



HMS OPOSSUM

British Far East Fleet 1945 - 1947

Memories of the first commission

By

Arthur Harris

HMS Opossum

The first commission

British Pacific Fleet 1945-1947.

A modified Black Swan class Sloop U33 later classified as a Frigate F33.
Armament consisted of 6 x 4" metadyne controlled guns in 3 mounts. A, B and X.

Two twin Bofors 40mm guns in 2 powered mounts.

2 Twin Oerlikon 20 mm guns and small arms.

Depth charges and throwers were carried.

The twin oerlikon mounts were replaced with 2 army type single bofors guns.

Radar installations consisted of type 271 aircraft, 293 navigation and 285
gunnery sets.

Asdic anti-submarine was also installed.

She was steam turbine driven with a top speed of 19 knots, this type of ship being favored for many reasons as an anti-submarine convoy escort.

Her crew then consisted of wartime personnel with many inexperienced seagoing members. After "Damage-Control" training at Stamshaw Camp Portsmouth and gunnery training at Whale Island, HMS Excellent, they were mustered at RNB Portsmouth and dispatched by troop train to Glasgow. Overnight at the DEMS Barracks at Govan they joined the ship at Denny Bros, Yard Dumbarton, Clydeside for commissioning on Monday 28th May 1945 Lieutenant Commander Hollins was the skipper. She engaged in acceptance trials off Helensburgh where the Denny Brown stabilizers provided the talking point with the ship, using these, could roll scupper to scupper in calm waters. In heavy seas this equipment could cause seasickness even amongst hardened sailors, due to the unusual motion.

On acceptance she left for Tobermory in the Western Isles. Afterwards, to Portsmouth and Portland for anti submarine and other trials which included anti aircraft plotting and gunnery, weaponry. During this period the two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan (Hiroshima and Nagasaki). On VE day, one crewmember was injured in the leg by a snowflake rocket miss- firing. The crew was given shore leave and was fare welled on 5th October 1945 by a huge crowd of one relative and two dockyard mates. Our knowledge was confined to destination Far East with return unknown. Out of the harbour the crew of an MFV was rescued and returned to shore side. Also a floating mine sunk by small arms fire.

During the trip a loss of engine power was experienced but soon repaired by ship's engineers. Calling at Gibraltar for supplies we continued to Malta and anchored in the Grand Harbour. Gunnery and general exercises were carried out on a small island where a 'hot gun' prematurely fired causing a few hearing problems. Then to Port Said, swimming was allowed in the Med, quite an experience. On arrival we moored "stern to", which greatly assisted fellows chased by "shoe shine boys" to scramble aboard. Passing through Suez was a tremendous experience for first timers. Passed a homeward bound troopship whose decks lined with troops gave us a resounding cheer. At Port Suez a couple of men sent home for medical reasons. Through the Red

Sea it was extremely hot, with vertical funnel smoke caused by a following hot wind, stokers and engineers were almost unconscious despite short work periods. No air conditioning and only one tap of cold water, as it was the accepted standard of the day. Refueled at Aden involving the use of offshore fuelling buoys. Large ships used nearly full-length wire ropes needed at these sites. Then on to Colombo, where we moored alongside HMS Northway. A ship, being maneuvered by a tug, collided with the bow. Hopes for shore leave dashed when a native dockie on a small raft, cut a plate and patched the hole. In a couple of hours

Next call Penang, Malaya where we had our real first experience of a tropical town. Especially as we realized our tour could be the traditional three years. A nightclub named, I believe, "City Lights" was the main attraction. Through suspected minefield, we went through the Malacca Straits to Singapore. No shore leave as the city was devastated and only small amounts of supplies were available. Storage of fresh vegetables was on deck and deterioration occurred rapidly. Onto Hong Kong, interrupted by an enforced call at Kudat, (British North Borneo), this due to flooding of our fresh water tanks with salt water, and engine problems.

A tremendous tropical storm saved the day and all hands gathered 14 tons of water for the tanks from awnings and any other place where water gathered. Afterwards we were informed that the water should have been chlorinated but as no one appeared to suffer ill effects so no harm was done. This suspect water was greatly appreciated better than no water. HMS Wave a Fleet Minesweeper came to our assistance but was not required. Kudat had Japanese prisoners of war incarcerated in wooden cages with walkways over, holding numbers of men. Guarded by Australian soldiers who engaged them in hard physical labor. Involving shifting large rocks we were informed that about 25,000 local people had been taken from the area as slave labor and the area was denuded of population, my notes show a white population of three. Thence through the most beautiful sunset, we had ever seen, we set sail for the ultimate destination Hong Kong. That was to join the British Pacific Fleet.

