

On the 28th of October 1941, I received notice of compulsory military service. At the time, it was possible to choose which force you wanted to join, and I opted for the navy. I was eighteen years old, and my service number was PMX116299.

I was ordered (via free travel) to HMS Royal Arthur, also known as Butlins at Skegness, as the camp had been taken over for the war. After some basic training – marching, saluting, rifle drill etc. – I was sent to Rugby Technical College. I spent six months there in digs, staying at a Mrs Cooper's house; no relation! People at the time were paid by the government for providing accommodation for members of the forces. I was residing with a fellow trainee called Nobby Clark. I was there from the 13th of December 1941 to the 29th of May 1942. I worked normal hours at the college training to be a radio technician. Rugby then was home to British Thompson Houston, a manufacturer of electrical equipment; there was also a big railway junction there too. It was here that I learnt about electricity and radio operation and subsequently became a qualified navy radio technician. Whenever I had a free weekend from training, I'd hitchhike home to Quinton and enjoy the company of my parents and some home-cooked food.

From Rugby, I next headed to HMS Valkyrie, which was a land-based ship/shore establishment, located in Douglas on the Isle of Man. I was to be stationed here from the 30th of May to the 24th of July, and I was to be trained in RDF (Radio Direction Finding). What I remember about the Isle of Man at the time were the horse-drawn trams parading up and down along the seafront. There were a number of boarding houses along the sea front, which had been taken over by the government to house German and Italian detainees who'd been interned from the mainland. They were caged in with 10ft high fencing.

At the end of July, I was transferred to HMS Mercury in Hampshire and from there, on the 7th of October 1942, ordered to join the crew of HMS Witherington in Nova Scotia. Rail travel took me to Gourock in Scotland on the River Clyde. Gourock is a small town in the Inverclyde area on the west coast of Scotland. It was from this port that I boarded the Queen Mary; a large liner which had brought many US servicemen to England. Days before I boarded, she was involved in a collision with a cruiser, fifteen miles off the coast of Northern Ireland. This was an incident hushed up by the Government. Years later we learnt that it hit a cruiser called HMS Curacoa and sank it. Not a thing was leaked at the time and it never reached the press. Anyhow, by the time we boarded, the bow was filled with concrete and pumps were being used to discharge the remaining water, it was soon made ready for its next voyage to New York where our adventure would begin.

I boarded the Queen Mary on the 8th of October 1942, only six days after its collision with the cruiser. We arrived in New York on the 14th of October and from there traveled to Boston where we took the train up to Halifax in Nova Scotia. Here we joined HMS Witherington, a World War I fleet destroyer, previously in action in 1916/17. It had had its torpedo tubes and main armaments removed and instead was now fitted with anti-aircraft guns and depth charge throwers. We were to be involved in convoy escort work whilst here. I continued my work as a radio mechanic and enjoyed it. I suffered seasickness initially which wasn't surprising considering the vengeful nature of the North Atlantic during those winter months, but soon overcame it.

I continued my duties as a mechanic in Halifax and St John, in Nova Scotia. However, we had to return to the United States on the 16th of December 1942, to have a new radar installed.

This took place in the Boston navy yard and meant we had to spend two months in harbor. At the Union Jack Club - a shore-based club established for the use of British servicemen - I met Mrs Mary Labounty and her husband Pop, of French-Canadian origin. Pop maintained boilers at a local jail. When she saw me, Mrs Labounty pointed at me as if to claim me and I took her and her husband up on their offer of lodgings. I soon learnt that Mrs Labounty was from Stockport in Manchester and that she had been in the USA since World War I. Her son John was ten years younger than me. From their house, I would take the train to West Concorde back to the ship to continue my duties. I remember being well-looked after by my landlady and it was good to be with British folk too. I stayed here from the 16th of December until the 21st of February 1943. Once the new radar had been fitted and the repairs made to the ship, we were sent back to St Johns to resume our convey escort duties.

St Johns in Newfoundland has a deep harbor and at that time of year, is deep in snow. At the time I was there, gas lamps still lit the streets, and the level of snow was up to the crossbar on the lamppost (the place where the lamplighter would rest his ladder whilst checking a lamp). We stayed in the harbor for two to three nights whilst we were at anchor. There was a large merchant vessel in the harbor at the time and we noticed a torpedo had blown a hole right through the bow. One night we sailed our liberty boat through the middle of it!

