

WARTIME IN THE ROYAL NAVY

KEN HARMON (and Mrs. Harmon):

Born: 1923

Royal Navy - Gunner

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

I went for the Navy because I knew it would be a clean death. I wouldn't have been in mud and that. I'd passed all the tests; I was passed A1 for the Royal Navy. I was given calling up papers, then I went to HMS Raleigh in Devonport, Plymouth. I did ten weeks training then I got ten days leave. I went back into barracks and we got a draft sheet to HMS Alaunia which was an armed Merchant Cruiser, an ex Cunard White Star liner, and it had 4 six inch guns. We did a couple of convoys across to America, we escorted the convoys. Then we came back and we were sent to the Indian Ocean, to Columbo, which is now in Sri Lanka. That was our base for a bit. Then we were in the Persian Gulf for four months as a control or contraband ship.

Later in the war in 1944 I went into barracks and did a course in radar at HMS Valkyrie and the Isle of Man. We did the theory at HMS Collinwood and I was there a month and then I passed out as a Radar Operator and went aboard HMS Singer as an RP3.

EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS

I worked with six inch guns, and when you used to fire the gun the shell used to drop out the end, it didn't go anywhere, it used to drop out the end, 'cause the rifling on the gun wasn't strong enough. And when fired, a gun recoils doesn't it? I had a bit of a shock. I was only 18, and I was stood behind this six inch gun. I was Number 3 rammer behind the gun and called to action stations, 'Load, load, load'. I rammed it home, then they put the cordite charge, and the Number 2 was red hot, he knew his stuff, and he bangs the BM lever and shouts, 'Number 2, all ready to fire, Sir!' Well when he bangs the BM lever, I saw this lot come off, and he shouts, 'Fire!' I shouts, 'No, not now!', dropped the rammer, and ran like hell up the fo'castle, and everybody ran with me. Anyway, we goes back to the gun, and the officer of the day says, "Which silly ***** said, 'Not now' instead of shouting 'Misfire'?" I said, 'Me, Sir'. He said, 'Don't you know the bloody drill?', to which I said, 'Yeah'. He says, 'Right, Commander's Report'. And I got fourteen days of running around the ship for an hour every night with a rifle above my head. I also had to get up every morning and do jobs.

When I was on the aircraft carrier HMS Slinger, we carried Corsairs. We had an Avenger and a Hellcat. The yanks wouldn't fly them at first, because when they came in to land, they couldn't see the batman, and they had to come in at an angle. Anyway the engineers on our ship did something so they could come in astern.

I had control in the air, being a radar operator, we controlled them in the air. My responsibility was to bring them in to land safely. It wasn't hard physical work, it was concentration. I'd pick an aeroplane up 180 miles away and when you had aircraft up in the air you had to keep in contact. They used to plot their course and you had to keep talking to them, while they write the plot down.

DAY TO DAY LIVING AND ROUTINES.

Capstans and cockroaches

On the Alaunia we were in hammocks, and sometimes we used to take them on deck and sling them on the deck. You had a blanket and a mattress in your hammock. On the aircraft carrier HMS Slinger though, they were all bunks and you dropped your bunk down and it folded away. You got used to it because it was air conditioned, you know, they weren't too bad. But on the Alaunia it was hammocks. We used to tie up our hammocks on the mess deck, which was a ballroom when it was a liner. You'd get into your hammock and the cockroaches used to drop on you. And I remember going in to the galley to get food and one of the lads said, 'There's a couple of cockroaches in the soup.' So the cook says, 'What do you want me to do, throw 'em a bloody lifebelt?' Things like that, that was life.

On board ship, nine times out of ten, you could eat anything that was put in front of you. There were odd meals you didn't fancy, but most of the times the meals were good. It was marvellous, you couldn't fault it. Now anybody on corvettes and the small ships, things weren't so good. You'd have to buy chocolate and cigarettes mind you. I used to smoke Senior Service, because they didn't have Capstan Full Strength. I used to get twenty for sixpence.

