

# HMS OPOSSUM ASSOCIATION



**SPRING NEWSLETTER 2015**

**1945-1958**

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter. Warmer weather must be on it's way. The sun will be shining at the end of May for our annual reunion at RED LEA hotel in Scarborough over the weekend Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May – Monday 1<sup>st</sup> June, arranged by Isle of Wight Tours Tel. 01983-405116, still a few places left to come and join us.

In this Newsletter are Designate Chairman's Comments, Treasurer's Report, Roll of Honour, Incidents of Friendly Fire [when a bullet, shell, rocket is fired it is lethal and far from friendly to anyone!]  
Naval Personalities [11] Robert Newton, film actor and R.N. wartime sailor.  
Naval Personalities [12] James Lind, pioneer in naval hygiene, especially of scurvy.  
Halifax – the Great Explosion, the story of the world's largest explosion before the nuclear age.  
Shipmates Humour.  
Water Displacement number 40, a humorous look at a 1964 advertisement for the product WD 40. Fire at Sea by Sam Edgar, his story of a dangerous fire in a liquid oxygen plant aboard the carrier HMS Eagle. An old salts thoughts.  
My Last Ship and Later by your Newsletter Editor, HMS Aberford and the 6,546 mile trip from Devonport to Mombasa.  
[These two personal stories are of the calibre that's needed to give human interest to the Opossum membership , sadly lacking in previous issues of our Newsletter – and is hoped will inspire others to come forward with similar anecdotes for future editions, it can be done, why not give it a try?]  
Kathie's Jokes and other Humour.  
Some of Charles Parker's photographs of the 1957 Opossum Commission, kindly supplied by his family – who also gave 10 mixed bottles of alcohol, malt whisky, port and wine to be raffled at our reunion.  
Photograph of the frigate HMS Opossum finally arriving at Devonport from South Africa, January 1958 – never to go to sea again.  
A revised Membership List as of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2015, giving the usual details plus email addresses.

President	Rear Admiral D.J.Mackenzie Rtd. [52]
Chairman [Designate]	Lewis Trinder 108 North Lane, Aldershot, Hampshire GU12 4QT 01252-323861 [45] lewistrinder@gmail.com
Secretary/Newsletter Editor	Eddie Summerfold 28 Greymont Road, Limefield, Bury, Lancs. BL9 6PN 0161-764-8778 [54] robopovan@btinternet.com
Treasurer	Sam Edgar 21 Heath Lawns, Fareham, Hampshire PO15 5QB 01329-235732 [57] sandredgar@sky.com
Website	<a href="http://www.hmsopossum.org.uk">www.hmsopossum.org.uk</a>

## CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the Spring edition of our Newsletter – from your Chairman designate. I must first congratulate our energetic Secretary, Eddie Summerfold, on his efforts in producing our Newsletter – well done. The year 2014 was a fantastic year for me, starting with the Opossum reunion at Southsea. Then the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day in June and later my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in September. Then appearing on the BBC Songs of Praise programme from the Royal Garrison Church here in Aldershot on Remembrance Sunday. This year, on 11<sup>th</sup> April I will be at Arromanches in Normandy to lay up the standard of Aldershot branch of the NVA; followed by our important Opossum reunion at Scarborough. I will be there with my wife Ve, together with good friends Marge and Jan Clout. I implore all members to make every effort to be there, especially those from the North who have found it difficult to come South for reunions. We have a great get together, so please make every effort to attend, details can be found on the front page of our Newsletter.

Yours Aye

Lewis Trinder

## TREASURER'S REPORT

Balance £1,748.26

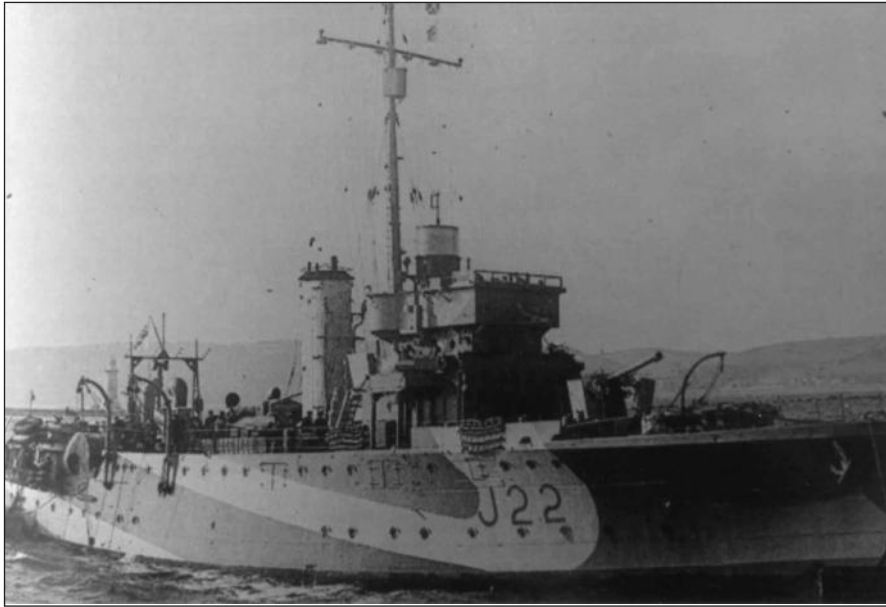
[No money out since my last report in the Christmas Newsletter]