Leaving Kudat we had an emergency call to Manila to discharge a crewmember suffering from health problems. Initially we were refused entry to the port by the American authorities disregarding this we moved through unswept minefields to an anchorage. The crewmember was discharged ashore and later flown to the Australian Naval Hospital in Sydney. Fresh food was exhausted and by barter with US Navy ships we exchanged bully beef for fresh bread and chicken. Manila and the islands off shore including Guadalcanal had been destroyed, so no shore leave. By this time many of the crew was suffering from tropical diseases such as scabies, tropical ring worms, tinea, sweat rash and dhobi rash, for which there was no satisfactory treatment, and, these persisted for the remainder of the commission except in Australia. With a complement of over 200 including passengers conditions were extremely crowded. Leaving Manila we experienced a pre tropical storm sunset of great beauty. Overdosed on the anti malarial drug Mepacrine, we assumed an overall yellow tinge coupled with loss of weight we assumed an Asian appearance. Finally we arrived at Hong Kong on 11th December 1945.

Hong Kong was crowded with warships, mainly British and American and we achieved our home station and joined the British Pacific Fleet, The battleship HMS Duke of York was the flag ship. We soon discovered that this was badly bomb and

war damaged city, with open sewers, lack of drainage, little food and general disarray, Marine commandos with naval patrols policed the city. The city was dominated by towering statue of Japanese war memorial plinth, unfinished, but dominating the city from the Peak. Constructed by British and Commonwealth prisoners of war and local forced labor, it was demolished by British Army engineers by undermining the structure and finally by use of explosives it collapsed away from the houses into a pile of rubble.

During the Xmas celebrations, a gang of thieves attacked a Star ferry crossing from Kowloon to the Island and passengers lost their valuables and money. This was despite the passage through ships of the Fleet. Food was in short supply and the celebrations muted. Side parties were engaged by payment through sole entitlement to the wastes discharged from the ship, including gash. On one occasion we were awakened by the sound of fireworks from a sampan alongside the ship, this celebrated the birth of a child. The lady resumed work the next day washing paintwork. The birth took place on the boat with no outside assistance. All their lives were spent on board. The famous Fleet Club was reopened and this provides a good meal, cool and clean bed, with Tiger beer for the fleet, when we had funds. Two and sixpence a day did not go very far.

On 26th January 1946 we left for Subic Bay, an American Naval Base in Luzon, in the Philippines to engage with other Commonwealth Navy ships in the escort a number of tugs, landing craft and other support vessels to Hong Kong. During this journey we engaged in a throw off shoot with a cruiser, after its quarterdeck was showered the shoot was called off. At Subic Bay, in the US Naval Base were a number of naval vessels including submarines. Having met a sub sailor I visited the USS Carp having a meal, no alcohol, as the US Navy is teetotal. It was interesting to compare the lavish catered messing in comparison with canteen messing on Opossum. We attended to a Forces entertainment show in an open-air theater, very interesting seeing the show in rain and heat. Opossum had rigged a water polo goal from a boom from the shipside, very popular. In the team to face the Americans we swam in a river. On asking for a reciprocal event, they said, no way. Too many sharks and barracudas and similar in the bay, fortunately we were ignorant of these dangers.

Returning to Hong Kong on 12th March 1946 we departed for Port Kampha (near Haiphong) in French Indo China (now Vietnam) escorting a Chinese ancient collier, passing south of Hainan Island (China). Maximum speed 5 knots, to collect coal from the mines. Whilst the loading took place, mainly accomplished by women wearing large strew hat with black bands, we patrolled the Van Dugi Islands and a pig shoot took place. It was obvious by the starved appearance and general poverty that colonial control was about to be ended. It took a long time for this came about after the Vietnam War. On 22nd March 1946 we returned to Hong Kong.

Our next journey was to Sydney Australia, leaving on 24th March 1946. Progressing through the South China Sea a crack appeared in the hull. This expanded to become a three foot square hole, on which emergency repairs were affected without result. As we surfed the waves, water gushed in and out. As the bilge was self contained it was decided to take no further action. This was my workstation as quarterdeck locker man, water music and sounds from the steering engine were quite interesting. Films were shown on the quarterdeck, the same films being shown on frequent basis, entertained

us. We knew every action and entertained ourselves with comment and whistling. There was no radio reception due to the heavyside layer in the stratosphere, during the day no reception but nightfall brought in an American Forces Radio Station.

During the evening of 8th April, whilst preparing to cross the equator a May Day message was received that a Royal Australian Liberator had ditched in the Celebes Sea to the North of our position. Returning to the north at top speed we entered the search area during the night of the next day. After a search using radar, searchlights and flares a signal was detected from the paddles used by the survivors in an inflatable raft. Scrambling nets were rigged and the ship, in calm conditions, put alongside and the survivors lifted aboard. All were suffering from cuts, sunburn and exposure. Some were more serious and were treated by the doctor on board, the ship then headed for Zamboanga in the Philippines, arriving the next day. Seriously injured were evacuated to Sydney by air, the remainder with us to Sydney. Seven RAAF personnel and one American survived and one each RAAF and American killed. Official details of the plane an RAAF B24J Liberator, A72-378-23 Squadron. The plane was en-route from Manila to Darwin.

