

HMS Versatile
by
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I joined Versatile in September 1943 as a 3rd Class ERA at Grangemouth. The ship had undergone a massive refit. No 1 boiler had been removed, effectively reducing the speed from 32 knots to 25 knots. An enormous fuel tank had been fitted, allowing a sea time of fourteen days. I cannot remember the mileage.

Mess-decks were situated above the fuel tank for the extra crew needed. The torpedo tubes were removed and the space used for depth charge stowage. 'A' and 'Y' guns were removed. In place of 'A' gun a Hedgehog was fitted, and extension depth charge gear in place of 'Y' gun. The midships Pom-pom was removed and Oerlikons were located at various points in place of the 0.303 machine gun.

The CO was Lt Cdr Corlett, RN. I can only remember the name of one other officer, S/Lt France, RNVR.

On working up we left Grangemouth for trials and on passing Rosyth the order was given 'Away Fenders', the 'sprog' seamen (of the crew only 25% were experienced hands, most of them had come straight from training) just slipped the fenders - and this in full sight of the fleet. There we were steaming along with our fenders in our wake!

On reaching full speed the main feed check valve on No 1 boiler jammed open. Ah me, back to Rosyth with a fried feed pump. Strip the lot down,

found a rivet under the check valve seat. (Sabotage? - we never found out). Put the lot to rights and went ashore into the flotilla canteen, where we were greeted with "Wanna buy some fenders?", and other uncomplimentary remarks about our seamanship!

The ship was worked up at Tobermory under the guidance of Monkey Stephenson (Rear Admiral) and of course his monkey, Richard Baker (BBC).

After springing a leak in the tiller flat which yours truly and the Chief ERA (Albert E Wood) fixed. He later became Lt (E) RN and trained in the Indian Navy. He was a non-smoker out of his hammock - cigarette continuous with pipe until the evening when he started on cigars. The reason he stayed in Versatile was so he could smoke all day. He would be the CERA joining after the 1940 bombing. I do not know where he is now but at the rate he smoked (he was born in 1910) I doubt that he is still with us.

We joined 18 Group (North Atlantic) - Cdr Gretton, RN in command - in Londonderry in November 1943, our first convoy was one that brought home to the engine room staff the age of our ship. Entering Reykjavik harbour the Double Beat Throttle Valve broke clean in two due to metal fatigue. This the CERA and I were repairing on the upper deck. A most ticklish job as the allowance on that particular seating was 1/9000 of an inch and of course 'Chiefy' was smoking. Along comes No 1 and

called 'Chiefy' to heel for smoking. Oh dear! 'Chiefy' was mad - blue lights and vengeance!

The next convoy we set out on was in the second week of December 1943. We were to meet at sea and of course we hurried at our best speed - 24 knots. Unfortunately, the worst storm in the North Atlantic, during the war years, sprang up. The CO decided to thrash on regardless. Well, regardless - it was! We lost all the hand rails, sea boats, depth charge davits were bent to deck level, and the shield on 'B' gun. Rivets fell out all over the place. The steering seized up. The tiller flat, engineers stores, wardroom and Captains cabin flooded to deck level, giving a list of five degrees. We steered for three days by main engines only. It was impossible in the engine room to fill in the log book due to flooding and motion of the ship. The boiler room was flooded to above the lower furnace oil sprays. 'A fine kettle of fish!'

We finally made Loch Foyle, Northern Ireland at 0300, with no electrics - watch-keeping in the engine room by candlelight and torches, and just enough steam to move at 4 knots. "Hey Ho, for the life of a sailor!" No sleep, and hard tack for four days. We cat-napped on two planks in the engine room in between trying to correct the five degree list. (We never did manage that).

Getting the anchor down was 'Knock out the bits and let it run!' This was just prior to Christmas 1943. The

CERA would not let the ERA's go watch and watch, but kept us all on, and ordered us to fill in the log books and engine movements for the previous four days, so with great scratching of heads and straining memories, Montgomery, (he finished up three months later in a lunatic asylum) myself and Stanton. (The last I saw of him was in 1963 as CERA in HMS Whitby when I was doing a stint in Chatham MTE).

We had no sooner got our heads down when the Captain sent for us and gave the three of us a dressing down and threatened us with dire punishment as the engine room log was an entire fabrication, he had never made all those orders. He sent for the deck log - it was hard to believe, but the bridge log had not been completed for four days. Oh dear! The engine room log stood as the only record. God Bless 'Chiefy'.

Next was a court of enquiry into the failure of the steering gear which had been caused by blocks and tackle getting into the Napier gear, we could not get into the tiller flat as it was completely flooded and the stern under water. We lost three crew members - washed overboard, during this period. (They were the depth charge party). During this time too, I helped a Lt RN to ditch loose depth charges from off the engine room hatches. I cannot speak too highly of the CERA. He was with us all the time in engine room 'A'. We were continually repairing defects caused by the bad weather.

