absolutely, nothing.

Please, tell me more about your drinking parties with the Russians. Were there naval seaman or civilians? What did you talk about?

They were civilians. We could not go too far from the ship; it was on the docks. In every port in every country there are pubs or bars or drinking places for seamen. The same was in Murmansk. Some of the locals could talk English. We talked about different things. It was so long ago... We were very friendly to each other. A Navy chap travels the world. He is friendly to any other chap.

Oh, I want to tell you one thing! When we were in Russia every morning they played the Russian national anthem. And we were singing as well. Let me remember: 'Keep the red flag flying high (*John sings - VK*). We used to sing it, but the officers didn't like it. They didn't like it for a minute. Then we sang the British national anthem.

Which day of the war do you still remember most? Please, tell about it.

I guess the day the war ended. I was on the submarine parent ship here, in the Pacific, in Luzon. We had one flotilla ☐ four submarines, and the Americans had their own flotilla and a parent ship. The submarines would come back and her crew would come on board the parent ship and relax while the so-called spare crew would do the maintenance work on the submarine.

We were really happy when the war ended. There was a lot of drinking. We were lucky because they used to send a merchant ship up from Australia full of beer. We used to have a bottle of beer

every night in addition to our rum issue. The Americans were dry □ they didn't have any alcohol at all, they had only coca-cola and soft drinks. They used to come aboard our ship and we used to give them rum. We used to water it down a bit (*John laughs - VK*) but they loved it!

What was your impression of the Yanks?

I didn't have much time for them then, I have even less now. They went to Iraq when everybody said 'No', and now they want the rest of the world to help them out!

The Americans were typical blow-outs. 'We are from the best country in the world, we are the best fighters'. But they had a lot of money. Say, in Hong-Kong shortly after the war finished the prices in brothels went up three times after the Yanks had come in! But many of them were decent people. When we lost our bows we went over to America to a navy dockyard up the river from San-Francisco. We were there for three or four weeks before we went back to UK and the local people couldn't do enough for us. We were invited to the local homes, breweries, we had free beer, once some locals dragged some of us to their cars out of the bar we were drinking in and drove us to the local music hall to listen to the Andrews Sisters! They were wonderful people.

And it was the same when half of the crew went to New-York by train. Wherever we stopped it was the same.

Once on the HMS *Versatile* we went to the North Atlantic and ran into the Force 8 gale. We had a new Lieutenant Commander then and he would not slow down. The boats were washed overboard; the depth charges were swinging around. We lost six blokes over the side. After we got back to London he (Lieutenant Commander) was court-martialed and I was one of the chief witnesses 'cause I was on the wheel when the Captain ordered me to turn around and go back to Ireland. The First Lieutenant said: 'Disobey the order, stay where you are!' But we turned around and, actually, got back with one third of the ship flooded. I don't know how we got back but we did it. The Lieutenant Commander lost his command, and he lost five years of seniority, in other words, he could not get promoted for five years, which was really bad for an officer. And he deserved it only because he ordered to turn around instead of cutting across the rough seas.

I believe, you read the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses*. Did you like them? Were they realistic?

I read these books and found them realistic.

What do you think about the situation when a U-boat was depth charged and the survivors in the water were killed? Was it justified?

(*After a long pause John shows a photo - VK*). This is an Italian destroyer we chased it and finally sank. But before that there was another one and there were survivors in the water. We were chasing this one and we never altered our course - we went through them. I suppose many people died. We could not muck about - we were after another one.

But, John, I am talking about a different situation. There were survivors from an Allied merchantman in the water and the Captain ordered to depth charge a U-boat. Would you have done it yourself if you were the Captain?

It's very-very difficult to say. I don't know. I would not like to do it myself. But it could have happened.

Did you have a chance to see your former enemies and allies after the war? If yes, what kind of atmosphere did it occur in?

I've never come across any Germans after the war. During my years on the docks in Auckland I worked on half a dozen Soviet ships. I had a lot of sympathy from the Russian seamen through being on the Arctic convoys. We used to play soccer with the crews of the Russian ships which

were mainly coming to load wool. We could not invite them to get together with us for coffee, tea or sandwiches. All the Russian ships had a commissar, and they had to be very careful... Some of the Russians spoke English and in one case I was invited for a dinner on board of one of the Russian ships. We were sitting down and the meal was brought in, but nobody would start and I could not understand why □ they wanted me to start first! They were very friendly and we had a great time.

Was it during the Cold War?

Yes, maybe in 1951.

Obviously, it was an uneasy time for such a contact?

The Cold War was between America and Russia and I was on the Russian side.

