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Dear Sirs ,

I have been advised that you may be interested in details of interest connected with WW2 I consider that I may have something which could possibly fill the bill and be of some interest to you. As a very general and brief summary of the happenings which comprise my contribution I could summarize them as beginning on my fifteenth birthday, June 15th. 1941 when I was officially enlisted in the local platoon of the Local Defence Volunteers which is now very well known as 'Dad's Army' and ended in October 1945 which dated the end of my first voyage to sea as a Deck Cadet which began in December 1942 when I joined a petrol tanker on the Manchester Ship Canal and I only returned to the U.K. in October 1945 after spending almost three years shunting aviation spirit to nearly every recognized theatre of war with the notable exception of the Russian convoys. I spent the majority of that time in the Pacific with the U.S. It began when the battle of the Atlantic was at its height and ended with our being seconded to accompany the U.S. 7th Fleet together with the supply ships to support the invasion of the Phillipines against the Japanese and this began in October 1944. We were the only British merchant ship and the only petrol tanker present and it is where the Kamikazes appeared for the very first time and there we remained for some six months before beginning our eventual voyage home.

I come from Liverpool and lived in Aintree Village and there they had formed a platoon connected to the L.D.V.. However they had not reckoned that this would require the manning of the village hall every evening until 7.30 am. on the following morning in order to receive any urgent messages. (which never came) and they were finding this almost impossible and accordingly, as everybody knew everybody else, they approached my father and suggested that as it was my fifteenth birthday and I was almost six feet tall that I most certainly looked as I could easily pass as having reached the necessary eighteen years of age and would be signed on. From Monday to Friday I would arrive at the village hall at 7.30. and would have every opportunity to do my homework as I would be taking the School Certificate (now known as the G.C.E.) and in the morning I would be collected in good time and returned to home. Normally the person performing this duty would receive one shilling and sixpence (in present day terms around 15p) per day and this would be passed on to me. For me this was approaching a small fortune and I could not believe my luck and within six weeks I had been fitted with my new uniform together with an Eddystone 303 rifle and ten rounds of ammunition with very strict instructions never to fire them.

In 1942 I applied to the Anglo Saxon Petroleum Co. (part of the Shell group) for a post as a Deck Cadet as the prospect of being paid for navigating the briney was of great appeal

They did grant me an interview and for this purpose forwarded two return tickets from Liverpool to London as they insisted that my father would have to accompany me. I was successful and I was informed that I would receive sixteen shillings and eightpence (around 80p) per month but in addition a massive War Bonus of five pounds would be paid monthly. I left school in July 1942 and was sent on a three month 'pre sea'

Course at the Liverpool Nautical College prior to joining my first ship named **Diloma**. All the ships were appropriately named after shells, a splendid petrol tanker built in 1939 with a Chinese Crew which the company always employed with sailors from Canton, engine room staff from Foochow and catering staff from Singapore. All of them living aft with the officers living midships in excellent single cabins with the exception of the two cadets who shared a cabin although for the first voyage I was alone until my dear friend, Douglas Ridley joined me after a short while. I purposely mention his name because later on in October 1988 he did insist that, as we had done our first trip together, that I should join him on his last trip in command of the Q.E.2. He was delighted to see me then as he would have someone at the meal table who would back up his tales of the Phillipines to the passengers.