At the Court of Enquiry the CERA was asked what the blocks and tackle were doing in the tiller flat. His reply was that the First Lt had ordered him to accept them in his domain, and to my amazement produced the engine room work log with the relevant order. As I said earlier, "Blood, blue lights and vengeance." That finished the First Lt's career in mid flight. He was dismissed the ship, it was the one order that he was not allowed to give - to put loose tackle in the tiller flat.

However, we got the ship repaired in Londonderry, and in the early part of January 1944 we set off again - but were recalled in the middle of a gale into Loch Foyle, whereupon at 0200 in the middle watch we entered with me on watch in the engine room a couple of sharp engine movements and in came the bow of a ship abreast the Gear Case.

There was I, flat on my back on the ER plates looking at the stem of the ship! Shock! Horror!! Quick as a flash I'm up on my feet, obeying the telegraph and down into the engine room came everyone! Ah well, we lost the CO the Warrant Gunner and the Warrant Engineer.

We were left with two RNVR Sub Lt's in command! But not for long. The removal of the latter was of consequence of the court of enquiry into the latest collision. We then got a new CO a Lt Potter, DSC, a Lt Brading as Engineer Officer the other I cannot remember.

So round to Belfast for repairs which took a fortnight. I got seven days

leave. Arrived home unexpectedly on the day our Bill arrived to get married. He was in the Green Howards. A great time was had by all, especially as I was unexpected. Back to the ship. We raised steam and moved out of Belfast, in the middle watch as usual, to confound the German sympathisers (IRA) who kept a constant watch for ship movements. The non-duty part was secured, and there was I once more on my own as Chief of the watch when up comes a young second class stoker, and in his best Mancunian dialect said, "Chief, the starboard gear case is on fire!" Buckets of blood!! Down aft I galloped, and sure enough he was right. Stop everything! Increase the lubrication pressure! Rig a hose! Ring the alarm bells!! Ye Gods! Once again, down came everyone. Me under arrest. However, there were so few of us that I had to continue with the watch whilst 'Chiefy' Montgomery and Stanton pulled off the back of the gear box. Our old friend - metal fatigue. The feather (a small copper rod) in the reduction gear blank had given way allowing the blank to bear out the end of the gear case, and friction had done the rest. At 3000 rpm it doesn't take long! Ah well, out of arrest and a red ink recommend for being so alert, so all was well that ended that way. We fixed that up on the move, a ticklish job, we did not have brakes on the idle engine in those old V&W's. It was a case of "mind your fingers" and trust in the ERA on watch.

All patched up, a couple of convoys later towards March we went on the Gibraltar patrol for a couple of months, to the beginning of May 1944 during which time we attacked, with others, three U-boats with no apparent effect, except that we do know that U-boats rarely got through the Gibraltar patrol intact. The shipping losses in the Mediterranean are the clue to that. Then, with the initial excitement dying down, Admiral Tennant left us, and we were set to carry out Asdic sweeps and protect the East side of the swept channel. The weather was beautiful, blue sky, no cloud, sea flat, calm for days on end. Lt Potter was getting fed up with the staple diet of corned beef and hash, (when they re-designed the Versatile they forgot to put in extra storage for food) so over went a couple of depth charges. Away sea boats crew, and fresh fish for supper - Hooray!! All good things come to an end, off we went for real, we picked up a U-boat, so down went the depth charges. After all, the Channel is not that deep. We bumped a bit, and the engine room clock fell down, that Ammatol shared the bang about a bit, and up came oil! We sat on top of the sub for a day dropping a charge now and again just to remind him that we had not forgotten about him, when up sailed a flotilla of 'R' class destroyers. Seven of them, Captain (D) in command. Stand back! There was never a sight seen like it! For about four hours the sea boiled, depth charges rained down, destroyers darted hither and thither, nothing

happened, Captain (d) got fed up, and probably in a fit of pique, led his flotilla off to other adventures. Once again, we resumed our lonely vigil.

It would seem that on the third day someone, somewhere, decided we were too big a hammer to crack that nut. We were relieved by a Flower Class Corvette, and off we went. Three hours later, up came the sub. Congratulations all round to the Corvette. Was Lt Potter mad!

The new mess-decks fitted above the oil tanks which replaced No 1 boiler, were lengthwise. Stokers mess to starboard and ERA's to port. This meant that the ERA's had a fairly comfortable mess considering the other mess-decks. To compensate for this, any supernumerary Chief or Petty Officer was domiciled in the ERA's mess, which consisted of the CERA three watch-keeping ERA's two fifth class for training, and the Canteen Manager.

