

H.M.S. WRYNECK.

THE STORY OF IT'S SINKING BY ENEMY ACTION IN APRIL 1941. AS DESCRIBED BY CHIEF ENGINEER ROOM ARTIFICER S.J.G. GORDINE

When the Italians attacked Greece, HMS Wryneck was the first British warship to enter Greece's waters, a fact which we on board her did not know until we heard it announced over the radio. At Athens we were given a great reception we were carried through the streets and prominent citizens made speeches in our honour.

Convoy and patrol work took us to the Libyan coast. We helped bombard Bardiyah and on the night that town fell to British forces, the Wryneck lay in Salum harbour. (See Map A)

Then came the battle for Greece. When it became necessary to evacuate our Expeditionary Force, the Wryneck was sent to take off as many men as possible.

APRIL 25TH.

Evacuating troops from Greece near the Corinth Canal. 647 all told. Air raids all the way back to Crete but no hits on the ship, we bring one plane down. Troops line the deck and use Bren and Tommy guns for dive bombers. We lash the boys up with cocoa and biscuits. Couldn't give them any food as we had been living for days on corned beef and biscuits ourselves. Troops slept all over the decks. Eventually reached Suda Bay in Crete without seeing one of our aircraft but plenty of Jerrys Troops all off by 1700. (See Map B)

April 27th.

Leave Suda Bay again 0515 for Greece. Pick up signal from H.M.S Diamond who is with large Dutch transport, the SS Slamet, with 2000 troops on board saying transport has been bombed and abandoned. We increase speed to lend aid and are bombed over and over but no hits. About 0900 pick up Diamond who had been forced to leave the sinking transport owing to continuous dive

bombing. She had 700 survivors. She then turned round and went back with us. We thought between us we could put up a good barrage and pick up survivors at the same time. We arrived off the sinking transport at 1000, she was still ablaze. Jerry had cleared off, the sea was full of men swimming, upturned boats and pieces of wood. Men were clinging to everything that could float. We picked up 61 men, some were in a bad state from being machine gunned in the water. One man died as we laid him on the deck. By 1200 we could find no more so following Diamond we went round the transport still burning furiously. Diamond torpedoed her, there was a loud explosion and she settled slowly down, breaking in the middle. Then we turned for Alexandra starting off at 28 knots for 4 hours then reducing to 24 knots for remainder of the voyage.

At 1315 we had just finished dinner and had just got down for a nap when the action alarm bells went. Almost immediately there was a big explosion and the lights went out. I jumped up and grabbed my lifebelt. Some sergeants in the mess asked what was wrong. I said I think we have been hit and I picked up several lifebelts and threw them in and told them to put them on and get on the upper deck. I went up the ladder, the men were grouped around but not in a panic. They were calm and appeared to be awaiting orders. Two men got in a flutter and I told them to pipe down or they would get the others in a panic. They didn't like it and I had to use some strong words to make them see reason. (one of these men was saved and the other lost). I saw the cook lying in the alleyway with his legs shot up and I pulled him out of the way into the wireless room. Then a young seaman ran along shouting for the aft fire party as the ammunition lockers were on fire. This boy was covered in blood with his right eye and side of his face blown away. He couldn't have felt any pain. I was afraid he might start a panic so I took him to the doctors station, the doctor wasn't there so I made him sit down while I went for the doctor.

During this time the ship had taken an uncomfortable list, I went out on to the upper deck and it wasn't until I saw how bad the list was that I realised how serious things were. The whaler was already in the water but one fall was holding it and pulling it along. I spoke to the EO (Engine Officer) and said if only the captain would stop the ship we could start to get things over the side. The EO said they couldn't shut the engines off from the ER (Engine Room). We were still doing about 18 knots and the port guard rails were under water. I went to the emergency valve lever and tried to shut it but it had jammed. I then saw the ERA (Engine Room Artificer) who had been on

watch, he was on the upper deck, he said he was blown out of the ER. I suggested opening the boiler safety valves, this we did between us also shutting off the emergency valves to the OF heaters. There was nothing else we could do so I went up to my abandon ship station but my raft was not there. Several wounded men were lying about and several other men decided to get the skif away. I went back to where the EO was standing, the C.E.R.O (Chief Enginr Room Officer) had come along , I spoke to him about going over the side, he didn't seem keen or interested. The Gunner came along the deck towards aft but he said nothing to anyone.