On joining the Diloma I had to report to the Captain who informed me that the ship had been torpedoed on the last outward voyage which was fortunate as the ship was loaded with ballast water and was virtually unsinkable unless hit in the engine room. The Chief Officer who was on watch at that time later told me that he immediately ordered the Chinese pumpman out of his bed to go to the pumproom and discharge all water ballast until the hole made by the torpedo came above water level. This was very successful and the ship did not lose convoy speed and all hands spent three enjoyable months in a very good hotel in Nova Scotia whilst the necessary repair works were carried out. If the ship had been homeward bound and loaded then all hands would have departed skywards at a very great rate. However we now were at an oil refinery on the Manchester Ship Canal which had a special cracking plant which produced Iso Pentane for the Texan refineries to use as it actually raises the octane of aviation spirit and this is what we were now about to load and it was, obviously, even more volatile than aviation spirit. I now made two round trips to Houston with Iso Pentane outwards and aviation spirit homewards and returning to the Clyde on both occasions but there was no question of getting home. The convoys usually consisted of around sixty ships occupying quite a few square miles of water. The naval escorts usually consisted of ancient ships which, apart from the few corvettes, were not very effective. The largest loss that we received in any one day comprised nine vessels. There was no question of rescue of the crews of these vessels and they simply were left with any boat or raft available to them. At the beginning of my second voyage we were informed that a rescue ship had been assigned to our escorts. This was wonderful news until we found that she would not be able to maintain convoy speed which, at maximum, was around a crawling eight knots.

It must be remembered that with the fall of France all of the ports on the Atlantic Seaboard were now available to U boats were as previously they had been confined to the Baltic and they took full advantage of this huge opportunity. After the war the official final figures relating to the

Merchant Service were given. Out of a total of about 145,000, all of them volunteers with the noble exception of the six soldiers and six sailors who were assigned to to keep us straight on each vessel where serious firing power had been fitted, more than 32,000 died at sea during World War 11. The overall casualty rate was higher than in any of the armed services.

Our last trip to the U.S. was to New York in April-May time when radar, together with the breaking of the 'Enigma Code', was resulting in the end for the U boats in the Atlantic. Our next job was to load aviation spirit after which we were to proceed to Bizerta in Tunisia to act as a floating petrol tank for the French Airforce which was stationed there in support of the landings in Sicily and Italy.

In New York, prior to loading, we went to drydock where we received an essential and overdue overhaul and where all of our ancient and useless British Browning guns were stripped out and replaced by eight superb Swedish Oerlikon anti aircraft guns. The Swedes did alright during the war with guns to us and ballbearings to the Germans.

After loading a full cargo of aviation spirit we left New York and down south we went to around Chesapeake Bay to join a very big convoy escorted by an unbelievably large naval escort which actually included cruisers. Off we went and it was obvious that no self respecting U boat would appear within miles of us and so it proved. After a very peaceful cruise across the Atlantic in splendid weather we passed Gibraltar and on towards Tunisia before arriving at the intensely boring port of Bizerta.

Here we spent several weeks discharging small quantities of aviation spirit into very small tankers, a potentially dangerous job, for transport to the airfield.

Eventually our captain received further orders. Sad news. We were told that on leaving Bizerta we would turn right and proceed to Port Said and obviously through the canal. It was common knowledge that once you ended up in an 'East of Suez' situation you could kiss goodbye to an early return to the U.K. and so it proved. However it was Friday and we were due to depart on the morrow but that evening we were in for a very serious air attack and it was obvious that the Germans were well aware of our departure as they had kept away during our whole stay. Bizerta did not operate the usual blackout procedure and kept all lights blazing for 24 hours and we were about to experience one of our very closest calls during the whole voyage and it was my 17th birthday. When a vessel is fully loaded with aviation spirit it is well known that a torpedo hit results in a blue flash. When it clears there is absolutely nothing left. An even worse situation presents itself when you have fully discharged the cargo as you are then a floating gas bomb and it is essential that you fit windsails to every tank to discharge the gas and that was the position we were in. Our captain had lost two ships in the Mediterranean and was very well acquainted with air attacks and he immediately came up with the situation which we, most certainly, had not considered. Our new, magnificent Oerlikon guns did, on the ninth round, discharge a lighted tracer bullet which would trace the direction in which the fire was going but in our case would, if passing above the fitted windsails, dispatch us all to kingdom come. The orders were given that the guns were not to be manned.

The raid started and one of the planes most certainly dived for us and when approaching us he

veered to starboard and let one of his bombs go. My permanent position during air raids was as no.2 to the

Oerlikon gun on the starboard side of the bridge. I never fired it but just replaced the drum when required and at this moment I dashed through the wheelhouse to the other side of the bridge to see what had happened. The bomb had just missed the ship, hit the water, and had not exploded but the wash that it had caused had now reached the side of the ship so it was categorized as an exceedingly close call and it was put in place by a remark which has remained with me and was very typical of our captain. 'We were very near it tonight gentlemen'.