The first Canteen Manager was Buck Taylor, (weren't they all?). He was something of a real wide boy. His previous ship had been sunk by a mine in the fairway leading into Liverpool. This ship was raised, and the false teeth left behind by Buck, in his haste to abandon, were recovered, identified(?) and posted on to him in HMS Versatile, along with the write up in the 'News of the World!' One of his dodges was to bring a side of bacon into the engine room with a pint of vinegar, rub the side down with vinegar, beg some oil that was waiting to be purified, and rub it in on the side of bacon. Just rubbed with

vinegar, it stank dreadful, take the side of bacon to the Doctor who promptly declared it rotten, a quick rub with more vinegar, and lo, Buck had a gash side of bacon for himself. He became aware that the NAAFI were catching up on him so, one dark night in the North Atlantic, all NAAFI records on board were given the deep six, and on arrival in Londonderry he departed, remember all NAAFI managers, although wearing uniform were civilians, and could go almost as they wished.

The next manager was an Irishman, I cannot remember his name, but he only did two trips with us before being caught with his fingers in the till, and away to jail he went.

The next one was a Hampshire lad. It was true he could not keep books and accounts. The CERA and I used to write them up for him in our spare time! He disappeared, and I cannot remember a fourth manager. I suppose we must have had one.

After 'D' day we had a PO writer join the ERA's mess, until then we had sojourned the war away in the West Indies. He had put forward for a commission, but had no sea time in to qualify, so we got him for three months. His name was Laing, place of birth, Newcastle, so Geordie Laing it was.

On Christmas Eve 1944, in the North Sea making for Immingham, down came a thick fog, and I mean thick, the Captain put the pick down. At 1100 Up Spirits, still in thick fog, the crew celebrated Christmas in fine style. I stayed fairly sober as

Geordie and I were due for a run ashore to Grimsby and I also had the afternoon watch. At about 1400 the fog lifted and by 1530 we were alongside the pier at Immingham. Shut down main engines, but could not find my 5th class ERA. One Jackie Baker

During another convoy we made a forward attack with the Hedgehog and we split the forward fuel tanks. Into Pembroke Dock we went - fairly serious this one. I will not regale you with how we spent an inebriated sixteen days there whilst dockyard mates endeavoured to seal us up again.

Up to this time I relieved Montgomery on watch, and Stanton relieved me. Taking a watch over from Monty was a nightmare. Our complaints had to be written to the CERA and I was loath to do this as it would have meant Stanton and myself standing watch and watch.(remember ERA's were in short supply throughout the war years, especially from 1943 onwards) until a replacement could be found. On one occasion he had allowed nearly all the lub' oil to drain into the bilges. Now that was almost a calamity, another case of Robinson being arrested and then given a red ink for quick work! Alleluia!!

An interesting aside was that on return with the group from convoys, a general chase was usually called for, or last one in is a cissy, and Whisky all round for the winning Captain. Versatile never lost! We had engines capable of 32 knots, far above other escort vessels. A couple of

turns by Albert Edward (CERA) on the safety valve, upping the pressure from 250 psi to 275 psi and off we went, I still have nightmares thinking about it. By the Lord Harry, resetting the safety valves on shutting down was a hairy job without Admiralty Inspectors finding out!!

Back to the middle of May and Pembroke Dock. In my alcoholic haze, and being full of booze and bravado I signed up with Coastal Command and flew on a trip in a Sunderland flying boat, taking a turn at the rear gun turret. My stoker PO was handling the depth charges, luckily no U-boats were sighted!

At the beginning of May we arrived in Portsmouth, did a 10 West convoy, returned, and the steering gear was defective. (The steam engine) Montgomery repaired it, rather badly, and when confronted with it, blamed the fairies etc. Oh dear! This time he went off in a plain van with men in white coats. Stanton and I did watch and watch for a week.

Then the last week in May we did another 10 Wester, dashed back to Portsmouth for oil and ammunition, and there was I in my number ones, ready to dash off to meet a lady of my acquaintance, when leave was jammed. All hands turn to! Orders were read and we were on our way to France, taking with us seven of those small commando attack launches, along with HMS Wrestler. We arrived at 1000 in the middle on the 6th, put down the anchor, and waited. Hammocks on the inside of the ship to stop splinters (some hope).

Came first light, up anchor and move in. Off went the Army. Wrestler had her fo'c'sle blown off back to the bridge. Jolly exciting it was too! I am not sure whether we pooped the guns off or not, but three days later we returned to Portsmouth, and passed the Wrestler at the Nab. She was going astern at two knots flat out, (must have been murder in the engine room) with everything and everybody sitting on the stern. We gave them a "Chuck up" in passing, they certainly deserved it.

