

HMS VERSATILE (I.32)

A 'V' Class Destroyer of the 1916 - 1917 Programme, she was ordered on 1 July 1916, and laid down on 31 January 1917. She was then launched on 31 October 1917 and completed on 11 February 1918. Her builders were Hawthorn Leslie.

Her basic particulars were as follows:-

Standard displacement 1,090 tons (1,457 tons deep load)  
312'(oa) x 29½' x 10' 8"(max. standard draught)  
Three Yarrow boilers, two shaft geared turbines, SHP 27,000; designed speed 34 knots.

Original armament - 4 x 4" guns, 1 x 2 Pdr gun, six 21" torpedo tubes

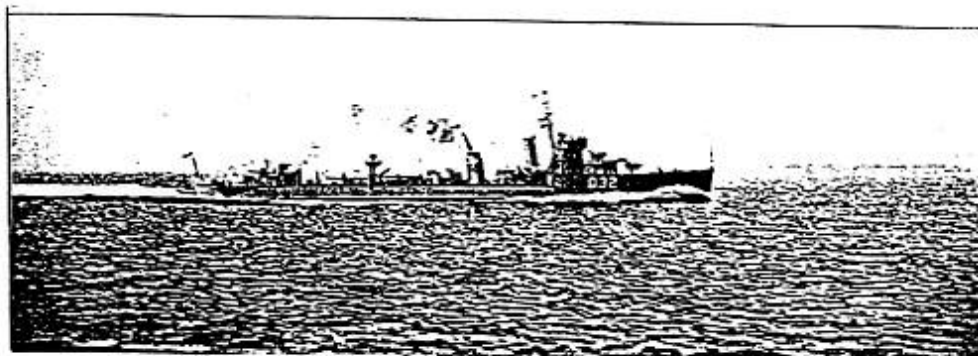
There were Alterations and Additions(A's & A's) over the years, and her armament was altered. The main changes occurred during the Second world War, and these were as follows:-

As will be mentioned in the narrative VERSATILE was converted to a 'Long Range Escort' during the year 1943. As a result of this major change her shaft horse power(SHP) was reduced to 18,000 which gave her a service speed of 24½ knots. As a Long Range Escort(LRE) she consumed 1.75 tons of fuel per hour at 12 knots.

Her armament as an LRE was 2 x 4" guns, 1 x 12 Pdr gun, 5 x 20mm guns. Her torpedo tubes had been removed; she now carried depth charges and the Ahead Throwing weapon(ATW) Hedgehog. The 12 Pdr gun was later removed. As a convoy Escort she was fitted with Asdic, which was first fitted in 1936).

In March 1941 she had been fitted with Type 286 RDF(radar), and in the 1943 refit and conversion she emerged with Type 273 and Type 291 RDF, and with High Frequency Direction Finding(HF/DF) equipment.

Her complement at the end of 1943 has been stated as 125; it is believed that this is a minimum figure, and that she carried many more men.



(Photograph by courtesy of World Ship Photo Library)

HMS VERSATILE's pennant was changed from D to I in 1940

One of the latest Destroyers in the Fleet, HMS VESAMBLE started her peace time duties with the First Destroyer Flotilla(1 DF) within a few months of the end of the First World War. In the summer and autumn of 1919 she was deployed to the Baltic; January and February 1920 saw her in Chatham Dockyard. She spent that year initially on exercises in the Western Mediterranean, then cruising in Irish and north east Scottish waters. She paid off at Chatham in December where she recommissioned on the 10th with a Chatham crew for 1 DF.

In the Second Division of 1 DF, she spent 1921 visiting South Irish ports, cruising in the English Channel and off the East Coast, and visiting Belgian and Dutch ports. She had a two month refit at Chatham in May/June. On 23 February 1922 she rammed and sank the Submarine M.42, and she was consequently out of action for the rest of that year. 1923 saw her visiting Black Sea ports, exercising with the Battleship QUEEN ELIZABETH, and recommissioning in May after maintenance. She spent the rest of the year cruising off the West Coast and in Scottish waters, with a docking period in August at Chatham. The same sort of pattern followed in 1924, the Spring Cruise being to Spanish ports. A brief Chatham refit was followed by cruising in coastal waters, mostly Scottish, and a further docking at the year's end.