Up until this time I never thought the ship would sink or that things were very serious. I put heavy list down to the fact that the skipper was making a heavy turn. I also think that everyone thought the same until it was too late, hence the heavy death toll, no orders were given to abandon ship, it was when I looked up to the bridge in the hope of seeing someone doing something when I saw a heap of torn up papers come blowing down that I thought, it must be serious because they are destroying confidential papers. I thought it was about time to see about getting away, the ship by this time had a terrible list, during this time some men had been trying to get the Carley boats away but these had got jammed on the guard rails. I went to a Carley float lashed down amidships I was the only one there and undid all the lashings and tried to pull up on the blocks to free the float but it was too heavy for me so I crawled back along the deck and got two soldiers who came along with me . Between us we hoisted the raft but as we lowered it that also jammed over the guard rails and we could not shift it.(one more hope gone). We three then crawled back along the deck again. I saw someone start to throw pieces of board over the side out of a wooden locker, I gave a hand until the locker was empty hoping that I could jump over the side and grasp a piece of wood but the ship was moving so fast through the water that all floatable stuff was left miles behind.

Things seemed rather hopeless then, there was a lot of shouting and noise from the boilers blowing off and steam hissing from the ER . I staggered to the port side where some men were still trying to lift the rafts off the rails, I was giving a hand when the ship gave a sudden lurch over, this freed the rafts and they fell over the side some men going with them. I didn't know what to do for the best, thoughts of my dear wife and kiddies came to my mind and I wondered how they would get on without me so I decided to take a chance and jump over before the ship turned over and took everyone with it. Before jumping I thought , well the Diamond is over there I'll swim to her. I glanced over and saw the Diamond with her bows in the air just going down. This put

me right in the dump. The poor old Wryneck gave another of her famous lurches which threw me over the side.

I was drawn under by the wash from the props and when I kicked myself up into the air again the ship was well ahead. I wasn't in any panic but looked around and saw a raft in the distance and started swimming towards it. There were several men in the water, one W.Heath, swam by me and told me to keep going, he comes from my home town. Anyhow, after about 15 minutes swimming I reached the raft, one of my chums, Jock Gauldwell was in it. I was hauled inboard and we started paddling around looking for others. We picked up the EO and several men and then we spotted the Whaler and made for it. We all got into the Whaler except Jock who remained on the raft. We tied the raft on and then spotted another raft, we made for this, took on some more men and towed the two rafts, still looking for more men. We picked up a lot, the boat had 21 men in it and the rafts about a dozen each. We rowed back over where the ship went down, there was oil and gear floating about everywhere but no survivors.

We then decided to row for some land that we could see very faintly miles away. We started off alright but the wind came up and it got terribly rough, so after some arguments we decided to turn round and run with the wind and sea. Then it was that the rafts kept banging into our stern, we were afraid that we would either hole the rafts or they would smash our rudder. Whilst we were trying to find a way out, the towing rope broke, the people in the rafts began shouting and several of them jumped off the rafts and started swimming for the boat but the EO said "pull for your lives men, as the boat is already full and we can't take another one, and they'll turn the boat over". We pulled away from them slowly. I only looked at them once as my two best friends were on the rafts. I didn't think any of us stood a chance, it was getting dusk then and a gale was blowing. We learned afterwards that the rafts were picked up at 0730 next morning by HMS Griffin.

We continued pulling with the wind and sea which seemed to be getting worse, as night wore on it got terribly cold, we had no clothes to cover ourselves, gradually one by one we slipped into the bottom of the boat tired out. It was a terrible job to keep the boat from getting beam on and turning over (I should have mentioned before that the boat had been machine gunned and had several holes in it, we found some soap in the boat and filled the holes with it, one hole being so big that we took it in turns to sit on it to keep

the soap in). We laid on top of one another to keep warm, seas were pouring into the boat, we had no baler so we opened a tin of corned beef and shared it, using the tin for baling, we also took turns all night baling with a tin helmet.

Our spirits were as low as they could possibly get, we said our prayers, my thoughts wandered to my home and family. I thought it all out, my pension would not keep my wife, she would have to go to work for the kiddies, how people would say how sorry they were, these and several other thoughts came to my mind. I had a little cry and was then quite ready to die. Speaking to the others afterwards their feelings and mood was just the same. I thought of little home incidents and the happy times I had spent with my loved ones.

A Dutch sailor who we had rescued sat in the bows and whenever we were in danger of turning over he would shout out "pull port" or "pull starboard" according to which way we were drifting, to whoever could pull an oar. At times during the night there would only be two men rowing. At least, not rowing but just trying to keep the boat with the wind and sea.