Please, tell whatever you wish to tell about the WW2.

It should never ever have happened, I mean World War Two. Trouble with Britain is that it's only a little island. They had the British Empire all over the world and they didn't have enough forces to defend it - just enough to defend the island. I joined the Navy and joined up to fight. Sometimes you didn't like it, sometimes you did. Every day in the war was a different day whether you were in action or ashore. Sometimes it was good, sometimes □ bad. Two days were never the same. I took every day of the war as it came.

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE MAIN

(JANUARY 2004)

Please, tell a bit about yourself, where you were born, how you became a Navy seaman.

I was born in Scotland in 1927 and educated in Edinburgh. Being caught by the war I was evacuated to Cupar then, when it calmed down I went home again and finished my education. I joined Leith nautical college, was qualified and finally went to sea as a cadet. I joined a company called Henderson Line in Glasgow. Its normal trade was between the UK and Burma. But because of the war they went anywhere. For my first voyage I went on the American-built ship *Ocean Viceroy* which I joined in Glasgow, then to Liverpool and thence to Freetown in convoy and then went independent from Freetown to Buenos-Aires. We got through quite comfortably but after we had broken the convoy some other ships (*Hensada*) were torpedoed.

For the second voyage we were loaded in Liverpool and Glasgow and went up to Loch-Ewe in Scotland to join a convoy. At this time I was about 16. We sailed off to Russia and never again in my long following seagoing experience have I encountered weather like that. On Xmas Eve 1943 we proceeded in convoy and I was on the bridge on signal watch. The flags froze and we had to use *ALDS* lamp. The cook was trying to prepare Xmas dinner. He had chicken and turkey afire in the oven. The flame started coming out of the galley funnel. The Captain McFadyen sent me to the galley saying: 'Tell the cook to put the fire out as everybody in Norway can see us!' I went down to the galley. There were three inches of sea water in the galley and just inside the door there was an electric water boiler.

The cook threw a full bucket of boiling water into the fire and it exploded and the flame burst out of the oven and the cook got so badly burnt! The fire burnt his clothing onto the skin. I was in a parka, *balaklava*, gloves, leather boots - I was in full regalia on (it was -20) and got only my face burnt. The cook had intelligence to turn me around and push me out into the open air. He followed me into the icy cold wind. I took him to the midship accommodation. There was only one tube of *tannafax* in the medicine chest, and it was not enough. Then I took him back to his accommodation which was near mine. I don't remember exactly what happened then but I was

obviously not good enough for work for at least 2-3 days. I was told to take it easy and look after him: there was nobody else to do it.

On Boxing Day we were attacked by *Scharnhorst*. About 10 o'clock in the morning she came in from the port quarter and started shelling. I had never heard a shell in my life. They make a sound like b-r-r-r-r-gh (kind of rattle). I had heard *Stuka* bombs but I had never heard a shell and there were plenty of them.

The engagement lasted all day. The final part of it was on our starboard quarter. She was still firing but I don't think it was chasing us anymore - she was defending herself. She had a hell of a job. We had 32 destroyers in the escort, and they called up *Duke of York*, *Belfast* and *Glasgow* (the first - a battleship and the latter two - battle cruisers). They had radar fully operational and *Scharnhorst* never had it properly working, perhaps all they had was DF (*direction finder* - VK) and how she fought the engagement I don't know. Eventually they knocked her off.

We had proceeded on to Murmansk by which time I was back at work. So, that was the worst experience I ever had. By the way, prior to the *Scharnhorst* engagement and the time I was burnt I was assigned to an Oerlikon 20-mm cannon, we had six of them. I was on the one on the bridge starboard side. I was only 16 and I was not a gunner at all. But we had Stukas and Luftwaffe in the air and were attacked fairly constantly during twilight (from 10am till 2pm). Our redeeming feature was that we were the inside column nearest to Norway and as they made their run, they missed us. Visibility was shocking, the weather was absolutely atrocious. The convoy was seven columns wide so they wouldn't hit us - they would hit the rest.

The story about Oerlikon is that it carries two drums each of 60 rounds: tracer, armor-piercing and explosive - in that order and that was the way we had to pack them in. There was a locker with a steel lid and there were two loaded drums - one in the weapon and one in the ready-use locker. My personal story about that - you pull the trigger and it takes 3.5 seconds to empty the drum, and I had to put the second one on! During the firing of the second drum one round jammed inside another in the breach and I fell into complete panic.