In 1925 she visited Spanish and Baltic ports and took part in Exercises off the east coast of Scotland. In August she had Alterations and Additions(A's and A's) at Chatham, and she paid off towards the end of the year. In January 1926 she recommissioned for 5 DF, and she spent the year visiting Spanish, United Kingdom and South Irish ports, with A's and A's at Chatham in July and further maintenance at the year's end. After visiting Spanish ports in the first quarter of 1927 she started a refit which included retubing. In April she paid off, her company transferring to VESPER. Commissioning for trials at the end of May, she went into Reserve until mid-August when her company rejoined from VESPER. With 5 DF she cruised off Ireland and the East Coast prior to docking at Chatham in December. In 1928 she visited Spanish, Scottish and west U.K. ports, paid off and once more recommissioned for service with 5 DF.

She started 1929 exercising off Portland before visiting Spanish ports. CONCORD escorted her home in mid-February to be taken in hand at Portsmouth. She recommissioned in July with a Chatham crew from VESPER and sailed to Chatham for A's and A's. With 5 DF she visited east Scottish ports before her usual end of year visit to Chatham. She remained in 5 DF from 1930 to 1933, with routine maintenance at Chatham and sea time around the British Isles and deployments to the Baltic(1931) and Western Mediterranean(each year). In 1934, after her normal Spring visit to Spanish ports, and maintenance at Chatham, she relieved WESTCOTT off Southern Ireland. In November she paid off at Chatham and recommissioned at once with a Reserve complement as Tender to the Cruiser CARDIFF(Reserve Fleet, More). A check was made of her turbines. She recommissioned for trials in August 1935, collided with WAKEFUL(no damage) and remained at Chatham.

She performed escort duties in the Channel in January/February 1936, paid off on 25 February and recommissioned the same day with a Reserve complement in the Reserve Fleet at the More. In March she was fitted with Asdic. In June she sailed with the Cruiser EFFINGHAM, and then took part in Exercises in the Portsmouth area. Still in the Reserve Fleet, she had a refit and boiler test in 1937 and remained quietly at Chatham.

Early in 1938 she was docked, refitted and retubed, and again lay in reserve. The 9th September saw her commissioning for sea "owing to the international situation". (This was the 'Munich Crisis'). Then on 17 September she was brought forward from Reserve as a Minelayer in 18 DF. Her companions were WALKER, VIMY and

VORTIGERN, and the Minelayers came under the control of HMS VERNON. 1939 saw her refitting, having her 'A' frames bored and recommissioning in June with a Royal Fleet Reserve crew for 17 DF. In July she and KÉPPEL had the honour of escorting the Royal Yacht VICTORIA AND ALBERT with their Majesties the King and Queen embarked. Their Majesties were paying a visit to the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth. On 3 September 1939 Britain was in a state of war with Germany.....

By this time VERSATILE was no longer young, but she had been well-maintained and 'flotilla' vessels were going to be in much demand. Her Commanding Officer on the outbreak of the Second world war was *Commander T.E. Murray R.N.* who sailed his ship to Liverpool "For convoy duties". It was some months before the Convoy system got into its stride, and to start with convoys were escorted only a few hundred miles on their outward passages. Between September and December 1939 VERSATILE escorted Convoys OB5, 8, 13, 18, 23, 26, 33, 38 and 44; XJF3, SL8 and HX10. After this introduction the ship was docked at Liverpool. When with Convoy OB28 VERSATILE and VORTIGERN identified a U-boat reported ten miles west of Holyhead, but they were unable to get to close quarters with their adversary. On 5 November ~~CAST~~ VERSATILE, ESCAPADE and GRENVILLE searched in vain for a U-boat 150 miles south west of Ushant, and on 25 November VERSATILE attacked a U-boat 150 miles west south west of Lands End. This particular enemy had sunk the merchant ship ROYALTON GRANGE in Convoy S183 and he escaped retribution.

VERSATILE undocked on the first day of 1940 and she resumed her duties at once, escorting Convoys OB83, OGL7F, HGL8F, OB96, SL20, OBL01, SL21, OBL07, HX24, OBL14, HX27, OBL19, HX29, OBL27, HX32, OBL38GF, HG28F and OBL44. When with SL21 on 5 March LEITH, VERSATILE and WILD SWAN attacked a contact in 49°27'N, 07°53'W. On 18 April VERSATILE attacked a contact fifteen miles off the Bar Light Vessel, and on the 19th she and SALADIN investigated the allegation that there was a U-boat ashore off Malin Head (no such luck).