The cold was intense, I don't know how anyone stood it, men were groaning with it. I suffer badly from cramp, at times I couldn't move owing to someone lying on me and I could only cry with pain which almost drove me mad. The cold had made me very sleepy and I honestly thought we would never see daylight again. The night wore on, then we awaited the dawn, with it our hopes revived a little we were terribly parched and thirsty so opened the barrico (small cask) of water only to find that it was half empty and the water bad. We had to drink it just one mouthful each and a biscuit and piece of corned beef. The corned beef tin was a most useful article being used as a baler, for drinking out of and for watering in to. But man's urine and bad water mixed was a rotten drink! As it got lighter we could see land a long way off and we decided to make for this.

Hopes were brighter now and we rowed with a will. We had one soldier, three Dutchmen and one Goanese besides our 16 men, three of whom were wounded, every one had a share of something. About 1100 we sighted two cruisers, there was an argument-are they coming towards us or not. Yes they were, we shouted and waved a shirt on an oar and fired our Vary pistol. We were sure of being picked up but they did not see us and went by about a mile away. Later we heard gunfire and several destroyers came into sight and out

again without seeing us. We did everything possible to attract attention but without success. We were very downhearted and said that if we were saved we would report those cruisers and destroyers for having slack lookouts. Later in the morning three aircraft came into sight, we were scared in case these were Germans, but they came in very low over us and we could see their British markings. How they missed seeing us is a mystery. Three times that morning we were within hailing distance and were not seen by them.

The sun was burning hot, all our water was gone and with the disappointments we were in very low spirits. The land seemed still a long way off, the wind had dropped and sea was running a stern swell. By our reckoning we thought we were in the Aegean Sea in the Dodecanese Islands. Earlier in the day we had sighted a small rock and now some of the men wanted to make for this, have a sleep and try to find some water then make for the mainland next day. There was lot of talk for and against. Eventually for's won it and we made for the rock. As we neared the rock we could not see anywhere to land so slowly went round it. There was a heavy sea, we put a seaman in the bows to watch for breakers and rocks. Coming in closer we could see women and children standing in a group. Then we saw the mast of a small boat, we thought it was a party fishing from the mainland. Then someone saw two soldiers with rifles aimed at us, we thought at once the Gerry's are here already, but we didn't care, it was land and human beings. Anyhow we waved a small white ensign just to show we didn't care who was there, and we were still British. Then someone ashore waved a Union Jack, we got closer still being suspicious. A man pointed the way to a tiny bay and as we got close wanted to know, in English, who we were. We said we were British sailors who had been shipwrecked and were making for land. Then they said we were with friends, they pulled the boat in but we were too tired to get out so they helped us and carried us up the rock to a sheltered spot and told us their story.

They had started out from Salouka in a fishing boat, a mother with three daughters, two married, one with a boy about 7, she was also expecting another, the other daughter about 20 years with a fine baby 11 months old. Both with their husbands, the other girls very nice kids about 18 and 16 years. The old granddad and two other men and a boy about 12 years, travelling only at night and hiding in the islands during the day They intended to get to Pireus but on arrival found the Huns there. In getting away their boat was bombed and sunk, they all got into another boat in which were three British

army officers and three R.E. privates. They then made for Crete, still travelling by night and had arrived at this rock called "Ansna" only that morning.

Anyhow, they carried us along and with their help we stripped off and they wrapped us in blankets. Those girls never blinked an eye, they were little heroes. Then they got a spirit stove working and made some nice hot tea, the soldiers warmed up some tinned sausages with biscuits, then they brought out several bottles of whisky, they made us all have a good drink, we felt alright again and we went to sleep on the rocks. We were dead beat and several of us were still too stiff to move much but that short sleep did wonders.

Whilst we were sleeping the party must have had a meeting for when we woke they told us they had decided to take some of us on the boat with them and tow our whaler if we could put four men in it to steer it. This we readily agreed to do, the soldiers then brought out some spare kits and we rigged ourselves out and certainly looked some sights. Whilst we were getting ready three Jerrys came swooping low down looking for small boats, we had no shelter so all laid down and didn't move until they had gone by. I can't say enough or praise those Greek people too much. Undoubtedly they saved our lives, we told them we intended to make for the island in the morning and they told us it had been captured by parachute troops 24 hours previously, it was called "Melos". They had a small wireless set and picked up the news, after feeding we began packing things back into the fishing boat and by dusk we were already to leave for Crete 54 miles away.

Four men were detached for the boat, we gave them some food and ½ bottle of whisky and plenty of blankets. Then we piled into the fishing boat, it was very cramped but we managed to get in, all was ready by nightfall and we started off saying goodbye to the old rock, it was rather cold now and a very heavy sea was running, they came right over the boat and we had to move the women further aft. We were all feeling drowsy and tried to sleep but the little boat was almost turning over and we spent another rotten night, freezing cold and wet through, but comforted by the thought that we were on our way to safety.

