

Hard Lying - HMS Westcott

by Cliff (Stormy) Fairweather

It was early January 1944 after initial training at 'Royal Arthur at Skegness and signals training Scotia' at Ayr. I found myself on a draft from Chatham to HMS Westcott which was at the time berthed at Greenock.

I arrived at Glasgow railway station after a long and tedious journey. There were three others on the same draft. When we reported our arrival, we were told that transport down to the docks would not be available for at least an hour, so to lose ourselves. We didn't need a second telling so we adjourned to the nearest watering hole where I was introduced to my first 'Black and Tan'. After three pints of this nectar, we were called to our transport, one of the Naval trucks. By the time we arrived at Greenock I was worse for wear. However, somehow, I managed to negotiate two gang planks and landed on the deck of HMS Westcott. I was directed down to my mess, then down a hatchway to the mess deck. Somehow I managed, with the help of others, to sling my hammock and actually get in it! The next morning I was awakened to find that my hammock was swaying. We were at sea!

I was told to report to the Yeoman on the flag deck. When I eventually found my way there I met the other members of the signals branch. I was shown around the flag deck, the flag lockers, halyards and various signal lamps, two 10" and an aldis, and the bridge, the binnacle various brass voice pipes. The chart table was on the port side of the bridge with its canvass cover, which was to hide any light when the navigator or officer of the watch would be plotting or check our course during darkness. This was almost 24 hours during the winter months in those northern climes. This was where I was to be when on watch. When I wasn't busy with signals I would be at the side of the bridge, with powerful binoculars as an extra lookout.

By this time the sea was getting a little rough and I was beginning to feel a bit nauseated. Oh why did I leave the comfort of my home? Soon I was being violently sea sick and wishing I could die! This was my initiation to being a matelot! I had never been on a boat before let alone go to sea. For three days I was so ill that I eventually passed out. Apparently I was rolling from one side of the flag deck to the other with the motion of the ship. Then one of the other signal men said to the yeoman, "What are we going to do about him,

Yeo? "Leave him there, he'll live" was the reply. However, the ship pulled into Iceland and I had a chance to recover.

After a brief stay, riding at anchor, we were off. Destination Russia! I was about to learn the hazards and hardships of those who were being employed in the escorting of convoys to and from Murmansk and Archangel. A few days at sea and we were out of fresh food. From then on it was dehydrated vegetables, which was always packed in square tins. Meat too became non-existent except of course, corned beef, or corned dog as we called it. The only respite from this was when things were really quiet, we would drop a depth charge, and with everyone on deck with boat hooks, buckets, anything to grab from the hundreds of fish that had been blown to the surface, with their guts blown out of their mouths. Of course, the fish was delicious.

But the memory of the intense cold (temperatures could get as low as -50° with the wind chill factor) and the very rough seas are uppermost in my mind when I think of those trips to Murmansk.

The ship like most of the V&Ws had been built in 1917 as a short range destroyer with a speed of some thirty knots. In 1943 she had been converted to a long range escort vessel by removing her 'Woodbine' funnel and one of her boilers to make room for extra fuel space. The conversion reduced her speed to 22-25 knots, and when she was at full speed she vibrated violently. Conditions on board were primitive, no baths or showers, you used a bucket. This was also used for doing your dhobeying or to the uninitiated 'washing'. There was certainly no privacy.

In the mess, which was about 29' x 25' about twenty-five men had to sleep, prepare food and eat it! To wash your clothes you scraped 'flakes' off a bar of 'Pussars Hard' (soap) you would then take it to the galley and if the cook was in a good mood, he would let you put it on the range to heat. Then you would take it on the upper deck and get busy with the scrubber. There were times when this routine was not possible, and you would go many days before you were able to change into clean clothes.