Next morning we were off to Suez and in for several boring months. There were some Japanese submarines around but it was a comparatively quiet part of the world. We were now in for loading aviation spirit from either Abadan or Bahrain in the Persian Gulf and making alternate trips to discharge by turning right in the Indian Ocean and proceeding to Aden and then a thousand miles up the Red Sea to discharge at Suez which was a dump. In the summer time the temperature rarely went below 100 degrees and we had to work the crew from 9 pm. until midnight and then get them out of their bunks at 6am. the next morning to put a few hours in before breakfast.

Our alternative route was much better as on leaving the Gulf we would go straight on and discharge in India at Karachi, Bombay, Colombo, Madras and finally at Calcutta. Pakistan, of course, did not exist. We repeated these voyages a few times. Only two happenings were worthy of note. The difficult River Hooghly serves Calcutta. It is not easy to navigate and it had the best paid pilots in the world. They were all British and they were all wealthy and arrogant and on the trip in question the river was just unbelievably full of floating bodies and it was horrendous. However when I came on to the bridge I did ask the pilot for the reason and he put it down to a rice famine that they had had in Bengal and then added a classic ending by informing me that you could always tell what sex they were by which side of their body they were floating on.

The other occasion was when, after discharging our cargo, we were in convoy between Colombo and Bombay and I was on the bridge when the ship directly ahead of us was torpedoed. She was a ship owned by an Indian Parsee shipping company. The Parsees were a wealthy caste and the names of all their ships began with 'Jala' and this was the Jalabala. She lost way very quickly. We later learned that she had a crew of over 100 and there were no casualties but they were making a hell of a noise when they passed us. We were bemoaning our rotten luck because if the submarine had hit us and not them it would have been three months in Bombay at a four star hotel and no war.

Douglas and I were always on the lookout for ways in which we could augment our meagre income and we had been very successful by purchasing items of clothing and footwear for next to nothing in India and selling to the locals in Abadan where such items were not very cheap and not easy to get. After a few voyages we had accumulated a very handsome, large box full of clothing and shoes made of the finest pressed cardboard and guaranteed to last for, at least, fourteen days. We did not know that we were on our last trip to the Gulf and as we knew

that we were bound for Bahrain we were not too bothered as the next trip would be to Abadan. When we arrived in Bahrain the agent, who had become our friend, came on board and told us that the parting of our ways was upon us and that we would be loading for Hobart, Tasmania and quite a few Australian ports. We were devastated and to this very day we cannot remember what we did with the box.

I well remember that I did discuss it with Douglas when I did my trip with him on the QE2 in October 1988 and, of course, we had a good laugh.

Our next trip to Hobart covered around 8000 miles and with the tropical ocean having the usual effect on our ship's bottom the maximum daily run would not exceed 240 mls and in such a vast expanse of ocean we would have been very unfortunate to run across the few Japanese submarines which were reported from time to time. After traversing the whole of the South Australian coast we turned right through the Bass Strait and on to Hobart where the whole atmosphere was dominated by the smell of apples.

The waters around Australia were peaceful and we completed discharge in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville and Cairns before returning to Newcastle N.S.W. for a four weeks stay during which our ship, amongst other things, had her bottom scraped. However when all was completed the captain came up with our next move and we were informed that we would be back as a floating petrol tank in support of the Australian and U.S. air forces operating against the Japanese in Papua-New Guinea.

We were very appreciative of the marvellous way in which we had been treated in Australia.

Our destination was to a place named Langemak. It is not on the map because there is nothing there but it is very near to Port Moresby.

Our job was once more to load very small tankers who would come alongside and were able to discharge very close to the airfields and when we had discharged all of the spirit a large T2 tanker from the U.S. would come alongside and fill us up again. Not the most interesting way to fight the war but it was not

the most dangerous. Plenty of air raid warnings with no planes arriving. This was soon to change.