On the 22nd of February, we commenced escort duties out of St John. Our role was to escort convoys, classified "slow" or "fast" halfway across the Atlantic, where we would be met by other escort vessels shepherding the merchant fleet crossing back to the UK. In essence, our ship did not have enough fuel for the entire journey. Our speed on these crossings was always determined by the speed of the slowest vessel and our course would be a zigzag meandering for safety purposes. We did have one incident of detecting anti-submarine warfare. Pretty soon on this voyage, we heard, 'Red! Red! Bridge! Bridge!' a torpedo approaching us on the port side. Thankfully, it failed to hit.

By this time, I had been promoted to Captain's Assistant on the bridge and my role was to assist with plotting the ship's course. I had considerably more education than many on board and my Higher School Certificate had helped to open my mind. I was offered a return to the UK for officers' training, but I didn't much fancy that. All the same, one of my privileges was being allowed in the petty officer's mess.

Towards the end of April, somebody went onto the open upper deck and walked towards the bow and noticed a crack had appeared in the plates fixed across the bow, perhaps caused by the serious weather conditions. We were told to 'oil at sea' (refuel) and proceed back to the UK for the ship to be repaired. As we traveled, we saw a surfaced U-boat that was all lit up in the moonlight. It was a spectacularly frightening image. We tried to ram the U-boat,

but it crash-dived. We dropped a load of depth chargers, hoping that this would 'take care' of it. Before long, we resumed our escort duties and returned to our zigzagging again and eventually entered to Gladstone Dock, Liverpool where the ship was repaired and we were sent on temporary leave.

I spent the following two months of shore leave at my parent's farm, where they were pleased and relieved to see me. At the end of this period, I was posted back to HMS Witherington. By then it was the 27th of June 1943. This time we were to sail to Gibraltar, with a crew of approximately one hundred. We were involved in U-boat patrols and our mission was to stop

enemy U-boats from entering the Mediterranean. General Montgomery, at the time, was intent on kicking both Germans and Italians out of North Africa.

One of our first missions, on the 5th of October 1943, was to accompany a Free French Army colonial territory boat, packed with troops from West Africa returning from Dakar, back to Gibraltar. At least that was the intention. They went at such a cracking pace we simply couldn't keep up and so we actually sailed to Gibraltar alone!

On another occasion, on the 28th of December the same year, we headed to Horta, in the Azores which was Portuguese territory. Portugal was neutral during WWII. We were given the task of taking two British army personnel to the Azores. They were commissioned army officers but had to wear civilian clothes due to the country's neutrality. That said, they were there to eavesdrop on German traffic over the radio. No doubt on the other side of the street, the Germans were listening to their conversations! We didn't stay, just delivered the personnel there, anchored overnight and had shore leave.

We returned to Gibraltar and made two further trips to Casablanca. North Africa had been cleared of Nazis by this time and the Allied forces were preparing to invade southern Italy. We traveled from Gibraltar to Malta as well as Alexandria in Egypt.

At this time, we had a white circle emblem painted on the foredeck of our ship so that Allied aircraft, mainly the Americans, could distinguish friend from foe in preparing for the invasion of Sicily. On the 13th of July we arrived at Syracuse in Sicily, which was the 'hopping-off' point for the invasion of Italy; we were there predominantly to fend off U-boats. On these U-boat patrols I stuck to my role as radio/radar mechanic.

Despite the seriousness of our missions, there was a happy-go-lucky atmosphere aboard the ship. Most of the sailors on board were gamblers and would bet on almost anything: which cockroach would be first to a particular point, or whether we'd be back in Gibraltar in a week's time. All bets were in rum; minor bets were for 'sippers' and more important bets were in 'gulpers'. Crew were given a glass of rum a day and generally it would be knocked back before we'd eat dinner. Chief petty officers and petty officers alike received a glass of the neat stuff and would sometimes bottle it to keep for a special occasion, whereas the rest of the crew would have their rum diluted with water, called '2:1 drinks' and didn't keep.