When in harbour, Sunday mornings would be 'Captain's rounds'. The mess had to be scrubbed out, hammocks stowed away, everything had to be neat and tidy, then you would retire from your mess whilst the Captain scrutinised the mess, everything had to be shipshape and 'Bristol Fashion'. This routine was not

possible at sea, being 'Watch About' ie, four hour on and four hour off (that is if you were not called to action stations). By the time you came off watch and removed your oilskin or duffle coat then the other sodden wet clothing and climbed into your hammock, most times near exhaustion, there was not much of your four hours left to snatch some sleep, and if action stations sounded, you could go some time before you could do that! There was a time when I dozed off standing up whilst on watch, thank goodness it was only momentarily, for if I had been caught 'napping' I would have been for the high jump! It certainly meant a very serious charge.

Whilst on watch on the bridge, unless you were engaged signalling, you had to keep a constant lookout with binoculars glued to your eyes looking for aircraft, U-boats and if you were close escort, keep an eye on the merchant ships, making sure they kept station and did not make too much smoke as some of them were coal burning ships.

Occasionally there would be one that developed engine problems and would drop back out of line whilst the rest of the convoy carried on, then you may get detailed to stay with it for protection until it could get underway again.

Convoy work was mainly boring and on the odd occasion we would get a 'ping' from the Asdic. Actions stations would be sounded then it was all systems go. Everyone would have their ears pricked listening to the Asdic and we scanned the ocean looking for the tell tale signs of a periscope or the wake of a torpedo.

On one occasion a U-boat had been reported on the surface ahead of the convoy. Being nearest we were dispatched at full speed to intercept. We were accompanied by another V&W - the Whitehall - I think! We were Senior Officer Escort and were ahead of the Whitehall. The Yeoman, who was a very competent man, had his telescope to his eye scanning the horizon ahead. "Hook on" - "Enemy in sight and the Battle Ensign".

We were breaking all speed records, vibrating like the devil pounding through the sea. Can you imagine what it was like for a 17-year old to be on the bridge of a Destroyer in hot pursuit of the enemy? "U-boat dead ahead, Sir!" Hoist enemy in sight, battle ensign to the masthead!" was the yeoman's cry. He had spotted the U-boat long before anyone else. Everyone at action stations,

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gun crews and depth charge parties. All those on the bridge had their binoculars trained on the U-boat. (It was my first and only sight of a U-boat until VE-Day plus one). "The U-boat about to dive Sir" came the cry from the alert Yeoman Hall. How did he know? The range and direction was given to 'B' Gun's crew. The Gunnery Officer, Trevor Riches, confirmed he had it in sight, but at extreme range, so with the gun at approximately 45° the order came, "Open Fire". With the crash of the gun, the peak of the Gunnery Officer's cap fell off. But what a brilliant shot. Dead in line with the U-boat but just a few yards short of the target which was now making a hasty dive, to the protection of the waves. There was not enough time to get off another shot before the U-boat disappeared. Then the ensuing depth charge attack. First the 'Hedgehog' to no avail, then the depth charges. What a spectacular sight when they detonate but on this occasion there was no sight of a kill. We continued the search but the conditions in those icy waters are of no assistance to the asdic operators.

We then had to resume our station in the most important duty that of the protection of the convoy. So we continued our way to Murmansk, or should I say, Polyamy, for that is where we naval vessels were berthed. Meanwhile the merchant ships continued up the Kola inlet to Murmansk. What a god forsaken place, not the ideal place for a run ashore. All the Russian people looked so very sullen, though the children were eager to barter for anything - they looked so pitiful.

We escorted another three of these convoys before we were called to another task, 'D' Day and the Normandy landings. We left the Clyde on the 3rd June, armed with a pamphlet from General Eisenhower informing us of the great crusade we about to embark upon. We rendezvoused with HMS Warspite, but because of the deterioration of the weather we had to sail around the Channel Islands for a couple of days before proceeding to the French coast. Warspite's task was the bombardment of shore batteries at Caen.