Requiring additional fuel we traversed to Tarakan in Dutch Borneo then southwards, crossing the "LINE" on 18th April 1946 with the usual initiations and ceremony, soft soap and No. 9 tablets being liberally applied. This event, being delayed by about 10 days by the rescue effort. Manus Island was the next port of call for fuel. Then to Rabaul, New Guinea, for additional fuel and food supplies. The latter entailed passing close to the active volcano, bubbling in the ocean and giving off intense heat and fumes that were felt on board. Some year's later this and another volcano erupted and virtually destroyed the city.

Then onto Sydney through the Louisiade Archipelago, a wreck of a submarine was seen completely stranded on a coral reel. No information as to its identity or the circumstances. As a number of depth charges, racked on deck, were exuding jellied explosive they were launched with the idea of a change in diet by fresh fish. Sea boat launched after the firing, rowed out to site, suddenly it was realized that live charges were unexploded, recall signal hoisted and ships hooter 'sounded off'. Whaler returned at boat race speed, no casualties and no fish.

Our first call was at Trial Bay, north of Sydney to give the ship a clean. Then onwards to Sydney, through the harbour, and moored alongside R.A.N ships, at the Naval Dockyard this at Garden Island. Plenty supplies of fresh milk, bread and fruit were awaiting us at the wharf.

A couple of days later we moved to Cockatoo Island upriver and under the Bridge, where we refitted at Vickers Yard, we lived on board during the refit, just like being at anchor as we depended on the harbour ferry for transport. Leave was granted and most had some days mainly with private accommodation. The beaches and National Parks were a great attraction. A ship's function was held at a nightclub (George's I believe) in central Sydney. The main center had closed, but the Australian Naval Club was open. Shore was incredible and made a lasting impression. After a prolonged stay from 2nd May 1946 to 17th June 1946 due in some part to dock strikes. We left for New Zealand. Off Three Kings Islands Tasman Sea the ship developed

turbo generator defects and loss of power, Temporary repairs were effected and we arrived at Picton in the South Island. Then, after a welcoming reception, particularly from the Maori population. We traveled north to Napier, Gisborne and Auckland. Napier was severely damaged by an earthquake a few years previous but had been greatly restored. Arriving in Auckland we docked at the Naval Dockyard for repairs to the generator. As no replacement parts were available except from the U.K. a metal box like structure was welded to the quarter deck and a diesel generator installed. Once again we all were made welcome again the quality and amount of food was staggering compared with wartime U.K. we left with "Now is the Hour" in our ears.

Returning to Sydney where the turbine was made good and the box was removed, extending our stay from 23rd July 1946 to 25th August 1946. We renewed acquaintances from the last visit with shore leave being granted, again restricted by lack of cash. The next destination was Tawau (British North Borneo) to rendezvous with the Governor General Malcolm McDonald for a "Show the Flag" tour. Our course was set inside the Barrier Reef which apparently had unswept minefields and navigation lights extinguished with charts doubtful. Progress was only permitted during daylight hours, anchoring in various bays and ports including Island (Percy Group), Edgecombe Bay, Townsville (Hitching rails still outside the pubs), Lizard Bay, Bathurst Bay and Weymouth. Captain Cook's charts were still in use. After exiting this most impressive and beautiful of the world's treasures we passed through the Torres Strait to Amboina (Molucca Islands), after refueling and food supplies to Tawau 12th September 1946, here commenced the formal tour by the G.G. Seemed ironic to see the plumes and formal dress against the simplicity of the natives who had been decimated but the Japanese occupation. Opossum provided the guard honor. This procedure was followed at Semporna, Lahad Datu, Sandakan the site of the infamous death march of Commonwealth and British prisoners of war, we knew nothing of this at the time), Kudat, Jesselton and Labuan. Here ended the tour on 23rd September 1946 with the departure of G.G. Returned to Hong Kong on 30th September 1946.

Left for Pratas Reef on 5th October 1946, this being an isolated Chinese National weather station, which required supplies. These were secured on the quarter deck together with light collapsible boats of Japanese Army origin. Our two powered boats were to tow them off the reef which was some distance off the mooring point due to coral reefs. The operation began fairly successful in calm conditions, until the afternoon when the wind rose and the barely visible reef became practically obliterated. Boats recalled and all remaining stores and boats secured. This rising wind became a tropical storm with huge waves and heavy rain as we moved into the open ocean and during the night waves swept the quarterdeck and swept the whole show overboard. Minor damage was caused to the ship. The deck sentry, fortunately, had been sheltering in the Quarterdeck flat otherwise he would have been swept overboard. It is said that we steamed all night into very heavy seas and by morning were astern of our commencing position. The weather station was still forecasting fine weather.