In October 1944 we were seconded to the U.S. 7th Fleet and were to accompany them together with some 50 supply ships to support the invasion of the Philippines which would begin with the island of Leyte and the destination for the supply ships was the Gulf of Leyte.

We dropped anchor in the Gulf without any problems from the Japanese but just three days later we were puzzled by large and very nearby sounds of gunfire. The captain made an enquiry to the U.S. flagship but was advised that there was no problem. What was taking place was the Battle of Leyte Gulf which is now recognized as the biggest naval battle in history in which two American fleets were opposed by three Japanese fleets who were decisively beaten with such losses that their naval power had been decimated. It is further noted that if the U.S. had been fully aware of this then the manner of the naval war may well have been changed resulting in the saving of many lives. It is now known that the object of the Japanese was to gain entry to the Gulf and destroy every supply ship there. History tells us that, for the first time, there were some 200 Kamikazes in the original battle but I very well remember just eight

of them appearing over the horizon and then to see them diving on to ships was somewhat offputting. We were very prominent as we were the only ship with a funnel aft which confirms us as a petrol tanker and one of them made for us. To this day I can hear the words of our Third Officer, Dennis Arthur Stapleton English who spoke loud and very clear English and who was in charge of a twelve pounder gun on the boat deck. 'He's diving for us' and he most certainly was but at the last moment, perhaps he had changed his mind for some reason, he veered to the port side and straight into our neighbour which was also a distinctive vessel. A U.S. naval, floating drydock. As we were visiting them every evening to watch the movies they told us that they had just had five casualties with no serious injury. They then told us that they did have a laboratory on board and what was left of the Japanese pilot had been taken down there and it was in the process of being dismembered and the parts would be placed into jars of formaldehyde then sealed and offered as souvenirs. We had difficulty in taking all of this in but this is most certainly what happened. The air raids continued but our red letter day was to come. It was a very quiet evening and I was on the bridge when a signal came through. 'Flash Red Control Yellow' which told us that 'An air raid is imminent and there are no friendly planes in the air'. All hands were called out and very shortly a plane came flying along the coastline of the island of Samar and in our direction. It had all of its lights on and was crawling along at no more than 100 knots. As he came abeam of us he turned ninety degrees and came straight for us. As I mentioned, our captain knew all about air raids at sea and he immediately called fire and we could not miss and he went into the water very near to us. As soon as he hit the water every vessel in the Gulf opened fire and how we avoided casualties from what is now known as 'friendly fire' we shall never know. The captain was not too certain about the 'no friendly planes' piece and he was not too certain that the Americans would not come up with a 'Those goddammed Limeys have downed an American plane.' piece.

The next morning the captain was requested to receive a senior naval officer at 10.30 am. and both Douglas and I were instructed to put on our best tropical uniforms and stand smartly on the boat deck where the s.n.o. would be received. We did possess what is called 'an accommodation ladder, which we used when important people were boarding. Instead of climbing a rope ladder they just had to ascend what was almost a normal flight of stairs. Up came the s.n.o., stepped on to the boat deck and, in what was required of every American naval officer when boarding a ship, saluted the quarterdeck where the flag was flying and then informed our captain that he had brought something for him and he hailed his minions and two of them came up with two landing wheels which were joined by a shaft. Near to each wheel was obviously a Japanese character and in the middle of the shaft an anchor was carved. The captain was informed that we had shot down a plane from the Japanese Fleet Air Arm and was congratulated and informed that he would receive an American decoration. Needless to say he was delighted as it would definitely go down very well with our owners in London. A few days later we were visited by a not so senior naval officer with an abject apology. They had not realized that we were civilians and as such, our captain could not have his medal.