What a thunderous roar when she opened up with a broadside - this went on most of the day. Come dusk a signal was sent asking for permission to go in close to do our little bit. We were told to stay where you are! The next day we developed a leak in one of the boilers, on reporting this we were told to return to the Solent for repairs. No lame ducks



A typical image of a V & W Destroyer

were welcome in this environment. As we steamed up the Solent, vessels of every conceivable type, Royal and Merchant ships cheered and blared away on their sirens etc, maybe they thought we had been wounded in battle.

After we anchored I was on watch when I noticed amongst these hundreds of ships, a light was flashing our pennant number. On answering I found it was my brother who was serving on an MTB. Looking through binoculars I could just make out his balding head. Of course, there was no possibility of meeting up.

On completion of the temporary repairs we were detailed to patrol off French and Belgian coast. This we continued to do calling in at Dover for fuel and supplies. Then it was off to Dundee to get the boiler cleaned and repaired.

On the 31st October we escorted two large personnel ships, this was a fast convoy. The two ships, *Empress of Australia* and *Scythia* had 1,000 Russian nationals on board who had been captured in France, while serving with the Germans. When we arrived at the Kola inlet we had to anchor in the mouth of the river. No-one was allowed ashore, and the British shore establishments were not allowed near Murmansk. What happened to those unfortunate Russians?

We did two more of those convoys to Russia. On one return convoy in December, I was on watch and saw in the distance a huge flash, followed by a huge explosion. I was soon to learn that it was the destroyer *Cassandra* who had been torpedoed, lost her bows and had to return to Murmansk.

Our last convoy to Russia designated JW63, sailed on the 30th December and arrived on 8th January. By now there was almost 24 hours of darkness, with very cloud, snow and ice, which meant there was no interference from the enemy. The return convoy RA63 sailed from the Kola inlet on the 11th January 1945, once again we were not intercepted by the enemy, but we encountered a far greater and fiercer enemy, that of the weather.

We were about three days out from Murmansk, north-east of the Faroes, when the storm blew up. Soon the winds were at hurricane force forcing the ships to heave to, or take shelter where they could. On the *Westcott* it was horrendous, we were tossed about like a cork. I was up on the bridge, soaked to the skin and hanging on for dear life. Those in the mess below were being thrown about to such an extent that some received injuries. Jock Gilmour, our sick-berth attendant, had split his head open and used his clean underwear to bandage it. Fuel oil had escaped through into the mess deck, mixed with the salt water was swilling around intermingled with various items that had not been stowed away. What a filthy stinking mess! One minute the ship was riding on the crest of a huge wave and then she would plunge down into a trough and the next wave would come right over the top of us.

Everything had been battened down, no-one dared move without a life-line. How long that storm lasted I don't know. I do know that it was the only time that I feared for my life. How we survived I never knew, maybe the skill of the Captain and the helmsman, or maybe by the grace of God. When the storm did eventually subside, its severity was evident. Much damage had been done, anything that was not secured had disappeared, boats smashed, carley rafts gone and rails bent. There was still a heavy swell running and on attempting an 180° turn, a wave caught our beam and the old ship keeled over at an alarming angle. She stayed there for what seemed ages, but the old girl righted herself. I'm sure a few hearts missed their beats!

We again resumed our voyage but had to return to the Faroes for an emergency repair. Apparently rivets had been forced out of our keel! On arrival at the Clyde at the end of January 1945 we had to go into dock for storm damage repairs. This was to be *Westcott's* last Russian voyage. She did other work, a few trips to Ireland to escort the ferry from Stranraer to Larne. The war in Europe was soon to end. We were anchored in the Clyde on VE Day. "Splice the Main Brace". The *Westcott* was later due to be scrapped. She had served her country faithfully and well for 28 years. "Stormy" *Fairweather*, ex-*Bunting Tossler*. Kindly reproduced from the book, 'Hard Lying' by Cliff Fairweather ISBN 0 9529440 4 9