By May 1940 the enemy was established on the Channel coast. After Convoy O3144 VERSATILE was sailed to Plymouth to refuel and she was then attached to the More Command. On 12 May she grounded on the Dutch coast and was towed off by MALPOL3. Her need for dockyard attention was heightened the next evening. Early on the 13th she, MALCOLM and VIVIEN commenced operating off the Hook of Holland, and VERSATILE escorted HENREWARD who carried the Dutch Queen from The Hook to Breskens. That same evening at 2045 VERSATILE was damaged by bombs and raked by machine gun fire off the Dutch coast; her Engine Room was flooded. JANUS took off her wounded and took her in tow. On 14 May she arrived Sheerness for repairs to the starboard side of her upper deck and superstructure. She had lost seven men killed and 13 wounded. Temporary repairs were completed on 16 June.

On 27 June VERSATILE was searching for a U-boat and the survivors of the merchant ship PRUNELLA 118 miles south west of Lands End, and then she reverted to the More Command to be bombed but undamaged on 3 July. She boiler cleaned at Chatham. She was then in the Sheerness Force, Group 6 for Operation 'Purge' (anti-invasion measures). When with a Channel convoy on 10 July one ship was sunk by aircraft off Dungeness; VERSATILE was not hit. Through most of August she continued in her anti-invasion role, witnessing and surviving numerous incidents which were usually caused by enemy aircraft which bombed, strafed and laid mines. On 25 August she and VIMY were ordered to join the Home Fleet at Scapa, and on the 31st both ships were ordered to 'raise steam as enemy force is reported to have shelled Eastbourne'. Early in September, operating in Scotland, VERSATILE escorted Convoy BAS3 from the Clyde to Iceland, altering course en route because of a possible German invasion force approaching Iceland. On 11 September she and JACKAL and others escorted a minelaying force on a sortie called Operation 'SM41', and VERSATILE spent the rest of the month engaged on escort duties in Scottish waters. On the 30th she and an

Anson aircraft searched for a U-boat whose periscope had been reported by the merchant ship HUNT GEORGE in 57°36'N, 04°03'W. Early in October VERSAPILE was escorting Convoy WS3 when she and HARVESTER screened the Liner HIGHLAND BRIGADE, and during this interlude VERSAPILE's Asdic and degaussing coil became defective. The following day (6 October), in addition to the defects just mentioned, there were serious oil fuel leaks into living spaces. VERSAPILE had temporary repairs at Londonderry on 10 October then she sailed round to the Tyne for refit and repairs. She received a new shaft and mended a stern gland leak (attributed to the previous bombing). When ready she sailed to rejoin the Rosyth Escort Force. Among the many convoys she escorted on the East Coast were Convoys FN45, FN70, FS70. Nearly all the convoys were heavily bombed - for example, on 8 December the YEARCH was bombed off S9 buoy (Humber area) and she required immediate help; on 27 December the WOENSDRECHT was leaking badly in the engine room.

Between January and 9 April 1941 VERSAPILE escorted Convoys FS81, FN80, FS87, FS95, FN93, FS427, FN426, FS435, FN441, FS456 and FN451. In those days VERSAPILE's consorts were (on various occasions) GARTH, VIMIERA, VANITY, WESTMINS DER, EGLINTON, GUILLENOT, DRAUG (Norwegian Destroyer) and SAPPHIRE (Trawler); a mixture of Sloops, Prawlers, V and W Destroyers and the new Hunt Class Destroyers. Twice, on 27 and 28 January, VERSAPILE's steering engine failed - a most uncomfortable situation when with unwieldy merchant ships in swept channels with no room to manoeuvre. Attacks by aircraft and E-boats were the rule rather than the exception. Mines proved a serious hazard, and VERSAPILE reported the MEXICO and HERPOURT mined on 6 and 14 March respectively; she took eleven survivors of the latter ship to Sheerness. On 13 March she attacked a U-boat contact, and on the night of the 14th she herself was unsuccessfully attacked with torpedoes by an E-boat off Cromer. On 26 March she scored a signal success by shooting down a twin engined He110 Fighter off the Naze at 0905.