After oiling and taking on ammunition, we picked up Admiral Tennant and became "Flagship", with a Lt RN as "Flag Captain." We also embarked five journalists to report on the lively events happening over the Channel.

So off we went again to join the merry throng on the other side. Admiral Tennant was in command of laying the Mulberry Harbour.

We dashed around thither and yon, but could not get the Americans to take their time and lay the concrete caissons correctly. Their attitude was, "Get 'em down and get going", and when the storm blew up, they went.

In the meantime the journalists complained that they were only seeing action at long range (about 3½ miles). Admiral Tennant being a man of few words, and not bearing fools gladly, took them at their word, whistled up an MTB and embarked them upon it. They saw action alright - about five minutes worth of it, and then they were dead. Pity the MTB had to go

with them to prove the point that you do not go looking for trouble!

After the storm we spent a couple of days shooting at the drifting curtains from the American Mulberry, as they were a hazard to shipping. We sank a few. God knows what happened to the rest of them.

Consternation, searched the ship, could not find him, had he gone overboard? As most of the ship's company were blotto there was not much help available. Geordie and I eventually found him collapsed in the heads, curled up in the corner. So Geordie and I went ashore to Grimsby, where a good time was had by all, but where to sleep? The last tram to Immingham Pier had gone. Everywhere was full up, YMCA, Sailors Rest, everywhere! "So" says Geordie, "How about the Salvation Army Down and Outs?" So there we went, knock on the door, a great commotion of unshackling bolts and chains, and yes we could have a couple of beds. We were each handed a chipped enamel chamber pot, taken to a dormitory, shown beds each, and the locked in! The next morning, for one shilling and sixpence, we had had a night's kip and a magnificent breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausage, fried bread and a pint pot of tea and we thought there was a war on! After which I left the ship for the Board at Portsmouth, and on to HMS Patroller.

Off we went and joined the 21st DF (Flagship, Captain (D) HMS Garth) at Sheerness.

We convoyed tankers round North Foreland and West up the Channel. That was always interesting, as the battery at Cap Gris Nez always had a go at us. It makes the adrenalin flow to hear the 350 mm shells (14 inch) coming towards you, and that bloody great bang at the end! Anyway they always missed us - just!

By this time the land forces were approaching Antwerp, and great efforts were being made to convoy ships to Antwerp. On one occasion the whole of the flotilla was assembled off Southend to fight a convoy through, and Captain (D) thought it fit to give leave to one watch until 1800. Myself and my 5th class ERA J Baker went ashore, and were sitting quietly in a hostelry in the High Street when two seamen came in and asked, "What ship, Jack?" As they were from HMS Garth, the reply from a stoker was, "A sea going ship." This was followed by a punch, which led to the greatest Donnybrook I ever did see. All the watch ashore of the 21st DF took part. Young Baker and myself struggled back to the pier, and I elected to walk to the end. We were the only two to do so, and the two trams were full of matelots locked in a furious battle to confirm their rights as sea going ships. The Patrol at the end of the pier was heaving the unconscious onto the liberty boats, and helping the injured in a not too kindly way. We did the convoy, and on returning the next morning defaulters looked more like a parade for the sick bay.

We saw more action in Southend than we did with the convoy.

Nonetheless there was some action on these trips, and as the waters are not too deep between the mouth of the Thames and Antwerp it was possible to go the distance to Antwerp and never lose sight of a sunken ship. The flotsam, from them, if only we could have stopped and picked some of it up!

We also took part in guarding the swept channel along the East coast, and it was one of these when Tigre (a Free French Hunt Class) raced past us after an E-boat, which he should not have done, ran into a trap and was sunk with (I believe) all hands.

Impetuosity usually leads to a sad end. We had a leave system in Versatile which was totally illegal. The CERA would take a week's leave whilst we were at sea, and would then join the ship when she came in for a boiler clean, whereupon, of the three watch-keeping ERA's, two went on leave instead of one. As we were continuously at sea, boiler cleans came round once a month! I seemed to be never away from home and we only once nearly got caught out.

Chasing a E-boat, the steering gear jammed hard over, and the steering rods broke in, of all places, behind the Galley range. We did fix it without the new Captain being any the wiser. He was a Lt Harper, RN, not a very nice man, and not too good a seaman either. We often had to go out again and return in a seaman like manner.

There are a lot more anecdotes, but that brings me to December 1944 and

I left the ship to be appointed S/Lt (E) RNVR, and joined HMS Patroller via HMS Rosneath in Scotland as watch-keeping Engineer Officer. I stayed with the RNVR to RNR and was eventually removed from the reserve in 1966 as Lt Cdr RNR for outside duties, and substantive rank of Lt (E) RNR.

There are a lot more anecdotes but they come one at a time these days. I suppose I should jot them down as they come to mind, and add to this story.

