

'PEDDLAR'S' GALATEA SERVICE

In April 1938 I received notice that I should be joining 'H.M.S. Galatea' for a commission in the Mediterranean once again and I joined that ship on 23rd May. I was still a Petty Officer and the Paymaster Commander was used to having a Chief Writer in charge of the Pay Office so at the end of the month I think he was testing me by asking that I collate the vouchers, complete his cash account and balance it. Thanks to my previous experience in R.N. Barracks I was able to do this without any difficulties and he accepted me. I must have pleased him as I undertook this task every month thereafter. However in a few months I was advanced to Chief Writer which is the senior rating on the Lower Deck.

The ship called at Gibraltar and did a couple of patrols off the Spanish coast because of the war taking place in that country, but we soon went on to Malta to join the rest of the fleet. We were sent to the Eastern end of the Mediterranean later in the year on patrol to stop illegal immigrants from entering Israel which was then still under British mandate. This meant stopping innumerable ships and searching them, also scouring the sea for small craft, no easy job and lots of sea time.

We did go to Haifa for a rest on one occasion and could not roam the town freely because of the troubles so had to be content with visiting the canteen in the Army Camp. The Coldstream Guards were there at that time.

Throughout Palestine were outposts of the Palestine Police. A body of very tough British men who daily took their lives in their hands. On average one of them was killed each day.

'Galatea' was the flagship of the destroyers and therefore carried an Admiral and his staff. This Admiral was a great friend of the man in charge of the Palestine Police and through him arranged a wonderful excursion for some 200 of the Ships Company.

When notice of this journey was posted on the notice board we realised that there might be some danger. A Palestine Policeman would be in each of the coaches. Also one in ten of the sailors had to be fully armed with rifle and ammunition. Reaching and embarking in the coaches we found we would have an escort of three armoured cars, two in front and one in the rear. The first of these kept several hundred yards in front of the convoy, searching for any signs of land mines or other dangers. We did pass the shot riddled remains of a motor car at one place.

Passing through the village of Nain, it was in this village that the miracle of the raising of the Widow's son was performed, then 10 miles further on we came to the town of Nazareth which was spread over a large valley. Here we stopped to visit and view the Church of the Annunciation, built on the site of the home of the Virgin Mary where the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her. Further up the hill we visited the Church of St. Joseph built over the site of the home of the Holy Family.

Leaving Nazareth we passed through the village of Cana the scene of our Lords miracle of the Wedding feast, than on upwards to the Mount of the Beatitudes, soon to see the Sea of Galilee.

We stopped at the town of Tiberias on the west shore of this sea. The heat was intense as this sea is 500 feet below ordinary sea level. This was our last town and after an hour or so started back to Haifa, we all realised how fortunate we had been to have had the opportunity to visit a small portion of the land we had been taught so much about in our childhood, much, I am afraid we had forgotten.

During this time, the Prime Minister Mr. Chamberlain had had talks with the German Dictator Adolf Hitler and other European leaders. He brought back that famous or infamous piece of paper, signed by Hitler - 'Peace in our time'. Very few people really believed it, Germany had already broken treaties and annexed a few smaller countries.

Rejoining the fleet at Malta in March 1939, endless exercises were carried out and much time was spent at sea. The Navy was going to be prepared, come what may.

The fleet base was switched to Alexandria, Egypt in July 1939, another country over which Britain had a mandate. A fleet club was set up on shore and this was principally due to the Chaplain on 'Galatea'. His energy was limitless and he could meet a sailor on his own terms on shore, have a drink, talk to him and even persuade him he had had enough to drink. When Sunday Church Service came and he preached his sermon he was talking to you direct and many a man was squirming in his seat. He was a fine man.

It was in Alexandria that the Fleet received the signal 'Britain is at total war with Germany'. The days of peace were over. All the tireless exercises carried out over the years were now to be in earnest. Many, in fact, most of those sailors present were to die in the next six years of bitter struggle.

Re-enforcement's were sent from home to bring ships up to their full war compliment. Most of these replacements were Royal Naval Volunteers, those weekend sailors who during those dark years proved their worth and their courage on so many occasions. Ships were detached from the Mediterranean fleet to go home for further deployment as Italy had not entered the war at that time. She did not enter the fray until 10th June 1940.

In June of 1939 My Captain and Paymaster Commander sent for me one afternoon and insisted that I took the necessary examinations for warrant officer. I had thought nothing about it previously and had to take the Educational Examination first. At that time I was having to cope with some serious trouble in my private life and really preferred to go ashore of an evening and not settle down to studying. The examination was in October and three weeks before that date the Schoolmaster asked me how my studies were getting on and what four subjects would I be taking. He nearly went up the wall when I said I had not done any studies but would take, General Knowledge, Geography, English and Mathematics.

The latter two subjects I felt were within my scope, General Knowledge was anybody's guess, as for Geography I felt I had a fair knowledge also I had just been reading a book about Canada, a most fortunate choice.

I had to go to the Fleet Headquarters for two days for this examination, and felt I had done fairly well at the end. When the results came back from Admiralty I had excelled my expectations having passed well with my lowest marks 87%. Later I had to take the Professional Examination but because of the turmoil of war it had to wait another three years.