We had a Marine Sergeant who was in charge of the 24 DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship) personnel. And he fired a 4.7-inch dual purpose weapon on the stern, and above it we had a 12-pounder and on the forecastle - another 12-pounder. Anyway, he was down on the stern. I got myself down to the poop, then climbed a ladder. The 4.7-inch gun blast struck me on the face. I almost fell off the ladder! I gave this guy all my information, he slapped me on my face and said: 'Shut up!' He took me back to the Oerlikon, fixed it up and said: 'Load the thing, keep firing!' I said: 'Yes!' and that was my experience of gunnery.

We had quite a long time in Murmansk - from about the 29th December till the 3rd of February 1944. The weather was extremely cold. We couldn't get out of there, because the German submarines were hanging about outside - They didn't seem to care whether a ship was loaded or not but of course a loaded ship was a better target. We had to stay until they said it was a fair thing to go. The bombers were coming every day as long as it was twilight. They were J-88 high level bombers.

Was it terrifying?

Oh, yes, it was frightening. But the worst part of it was the Americans. If you fire a short at an American he'll let go with everything. It's like a Western! There is no point in firing an Oerlikon at a Ju-88. You'll never get there. But the Yanks fired everything they had including 9-mm pistols! It was alarmist, they did make a lot of noise but didn't frighten the Germans.

Eventually we got back down to Pentland Firth (between the Orkneys and Scotland). The unfortunate part was that instead of going to the west coast they sent us down the east coast, and the Germans were using high-speed diesel E-boats at that time. They were barely clear of

the water - they did about 40 knots. The Germans were terrific in producing equipment. We never actually got hit but we went down in a convoy in column of two ships in line to a place called Hartlepool and that ended the voyage. That was my only experience with the Russian convoys.

Did you shoot down yourself any *Stukas*?

No, I don't think so (*George laughs - VK*).

Please, tell about your feelings towards Germany in the beginning of the war. Was there only a desire to protect your homeland from the enemy or some ideological anti-Nazi feeling?

Hitler just went all over Europe and we hated him. I had some experience of German Jews. The Germans were killing the Jews and some of their children fled the country. And we were cruel to them: you know, children are cruel to each other, and we used to call them *Fritz* or *Hunn*. They used to wear white stockings with tassels - the gear they wore in Germany. I was in a private ordinary school in Edinburgh in 1940-41. There were Jews in Edinburgh - they had a synagogue - and they mobilised themselves to foster those children. I don't suppose those children ever saw their parents again, I don't know. Because of that I didn't have any sympathy to the Germans at all because they mistreated those children who were of the same age as us.

Do you remember the Battle of Britain and bombing?

Yes, and the children of Edinburgh schools were evacuated and later returned. The Germans were trying to knock off the Forth Bridge and cripple the communication.

Did you see people dying under the German bombs?

No, because we had dug shelters.

Initially German seamen were like the Royal Navy - they were gentlemen. At the beginning of the war if they knocked something off, they would get the blokes onboard and put them on POW ships, but then they began to machine-gun the survivors. Off Freetown they sank *The Empress of Canada* and they left them (*the survivors - VK*) alone in the waters infested by sharks! That was one of the worst tragedies I've ever heard of. I sailed with a fellow who was amongst the few survivors. He didn't lose his sanity, but he never recovered from the experience.

Please, tell with a bit more detail what did you think about Russia before the war, then during the Hitler-Stalin pact and after the German invasion into the USSR? How was it changing through the war?

I knew nothing about Russia before the war except it was the biggest country in the world □ three times as big as America. I don't know much about it even now. The Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact made Russia our enemy immediately, because Germany was our enemy!

And when you heard that Hitler had invaded Russia what was your feeling?

That was the best thing which ever happened to Britain. We became allies! Russia resisted, and the way they fought in the siege of Stalingrad was superb.

Were you aware of the situation in the Eastern front?

Yes, of course. After the war we went to Finland and there were only women - a sailor's paradise. It was the only country which declared war on Russia along with Hitler and one could see - their men used to die like flies.

Did you visit the USSR yourself during the war? Did you encounter the Russians and, if yes, how did you get along with them?

Murmansk was devastated - it was bombed out completely. People working on the wharf I thought were either deserters or those who had done something wrong: they were marched around in columns or platoons by armed guards.

I went ashore a couple of times - there was nothing there for me - I was only a kid. We went to *Intourist* hotel (kind of a bar) where after standing in a long queue you could buy vodka and a coffee and they also gave you a candle because it was dark! I didn't have a chance to get in touch with the Russians - I was only a cadet and was told what to do.

There was no tucker in Murmansk. We had stacks of food in the tween deck and I and another guy were ordered to look after the stores to prevent stealing. As the cargo was discharged our blokes and the Russian workers could see those attractive foodstuffs, so we used it to build a sort of a barricade around the stores so that not to let other people pinch our tucker.