When dawn came we could see better and gradually we crept nearer, several aircraft flew over and we heard gunfire but we were left alone. We picked out Suda Bay and made for it but we began worrying about the swept channel in case we ran into a minefield. Then we spotted a ship coming up astern, it

turned out to be an invasion barge getting away from Greece. We waved to her and she came close, we explained our position and they threw us a line and took us in tow. We were being towed for about two hours and during that time we had six air raids. Anyhow we entered Suda Harbour, the barge towing the fishing boat which in turn was towing the whaler. There were several merchant and warships there loaded up with refugees and soldiers from Greece, they gave us a cheer as we went by.

April 29th.

Eventually we landed at Retimo at 10.30 and at the same time we saw the convoy begin to move out on it's way to Egypt. We duly reported ourselves after being adrift in the boats for 45 hours!

Things at Suda Bay were in an awful chaos. We managed to get medical attention and after a lot of running around we got into a lorry and were taken to York camp. On the way we saw soldiers every where, some were wounded, some short of clothes, they were all tired out and were sleeping in any old place. These men had just come from Greece, they one and all said they had got Jerry on the run if only the airforce had backed them up. We got to their camp, some camouflaged tents under some trees, we were given two blankets and a groundsheet and allotted 6 in a tent. Nobody seemed to know, or care anything about us, the food scarce, we had no toilet gear and could not wash. That afternoon there was a heavy air raid, our fighters disappeared and Jerry dropped bombs just where he wanted to. We saw several parachute mines drop, we were feeling very jumpy, as soon as the raid was over our brave air force took to the sky again. I laid myself down early that night, the ground was very hard and cold and I suffered terribly from stiffness and cramp during the night. Quite a lot of shooting went on.

April 30th.

I still hadn't had a wash or shave, I could hardly walk and my jaws had got set. I went to the sick bay tent because I was afraid I had got Tetanus as I had got a wound over the left eye and it been bleeding quite a lot. Anyhow they told me there was nothing to worry about.

I laid about all the morning and managed to get a wash but nothing else. In the Afternoon I went to a RAF camp about ¼ mile away that I had been told about, it had been abandoned by the RAF who left all their stores behind including hundreds of boxes of spare parts, wings, tyres, etc, these boxes were being broken open and smashed up by anyone who felt like it including

soldiers, sailors and Greeks. There were hundreds of tents, blankets and ground sheets, and sand bags any clobber you could think of, all their webbing equipment and parachutes. It was a wicked and awful waste of money saved and sacrificed by the people at home, it was here that I heard what a very bad name the RAF had got. I managed to get some shirts, a pair of trousers and a pair of boots as during all this time I had been in my socks, having lost my slippers. There were several air raids but I laid down in the ditches and nothing came near me. I made my way back to the camp, the sun was very hot, I had got a white topee, this I camouflaged with mud and water and wore it. The camp was bombed then and machine gunned, we could not make smoke from our fires or show anything coloured, it was a nerve wracking day. Turned in that night again plenty of rifle fire.

April 31st.

I was sent for at the base office Returns and told to take over a tug, this I flatly refused to do and explained why, so I was sent back to the camp. That afternoon we were told to report on the jetty at 17.30 to take passage for Alexandria. The disorganisation and chaos was hard to believe no one knew anything about us, soldiers were making their own way to the ships.

Eventually we were taken by barge to the Kimberly, we were on board about five minutes and had to get off again and go back to the jetty. There we were told to come back next day or try to make our way to Alexandria. A lot of soldiers refused to go away and sat down to go to sleep on the jetty for the night. There were several wounded men but everyone's only thought was to get away from Crete. As we dis-embarked there was another big air raid, we dived into some shelters and there met our Greek friends again. They had been fixed up and were going to some distant part of the island.

We got back to camp once more, that night firing broke out fiercer than ever, we were ordered into the trenches and stayed there for three hours. Fifth columnists were rife and had been signalling by lamps to the Huns. Our soldiers used to fire at these lights and the owners fired back. Then a proper barrage went on, automatics Tommy and Bren guns all firing. Several of our parties were firing at one another. Our camp was a no-mans land with bullets whistling all around, we dare not put our heads above the trench. This finished about midnight.

May 1st.

The air raids got very very bad, we couldn't leave the camp during the day but had to keep hidden under the trees. In the evening we were told to get ready for leaving, arriving at the jetty things seemed to be worse than ever, men were almost fighting to get into the boats, I got into a small boat with some officers and found myself on HMS Havock, I was made very comfortable indeed but I could not sleep. Leaving Suda Bay we went through the Kasso Straits to Canea, there we picked up 42 men women and children from the embassy staff in Athens, they also had got away by fishing boat. Leaving Canea we set off for Alexandria and had no further air raids.