In order to catch up with the news, the ship produced its own newspaper: The Withers. I kept the Christmas number and still have it today. The ship's doctor would contribute under the pseudonym 'Cod' - Doc in reverse. I contributed several items, 'On with the Motley' being one. The ship's pipes transmitted announcements throughout the vessel such as, "Clear lower deck for payment", which meant that the men were to queue up to be paid or "leave from 14:30", if say, we came into port. I also received some news from home via letters from my parents. We had to be very careful about what we wrote concerning the navy's goings-on in case of interception by the enemy. Our letters were always censored.

Eventually, we had to return to the UK as there was trouble with the ship's condensers. The condensers were involved in desalinating seawater for the boilers and for drinking, so without them, we would be in serious trouble. We sailed home taking bananas 'as green as grass' in defiance of rationing and hoping to impress everybody waiting to see us with our exotic finds. They didn't take kindly to stowage in the boiler room however and turned black long before

we had landed in England and were tossed into the North Atlantic. We sailed around Ireland and the North Cape before finally docking in Hartlepool. The old girl was finished with by the end of the trip and had to be sent to be repaired. As for me, I traveled to the Midlands to see my parents and then onto HMS Victory in the dockyard at Portsmouth to recommence my duties.

It was while stationed in Portsmouth that I attended one of the 'Go Ashore' dances at the navy barracks at the ballroom in Southsea, and here I met a girl who I thought looked 'alright'. I asked her for a dance and later on I offered to walk her home. She was living at her parents' flat in Portsmouth. She was called Joan Mary Nutt, a secretary to an air force officer who worked for an airplane manufacturer called Airspeed. She would eventually become my wife. I invited her to attend a show with me at the Kings Theatre in Southsea. In the meantime, I would be in Newhaven or in Scotland, training.

At this point, I was posted overseas to Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) so Joan and I kept up regular correspondence, at which she competed with my mother for the frequency of letters. Before leaving, Joan and I had met at the dance, been to the cinema once and the theatre once and then wrote to each other regularly throughout the rest of the war.

Returning to Portsmouth, I was given a new role involving the use of sound recording and playing for military purposes, at the time an innovation! We were initially sent to Newhaven to train and from there to an army unit on the West coast of Scotland (no idea of the name of the base). Just four or five of us made this trip to see what sound recording equipment they used, before heading back to Newhaven again. The project involved using a wooden spool wound with copper wire which was then fit to record the sounds made by various engines: ships, aircraft, tanks etc. If the wire broke, we'd tie a knot in it and fuse it with a fag end - job done! - and then we'd carry on.

Our next adventure was to take this so-called war paraphernalia to Ceylon as well as India and embark upon a lengthy sound-recording mission. Eight of us set off in 1944 on a cargo passenger boat called the 'Brocklebank Mayanada' (Brocklebank was a shipping company) traveling along the Suez Canal, and from there to Sri Lanka, for a couple of nights before taking a train to the north and onto India. We arrived at a port on the east side of India called Vishakhapatnam. I shared a hut with three other men and a boy we called 'Ready' as he ran errands for handouts and became our house boy, his mantra being 'Me take, fetching, coming sir...'

Here, with our spools of copper wire, we set about recording further engine sounds. We'd recorded a selection of engine sounds by then, including motor launches, aircraft and tanks. Now was the moment that they were to be put to good use. The equipment was loaded onto a motor launch with about ten people on board and we lay offshore waiting to test the equipment. The final plan was to lay off the shore of Burma, which was Japanese occupied, and play the medley of sounds we'd accumulated to draw enemy fire to this side of the country, whilst British troops landed elsewhere. However, the Americans dropping two atom bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki meant that the Japanese surrendered and there was no need to continue with the plan. The European War at this time had already finished and the Asian War had ended four months later.

We were told "You can all go home now boys!" We were released and thankfully the navy ended up heading home before everybody else. So, we returned from Sri Lanka on the cruiser HMS Newcastle. I had received my certificate of release, as there was no more work the navy needed us to do. My certificate was dated the 28th of February 1946 and I was discharged on the 26th of April 1946. This was a 'Class A Release' which meant, of course, I was subject to recall, if necessary. I had entered the navy under the National Arms Service Act of 1939. I didn't think there would be another war, it was assumed at the time that Britain had had enough of war and was pretty much bankrupt.