'Galatea' was soon relieved in the Mediterranean by my old ship 'H.M.S. Delhi' and we proceeded home in February 1940. Coming up to the Bay of Biscay we met 'H.M.S. Exeter' and her escort after her epic battle with the 'Graf Spee'. She was in a terrible mess but still was operational and later went East where she was eventually sunk in the Battle of the Coral Sea. We stayed with her and arrived in Plymouth Sound in dense fog. Eventually we went up stream to the Dockyard and as we were to be fitted with a protective device against Magnetic mines the Germans were then using we expected the ships company to get a few days leave. However, no decision had been made so I prepared to go ashore for the evening, but the Paymaster came to me and said that if leave was given, the hands would have to be paid so I ought to remain on board to await events. My reply was that as Plymouth was my home town and my family were there and also, most important, it was my birthday that day I would be back on board by 10pm and would do the necessary work during the night. He agreed to this so off I went to my fathers house, my sister lived there also. What a homecoming it was, no one knew my ship had come home.

Returning on board as promised I found that six days leave was approved for each watch. So we got down to work, calculating pay and putting it in envelopes for the lucky ones taking first leave, preparing ration cards and railway warrants - servicemen travelled free on railways during the war. Altogether it was quite a hectic nights work, but everything was ready before the next morning and the first leave party got away from the ship by 8am.

In two weeks we were ready for sea again so we went West about going up the Irish Sea and on to Scapa Flow to join the fleet there and from then on life was very hectic. We were to spend most of our time at sea during the next months. First on convoy duty, then on various patrols until 8th April when Germany invaded Norway. During the next month we did two trips to Norway going up a fjord to Andalsnes taking British troops and their equipment over and a third trip to bring some of them back during the withdrawal. It was a risky business. German aircraft occupied shore bases and seemed to take a liking to us. They would appear two or three times a day, always at meal times. I remember the Chief Torpedo Gunners Mate coming into the mess one teatime, he had just poured himself a cup of tea when the alarm was sounded 'Enemy aircraft overhead'. He flung his arms into the air and looking up said "can't you b****s wait until I've finished eating? Even in danger funny incidents occurred.

On our third visit we had to go up the fjord by night, embark the troops and get out as quick as we could. Two cruisers had already 'bought it' doing the similar run. It was a mad stampede getting the Army on board and during all the chaos the Paymaster sent for me to meet him on deck. He said "we have to get that lot on board" - a pile of small wooden boxes. I said "but that's stores Sir - the stores chief should be doing it". His reply shook me, that is not stores its gold"!! Seven million pounds of it, to be taken to the United Kingdom for safe keeping for the Norwegian Government. We

did a very careful check as it was piled into a cubbie hole in the deck structure with both of us doing the same method of 'fives' and comparing results later - they were correct. All the time the hustle was progressing getting the troops in.

At last we were ready to sail again but dawn had arrived. We reached Molde where the fjord widened into a large bay and there were the German planes awaiting us. Fortunately we had a good Captain - his idea was to steer to where the last bomb dropped - nothing hits the same place twice!! More by good luck we were not hit and after a running battle of nearly five hours we got away. We only had eighteen high angle shells left so I was told. Previous to this we had been going into Scapa Flow on one occasion with typical Scapa Flow weather, a dense fog and drizzle, when a lookout shouted "dark object bearing so and so, height such and such". The Captain said "challenge" but after the three seconds allowed there was no reply "open fire" - we did and brought down a 'barrage balloon'. The ships company called him 'shoot first' after that incident.

'Galatea' did not stop in northern waters, she was sent down to Chatham. Things were going very badly on the continent and the allies were being driven back on all fronts by the German 'Blitz Kriec'. One Sunday morning the ship raced across to the French coast and just west of Calais we started bombarding the Germans from the sea. Calais was having a hard time from continual bombing. We had a share of this bombing but we once again were not hit. The Destroyer 'Grafton' was hit and sunk within a few miles of us that day.

An incident took place that day I have always remembered. A small boat loaded with refugees was running down the coast between us and the shore and as she passed us she lowered her flag in salute. A pathetic or heroic gesture, I wouldn't like to say. Later that month the glorious and historic rescue of the British Army from Dunkirk commenced. Although without most of their equipment they were not beaten men but given rest and re-armament would soon be ready to fight again.

So the war went on, patrols were numerous and so convoy work became another job for us. While on one of these convoys in heavy seas, the cover to the vent which supplied air to the area of our office was torn away and water was running through the system. A shipwright chum of mine decided that it could be plugged. We put him on a lifeline and he got down to the vent and did this job, getting a thorough soaking also. He went to the electric pump to start the air once again and found the sump full of water. It was easy to drain as the pump was overhead so he took the plug out and held a bucket under. When the bucket was nearly full the ship gave a very big lurch, the bucket left his grip and somehow descended over his head like a helmet. Once again he got a soaking but this time with black oily water. It was so funny we around him could hardly keep our balance with laughter.

'Galatea' was once again sent to the Mediterranean in late 1940 and in the following year her luck ran out and she was eventually torpedoed and sunk off Alexandria.

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PALMER, Ronald "Peddlar", ex Petty Officer and then Chief Writer from April 1938 to Feb 1940. The only reason he left Galatea was that he was taking promotion exams to become a Warrant Officer (still alive as of November 2003, aged 92).