Some weeks later the captain came back from a conference and it was all hands together in his

quarters. McArthur had decided to go for the northern island of Luzon and Manila in particular and he had been informed that we would definitely be required. A quick look at the chart would show that we would need to go very close to islands on both sides and they were full of Japanese. It was obvious that losses would be very heavy but the captain had been informed that, if we so wished we could, when the time came, write a letter which would be delivered to our families in the event of our not making it. Deep gloom all round. Nearly all of the officers were in their twenties and some of them with very young wives and children who were completely dependent upon them for support. However in a short while the captain came back from another meeting with a huge smile on his face and I shall never forget the words 'we can't go we are too bloody slow'. They did require a minimum speed of 12 knots and 8 knots would be a maximum possibility. The casualties on the day were over 50%. We cruised up to Manila some weeks later on our own and with no absolutely no problems. The Japanese were finished and the war was virtually over. Our only complaint when we arrived in Subic Bay was that the American admiral had decided to commandeer the magnificent beach for the sole use of his nurses together with their authorized escorts. However we were surviving and, most certainly, that is what mattered most.

The day finally arrived when we received the date upon which we would make sail for Panama where, upon arrival, it would mean a hearty farewell to the war. In the meantime it was a memorable time for me. Our third officer had spent quite a period during the war around Australia and was under the spell of a very attractive young lady from Sydney whom I had met and all of the officers, including myself, were due for six months leave of which three months would be spent at a nautical college studying for the next certificate and he wished to spend the time in Sydney. The captain agreed to this and informed me that he was now in immediate need of a third officer and after almost three years he was prepared for me to sign the ship's articles as the uncertificated third officer and I honestly had never heard of any instance where a cadet had joined a ship for his first trip and returned as the uncertificated third officer. My accruing advantages were mind boggling. An 800% salary rise, I could order a bottle of Scotch, a superior seat in the dining saloon, my cabin would be cleaned by the steward and from eight to twelve am. and pm. I would be on the bridge and, in the absence of the captain, boss of the ship. Off we went on an intensely boring six weeks crawl across the Pacific at eight knots. The Japanese were still in the war and I well remember the only message received from the radio room reporting the sighting of a submarine over 100 miles to the northward. We were definitely in grave danger of surviving but a memorable day was drawing near. The eighth of May is now remembered as VE Day. On crossing the Pacific one must cross a line of longitude known as the International Date Line and if you are westward bound the clock must be put forward for 24 hours but if you are eastward bound, as we were, the clock must be put back for 24 hours and there can not be many around who had two VE Days. Our luck was definitely in.

Panama Bay was one mass of baby sharks and I honestly do not recall much of the passage through the Canal but it was an experience to leave at the other end as, for the first time in six

years, I was not at war.

A short run along the northern coast of Venezuela brought us to Curacao, the petrol port where we spent a considerable time carrying out essential repairs before loading our final cargo of aviation spirit consigned for London.

Off we went on the very shortest passage across the Atlantic with all lights blazing and the Radio Officers filling the airwaves with all the messages that we could dream up. We now had a standing message on the bridge that when the Longships, the most southwesterly lighthouse in the U.K., was sighted that the loud hailer would announce to all hands that they could come and have a look at England for the first time in almost three years. Right along the south coast to turn left at South Foreland and in to the Thames Estuary for discharge at Shellhaven where we were boarded by Customs and Immigration who, when they learned of our voyage were, quite untypically, very pleasant.

I just had one problem remaining. As third Officer I had charge of a fairly large storeroom which was very full of excellent cans of meat and fruit and supplied by the splendid U.S. people who had looked after us so well. We had no record as we had not paid for anything but we now knew that although the country was not at war the food was still rationed. I had words with the captain and he suggested that I had a word with Customs which I did and they considered that a solution could be found. In no time at all there were more Customs Officers on board than I had ever seen before and I must say that in double quick time the problem was solved.

When one leaves a ship all dutiable goods must be declared to Customs. I was going ashore for six months and had acquired a massive addiction to Camel cigarettes from the U.S. which were different. I would be allowed just two hundred but I decided to pay the duty on twelve hundred. When the day arrived I approached Customs who rapidly convinced me that I really meant two hundred and so off I went to Liverpool to find that I had missed my parents who had come down to London to meet me.

They returned the next day. End of story.

(W.C.B. Gilhespy)