Returned to Hong Kong and from 9th October 1946 anti-pirate patrols were made in Bias Bay, Chugchow, Macao, and Lantao Island. Boat attacks on civilian and Police patrols were frequent. Small arms fire was reported on one occasion during the night and they responded but this was not confirmed. This 11 day operation concluded on 25th October 1946 when we then docked at Aberdeen dry dock for a bottom scrape

and boiler clean. One man, whose body was not recovered, was lost whilst swimming in the harbor. A Chinese cemetery overlooked the dock and everyday a flag was hoisted and siren sounded, followed by explosions to excavate graves. We took cover as flying rocks occasionally struck the ship.

On 10th December 1946 we left for Singapore, Labuan, Jesselton, Brunei Bay for the induction of the Governor Mr. Twining. Once again plumes and uniforms seemed out of touch in these, still, war stricken areas. Opossum provided the guard. From 30th December 1946 to 15th January 1947 the Johore Naval Base was our base. A Royal Navy frigate was alongside supplying electric power to the island. Singapore was still suffering the effects of war. On 17th January 1947 we commenced a patrol of the Malacca Straits, with some Army personnel on board to sweep the islands to the north for pirates and now Communist were mentioned. Covering Penang, Bas Bay and Sungei Pinang we encounter a suspicious boat at which a Bofors gun was used to no effect as it disappeared into mangrove swamps. Proceeding into the Indian Ocean to cover the return of the retiring Governor of Australia, the Duke of Gloucester (traveling by air) and return to Malacca Straits. Visiting Port Swettenham, Port Dickson and Malacca. The latter being impressive for its colonial buildings. We entered Singapore on 10th February 1947.

Leaving Singapore on 12th February 1947 to provide British territory for the trial of a British Officer we arrived at Surabaya, Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). The scenery was absolutely beautiful, Bali Hi territory. However, tempered by the fact that so many men had died in the Suva Strait and the surrounding seas. In fact in all our journeys through the Far East we had seen the sites of so many disasters to people of all nationalities, although it took many years for the full truth to be known. No information was divulged as to the result or reason for the trial. Returned to Singapore via Jesselton and Manila arrived at Hong Kong on 22nd February 1947. On 25th March 1947 left Hong Kong with HMAS Warramunga towing troop landing craft from Hong Kong to return them to US Navy at Subic Bay in the Philippines. It craft was cumbersome and difficult to control as being crewless they veered and surfed in heavy seas. Fortunately we rigged an orthodox towing gear with anchor cable and swivel pieces which ensued that we could safely proceed. Rolls 58 degrees were experienced. It seemed a futile task as immediately on arrival the American authorities took them to sea and scuttled them.

On 4th April 1947 from Hong Kong we left to join British Occupation Forces in Japan. The first call being Kure, passing the wrecks of the Japanese fleet in the Sea of Japan, very dramatic. Seeing Fujiama in the brilliant light of a clear day as industry was practically non existent, mainly due to the bombing of their industrial centers. Kure was devastated, we saw a massive dry-dock filled with partially constructed mini submarines, and once again, one could imagine the potential damage and loss of lives inflicted by these ships. Although an Australian base the town was controlled by American Military Police with many restrictions. Afterward we moved to Sasebo then Nagasaki, where we moored at the atom damaged wharf. People had just resumed occupying the devastated city. Little to do except wander around, marveling how anyone survived, and imagining the suffering of the people. Also Hiroshima was visited with same feeling and sights which were disheartening, however tempered by the fact that the war had been drawn to an early conclusion. Visited also were the ports of Obama and Fukuoka where sea patrols were carried out ostensibly to

prevent the unauthorized return of Japanese people from Korea. Also to prevent smuggling, between Japan and Hong Kong.

Yokohama, a port close to Tokyo, where we engaged in a number of short journeys up a river, to convey crew members of the Australian Cruiser HMS Hobart for the then Empire Day march past on the forecourt of the Emperors Palace. A number of B.C.O.F. forces took part including Indian and British including Opossum members. Returning to Kure, then onwards to Hong Kong on 20th June 1947. For the first time in the commission we went alongside at the Dockyard HMS Tamar for a refit. Afterwards exercises were conducted with the carriers HMS Glory and Venerable when we acted as crash boat. Later that year my service with Opossum ended, as with a small number of wartime service personnel, we transferred to the troopship Empress of Scotland for the journey home, after two and half years it was with regret and happiness. On return to Portsmouth after disembarking at Liverpool I saw Opossum enter the harbour with paying off pennant flying signaling the end of the commission.

Finally I was discharged in January 1948 after over three and a half years service, with a demob suit, £43 pounds and discharge leave to start a new life.

This Article was created from notes and memories by Arthur Harris.