Did you hear anything about brothels for merchant seamen in Murmansk?

No, I didn't know anything about that. Maybe, I was too young to be interested in. There were very few women, very seldom we saw a woman, and it was bloody hard to tell it was a woman because they all wore the same gear.

What kind of conditions were on the merchant ships compared to the warships, say, destroyers? Were you better off?

Oh, yes, much better off comfort wise... Their living conditions were frightful! Our bridge was 50 feet above the water and on destroyers only about 12 feet above the water! They were under blue water all the time, wet and cold. And they were stuck on the warships. If I didn't like it I could have quit, couldn't I?

But in this case, they would have drafted you to the Army □

Oh, yes, and I would have been sent to the Western Desert (*George laughs - VK*).

We were in the first convoy in to Rangoon - we carried wheat from Wallaroo (South Australia). The Japs were still in the suburbs, but believe it or not in the Bay of Bengal the submarines were German, and there was so called *U-boat Alley*.

Were you under attack from U-boats?

We were under threat of attack most of the time.

Did Japanese aviation attack you?

Yes. We had a sistership called *Sagain*. She was sunk alongside the wharf in the Trincomalee harbor and the Japs sank it with bombs. I was in a hospital ship *Amarapoora* in Trincomalee where we ferried wounded defense personnel on and from the ship.

Which day of the war do you remember most?

The action against *Scharnhorst*. I □ll never forget that - I saw some other action but that was special.

I believe, you read the books *The Cruel Sea* and *HMS Ulysses*. Did you like them? Were they realistic?

I read *The Cruel Sea* by Nicolas Monsarrat. The description of the weather in *Ulysses* was comprehensive.

I see another book written by Monsarrat on your bookshelf...

Oh, yes (*George smiles - VK*). *The Cruel Sea* is very realistic. Nobody believes what he wrote about the ocean but I'll tell you off the North Cape the weather was like that! They actually told us straightforward: 'Don't worry about it if you fall overboard. Nobody will look for you. You'll have only 3 and a half minute'.

Was the attack on U-boat justified when there still were survivors from a torpedoed merchantman in the water?

It's very difficult but they might as well go for U-boat. The Captain was under order. He was fighting the enemy...

Yes, but it could have been you in the water as well... Did you have a chance to meet your former enemies and allies after the war? If yes, what kind of atmosphere did it occur in?

Yes. I went to Hamburg shortly after the war. It was devastated. You could buy anything for five cigarettes. The Second Mate was teaching me how to live - he was older than me (*George laughs - VK*). We had passes to get ashore and he led us to a place called *Atlantic Hotel*. It was a fabulous place like *Sheraton*. Magnificent hotel, two double beds in the bedroom. And for 5 cigarettes you could buy a bottle of best French champagne! And all what the girls - young nice blond blue-eyed German girls - had to eat was terrible rye bread and there was nothing with it.

I came to Western Australia from Queensland to get a job in Fremantle port authority. I had direct contacts with captains of all foreign ships coming here including Russian ships.

Did you ever tell them that you had been to Russia during the war?

I probably did but I don't remember (*George laughs - VK*).

I visited Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania after the war - maybe, in early 1950-ties. I was the first mate and our cargo was timber. I had learnt the carriage of timber by sea - it's not easy because you have stability problems. Timber floats but it's no good for a ship. We went ashore quite a bit. I chanced to know one Latvian bloke fairly well. He was a supercargo. He was a very nice fellow. His hobby was to collect stamps, and I gave him all stamps I could find and also a couple of magazines - I suppose they were not allowed to have those magazines.

They even took our radios away! It could have been in the Cold War. I didn't worry me too much but they even immobilized our radio station when we were in port. Actually, they took away our magazines so that we couldn't give them to anybody but I sneaked away a couple for that fellow.

Navigating in the Baltic and Gulf of Finland was fabulous especially in the winter. The water is black, the islands and trees are snow white! Gorgeous, really beautiful.

Please, tell whatever you wish to tell about the WW2.

It took an awful lot of time. In the final analysis, any war is fruitless because wrong people suffer. Maybe it's good for politicians but it's no good for an average guy in the street. An awful lot of people died, and I lost a lot of people I knew. I'm pleased we won it. I feel sorry for the Germans because they were carried away and they were poorly led. I feel tremendous amount of sympathy for London, Coventry, Liverpool and all civilians who were dispossessed. I now live in the best country in the world and have no complaints because we enjoy great freedom here.

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