Between April and July 1941 VERSAPILE escorted Convoys EC15, FS527, EC40, FS532, EC37, FN489M, FS539, EC51(S), FS555(F), FS561(F), and EC54(S). She managed to visit Rosyth in July where she had platforms for Oerlikon cannon fitted. In addition to the myriad incidents experienced in convoy at sea each convoy was heavily bombed. VERSAPILE's consorts during this period were LE TIGER (Free French), LUDLOW, VORTIGERN, QUANTOCK, VALOROUS, JASON, WOLSEY, VIVIEN, WHADDON and VANITY.

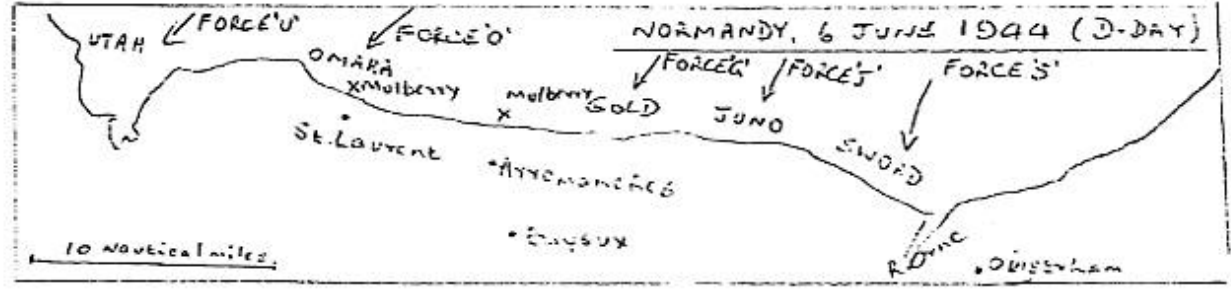
VERSAPILE carried on with the relentless pressure of convoy, escorting the following during the remainder of 1941:- EC567(S), FN503(S), FN506(M), FS585(F), FN511(F), FS591(S), EC70(S), FN518(S), FS600, EC77(F), FS612(S), EC83(F), FS617(M), EC85(M), FS619(F), FS627(S), EC90(F), FS633(S), FS639(S), FN541(F), FN543, FS641(M), FN549(M), . . . VERDUN, WINCHESTER and WOOLSPON were added to the list of sister Escorts. VERSAPILE went into Leith at the year's end for maintenance.

In 1942 she continued to operate in the Rosyth Escort Force under much the same conditions as hitherto, some of the convoys she escorted being - FS719, FN628, FN630 FS756 and FN679. On 12 February she was among the ships especially deployed when the SCHARNHORST, GRAISENAU and PRINZ EUGEN broke out of Brest and escaped up-Channel. It was a gloomy year, but there were glimmerings of light. The Allies were gaining strength; on the East Coast this was reflected in better organisation and cooperation between the Services. On 5 October VERSAPILE was involved in a collision with the Patrol Sloop SHEARWATER, neither ship being seriously hurt. On 22 October VERSAPILE learned that her transfer to Western Approaches Command was pending - this would mean a complete change in the nature of her duties from sailing in restricted shallow waters to operating in the broad ocean. As will be seen this would entail significant changes in the ship's design. In November she sailed to Rosyth for A's and A's.

Early in 1943 VERSATILE sailed round to Grangemouth where she was taken in hand for conversion to Long Range Escort(LRE). An outline of the A's and A's this involved is given at the beginning of this summary, the main items being the conversion to a two boiler ship and the fitting of the ahead throwing weapon(ATW) Hedgehog. When she emerged in the autumn she was allocated to B7 Escort Group in Western Approaches Command. Her Commanding Officer was now Lt. Cdr. C.S. Collett R.N. After workup at Fobermory she escorted the Icelandic Convoys DS46 and SD46 in October/November.. In November/December she was detailed to join her own Group(B7) which had recently completed a successful spell working as a Support Group. Earlier in the year, in May, this Group took part in the greatest North Atlantic Convoy battle of the war -Convoy ONS5. When VERSATILE set out to join the Group which was escorting Convoy ONS23 in November she ran into such mountainous seas and incurred so much damage that she was obliged to return to Londonderry for repairs. At that time the Group comprised VIDETTE(Senior Officer, B7 Group), LOOSESTRIFE, PINK and SUNFLOWER, and CHELSEA. After repairs VERSATILE sailed to join the Group which by then was escorting Convoy ONS26, and she was with the convoy between 5 And 12 January 1944. The convoy was unmolested and B7 Group handed it over to the Western Local Escort, the Canadian W6 Group on 13 January.