May 3rd.

Arrived at Alexandria to discover the harbour had been mined during the night so off we set for Port Said, arriving at 22.00. Here the navy organisation came into play and we were two hours trying to get off the ship. When we did get off we were taken by barge to Port Fuad, from there we walked about two miles into the desert where we found a soldiers camp. They knew absolutely nothing about us but they gave us some hot food and blankets and we slept out in the sand from about 3.am till 7.am. This was all right for an hour but the sand got very hard and cold.

May 4th.

A P.O.(Petty Officer) from Port Said Navy house came down and took particulars, we loafed around the camp all that day. The food was poor, the sand got into everything, we ate sand with all meals, all our food was served on one plate, we had to blow the sand off to make room for the food.

May 5th.

The men were beginning to grumble so, finding myself the senior CPO (Chief Petty Officer) I had a scrounge round and got some cigarettes and matches, one packet each man free, this pleased the lads. I then phoned up Navy House and spoke to a pay bod, here again nothing was known about us, so I explained our position, we had no toilet gear at all, some men had no clothes or boots, he was very surprised and told me to get the men to Navy House as soon as possible. I went back and told the men, they were grateful to know something was being done. We all trooped off to Navy House where they gave us just essential gear and a £3 payment, also we were told to be ready to leave for Alexandria first thing in the morning. Of course, some of the boys went out on the booze, they couldn't help it after what we had all

come through. I went back to the camp to make arrangements about leaving, I had my first hair cut and shave since April 27th (I had grown a fine beard and didn't know whether to have it off or not). I still had only got a pair of plimsoles, torn trousers and R'AF shirt on but I got a taxi back to Navy House where I had promised to meet one of our lads who went into the sick bay with a poisoned leg. He comes from Chadwell Heath , I had a couple of beers, a nice hot feed and a game of Tombola. About 22.00 I said my goodbyes and was going out when I met a PO Tel (Petty Officer Telegraph), who left the Wryneck just before she sailed. He was pleased to see me and insisted upon taking me to his private pub. We had a few drinks and I left him about midnight and went back to the camp and the sand.

May 6th.

We were up early, got into some lorries and driven to Port Said main station. We still looked very ragged, we got into the train and had a rotten journey, it was stinking hot going through the desert, the sand blew in and covered everything. We stopped at several stations, including 3 hours at Benha, we went ashore and had a few drinks, the journey was interesting, passing mud villages, aerodromes in the desert, Italian prison camps and working parties. From Ismailia we went along the Suez Canal and eventually arrived at Alexandria at 21.00 hrs. There we caught a bus to the depot, just arriving when a heavy air-raid started. By the time it was over and we had got some blankets , food and somewhere to sleep it was 1.00 am.

May 7th to May 10th.

We went through the usual rigmarole of giving particulars and getting some clothes.

and were busy getting our money sorted out before we were sent to Lady Cunninghams Rest Home, "Happy Children". A Captain Shelley, Cunninghams Flag Captain sent for me and told me that he was going to send us all home. He spoke of our experiences etc; then we got to the home, there we met the remainder of the Wrynecks survivors whom we were glad to meet and hear their experiences.

May 11th.

We left the home for Sidi Bisir Camp, out in the desert once more. This place was in a terrible state but were only staying one night.

May 12th.

We entrained at Alexandria for Port Tewfik, another awful journey and terribly hot. We arrived at night but by the time we had unloaded the train, then into barges and out again it was 3am. We arrived on the Empress of Australia and got to bed about 5am.

May 29th.

Having spent 16 days at Port Suez we left on May 29th for Aden arriving Sunday June 1st 4pm. We saw many sharks, Mount Sanai the Twelve Apostles Islands and Hells Gates. The coast was in sight all the time. Perim Lighthouse still has light burning. Went ashore in Aden until midnight and sailed on Monday June 2nd at 21.30 hrs a fire broke out on board. The ship stopped but the fire was put out and off we went again. The weather was very hot indeed. In our convoy are Viceroy of India, Strathhaven, Strathalan and The Duchess of Athol, the first four we left at Mombasa and we went on with Colonlo.

The journey home took 13 weeks but at Port Said I had been able to cable my wife to say I was safe. At Durban and Capetown the population could not do enough for us. Lines of cars would come to the docks with offers of outings into the country, and every house was open to us. They are with us in everything we do.

We spent a further week at Sierra Leone before setting off on the final leg for England