Sippers

I was the rum boatswain. One man from every mess went to collect the rum ration for whoever was in the mess at half past eleven. I went for our mess, and I used to get fourteen tots, and they used to weigh it out, but it was two for one. They always used to have water with it. Only now and again did you get it neat. Whenever it's your birthday you got what they call 'sippers'. You had a sip of everybody's rum. You used to get your rum the same time as your dinner. On my twenty-first birthday, I'd had one or two sips, and then more sips, and then

I just fell into my dinner. I was out for forty eight hours. They had to hide me, because it was an offence really. So they hid me in a cupboard in a bathroom. With it being a liner a lot of the ship wasn't used, so they found one of the cabins with all the original fittings and they locked me in there, and kept coming to have a look to see if I was alright. Well the Petty Officer in charge of us knew I was missing, but he knew why, and of course everything was smoothed over. The only time I went up on deck, and they were dishing the rum out, ooh I used to run and be sick. I was, you know, for ages after, every time I got the smell of rum. I don't know whether it was eighteen or twenty one before you were allowed it. I think it was eighteen. If you didn't take your rum you got threepence a day.

I never really suffered with seasickness though. I was very fortunate. But I knew a lad that was and there's some of the Captains on board ships, every time they went to sea they were sea sick. A lot of the Navy men, big, big cheeses were seasick. You get used to it, you're only seasick for four or five days, six days, then you were alright. Some men, whenever they went to sea were seasick for maybe a couple of days, and then they were alright.

Letters home

Nine times out of ten the letters were cut up.

(Mrs. Harmon): We were censored. He used to try and write to me every day. He used to number his letters because if one was missing I knew the ship that was bringing them here had been sunk. They were all read by the officers, and pieces were cut out, if they thought they were sending you a message in code. You got strips taken out.

EXPERIENCES BEFORE AND AFTER D-DAY

A lucky escape

One time I was in Durban, South Africa. I had a bad do while I was there. We were anchored in a place called Killendeany in Mombassa, and we had our anchors down, forward, but we were also moored to a buoy aft. Anyway, the signalman announced the station for leaving harbour and I was in the motorboat's crew, so I got in the motorboat to go take the manila (rope) off the buoy. Before I could get it off, they let the manila go, and the shackle dropped on both me feet, and, of course, they were bleeding and one thing and another. Anyway, the Coxswain pulled me back on board the motorboat, and alongside the harbour wall there was a Dutch hospital ship, SS Talambra. The coxswain was going to take me to it, and the officer of the day said, 'Bring him back aboard.'

You heard the pipe announce the stations (signals) for leaving harbour and we're leaving harbour. Put him aboard the hospital ship and we would never know where he was. Where would we pick him up?' Twenty-four hours later that hospital ship sailed, and the Japs sunk it. All hands went.

Japanese treatment of prisoners of war

Another time we went up to Hong Kong, where they picked up 23 prisoners of war, Australian prisoners of war that were being held by the Japs, and the sight they were, it was unbelievable. They all had beriberi, and the conditions were terrible. Anyway they had no clothes or anything, so we gave them some clothes, and we collected some money for them, and we fitted them out. They had worked, as prisoners of war, on the railway (Burma Siam railway) for the Japanese.

(Mrs. Harmon): You don't know the conditions they used to go through. Even our lads that were captured they had dysentery, they'd every disease going. The toilets would be heaving with maggots. They'd no clothing - I mean they were beaten if they did anything, well; they only had to look at them the wrong way. They were treated abominably, nothing like the German prisoners of war. They were absolutely treated like animals, then they were used for slave labour. They had to go out whether they were sick or not, and do whatever the Japanese wanted doing. I mean they lost thousands of lads. They used to drop down dead whilst they were working on this Burma railway, or any of the jobs. You see, our lads were not used to the conditions out there, were they? I mean they were going through the jungle, and up to their waist in mud and stuff. We met some lads at Eden Camp that had been doing the same kind of work, in the Navy, and they were saying, 'Weren't those islands Hell holes?'

D-Day landings

All I did was go with some ammunition. I was told to go and report in the dockyard, and there was a load of ammunition on the side and we had to get it on board this barge, and while it was loaded we started to get off and the Petty Officer said, 'Where are you going?' We said, 'It's all been loaded Sir.' And he said, 'Get back on board. You're going with it!' And they towed us out and shoved us aboard, got the ammunition and took it over to ships, which shelled the beaches with it.

I'd like the children to appreciate what we did and why we did it. We did it for their future, for their peace of mind... so they could go to school knowing they were going to be safe, and that they won't have any worries that our children did, but as I say, I appreciate we did this for their future, for their safety, and

I'd like them to look on it as their heritage. We did for their sake, and their future.