B7 Group's next task was to escort Convoy HX275. On 25 January 1944 the Senior Officer signalled: 'VERSATILE sighted and attacked Submarine twelve miles on starboard beam of convoy. VIDETTE joining her.. sixty merchant ships and all Escorts in company... PCS 51° 32' N, 18° 03' W, 065° 9.5 knots'. Enemy reconnaissance aircraft were also in the vicinity of the convoy. Three hours after the sighting report of the U-boat (she was seen on the surface initially) VIDETTE and VERSATILE carried out a creeping attack on the enemy boat. They were ordered to remain in the vicinity until dusk the next day 'or destruction'. They had lost contact and the U-boat was never found again. Again very bad weather was experienced during this convoy's passage.

In February VERSATILE docked at Milford Haven until 14 March, after which she sailed to Belfast for further repairs and docking. She aborted a voyage with Convoy GS71/ KMS45 to Gibraltar because of an Asdic defect and had to dock there. She was back at Londonderry by the end of April and she found that the redoubtable B7 Group had been disbanded. Operation 'Neptune', the invasion of Normandy, was imminent and a large reorganisation was taking place. In general terms the battered older Escorts were overhauled and redeployed to the South Coast, while large numbers of new Frigates and Corvettes took over the Atlantic long range escort duties. During the assault on Normandy VERSATILE was assigned to escort duties in the English Channel where a vast mass of shipping and Landing Ships and Craft were nourishing the Armies ashore in their beachheads. On D-Day (6 June 1944) she was escorting the first components of the 'Mulberry' Artificial Harbours, and for some time Rear Admiral W.G. Tennant, who was in charge of the two 'Mulberries', embarked in VERSATILE in order to inspect the components being towed from England. Lt Potter, Royal Navy, was in command of VERSATILE at this time.



When the Allied Armies had been established ashore it was the duty of the Destroyers, Sloops, Frigates and Corvettes to escort shipping to the beaches and to keep at bay U-boats and E-boats. VERSATILE was attached to the Portsmouth Patrol for this purpose, operating from Portsmouth and Plymouth to and from the French coast. By the end of August she was back in the Western Approaches which had provided many Escorts for 'Neptune'; the need for them in the Atlantic was, however, undiminished. On 30 August she attacked a contact in 50°04'N, 01°33'W. In September she escorted Convoy HX306, and in October she was with Convoys ONA262 and HX314. When with ONA262 she attacked a suspected U-boat in 49°58'N, 04°35'W.

*In Western Approaches Command, and*

As mentioned earlier new Frigates and Corvettes were coming forward for service in the narrow seas, back to the Nore Patrol. Starting in November 1944 she began a series of escort duties between the Nore and Antwerp/Ostend. Antwerp in particular was essential as a supply port for the Army. It had been captured early but it could not be used because the enemy held the island of Walcheren. The latter was finally assaulted and captured on 1 November by Royal Marines from Landing Craft, and thereafter, following minesweeping, the port was opened. The mine problem lingered on and several merchant ships were mined off the Dutch coast. Among convoys escorted by VERSATILE were ATM36, TAM59 and ATM97. She continued to operate in the Nore Command right up to the end of the war in Europe in May 1945.

When the war in Europe ended, those ships not destined to sail to the Far East were quickly reduced to reserve categories. By 26 May VERSATILE was in the Rumber, reducing to Reserve. On 8 June she was accepted into Category C Reserve at Rosyth. Two years later, in May 1947, she was handed over to the British Iron and Steel Corporation who sent her on 6 August to Brechin where she was broken up.

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Commanding Officers appointed during World War Two

Cdr	P. E. Hussey (retd)	15 June 1939
Cdr	J. H. Jauncey (retd)	June 1940
Lt Cdr	J. B. Palmer	29 April 1941
Ty Gunner (T)	E. W. L. Harden	22 June 1942
Lt	D. G. D. Hall Wright	November 1942
Lt Cdr	G. S. Corlett, DSO.,	1 September 1943
Lt	G. C. Potter, DSC.,	December 1943
Lt	A. L. Harper	3 October 1944