[Charges for our website are 2 times £10.80 [£21.60] and £30.00 annual fee payable in April]

## ROLL OF HONOUR

John Cartwright	John Eardly Wilmot	Ronald Bradley
Harry[Scouse]Barlow	Albert Corless	J W Powell
Les Wood	Bob Gray	David Jarvis
Ken Harris	John Williams	George Scott
Harry Roach	Reg Parker	Pat Norman
Fred Thompson	Gordon Fletcher	Ivan C Haskell
Fred[Mick]Bodel	George H Richards	Fred King
John Davison	Sid Pemberton	George Curry
Steven Hart	George Brown	Cliff Harthill
Jack Marshall	Arthur Pope	Stewart A Porter
Dick[Ginger]Bird	Jackie Scholes	Les Dimmock
Joe Gornall	John Bray	Doug Banks C
Cornelious[Scouse]Canon	Jim Tribe	Harry Wollams
Pete Maddox	John Fraser	Doug Goulding
John Hardman	Cyril Mason	Bill Bolton
Harry Catterson	Mike Swayne	Ken Phillips
Jack[Yorkie]Richards	Bill Bovey	Bill Price
George[Jan]Lobb	William[Bill]Wilder	Ron Hare
Ken Slater	Martin George	Stewart Coltherd
John Blair	Bert Rimmer	Roy Cope
Peter Lockwood	Edward[Ted]Longstaff	Mike Cole
Jim Payne	Ken Carson	John W C Clark
Willie[Jock]Mitchell	Tony Harris	Charles Parker
Alan Percival	Alister Hunter Blair	Ron Blundy

## INCIDENTS OF FRIENDLY FIRE



HMS Britomart sunk by the RAF on a clear sunny day off Normandy August 1944

[Friendly fire – a misnomer if ever there was one.] When a bullet, shell, rocket is fired it is lethal and far from friendly to anyone. Self inflicted losses, own goals, blue on blue - all used to describe hits that are not on an enemy but inflicted on the same side. Sadly ships are damaged or sunk, personnel wounded or killed, families left to mourn – others suffering overwhelming guilt.]

Mistakes happen in all walks of life. But to minimize such incidents a good lookout and good up to the minute communication seems the key not only between ships in the same operational area but also between the different Services especially the Navy and the Air Force. During the Second World War all the combatant nations withstood friendly fire incidents, those involving Britain, United States, Germany, Italy, France are well documented, Russian less so and as for Japan none recorded at all; perhaps they are reluctant to commit the truth to paper! In terms of naval warfare this phenomenon is most noticeable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to that battles at sea happen so slowly Darkness, fog, foul weather conditions, incidents happening quicker or slower than expected all hinder and create doubts as to what action to take. In February 1915 the German submarine U-22 torpedoed and sunk U-7. When U-22 left Wilhelmshaven her commander was assured that no other U-boats were out on operations. In poor visibility he sighted a surface submarine, twice gave the days challenge signal. Receiving no reply he dived and closed to attack fired one torpedo that was seen to explode. Only later amid the oil and wreckage when they rescued some of the survivors did they discover that they had sunk their flotilla mate. Three years later in the Bristol channel they lost a further two U-boats who both thought they were attacking an enemy, neither returned from patrol. During the Great War perhaps the Royal Navy's worst "blue on blue" was the so called Battle of May Island when on a dark misty January evening in 1918 – when warships and submarines left the Firth of Forth bound for combined exercises with the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow a whole series of accidents occurred – five collisions between eight vessels This resulted in 2 submarines sunk, 4 others badly damaged plus their escorting cruiser and the loss of 104 personnel - and not an enemy in sight!

The Second World War.

There are several recorded incidents of R.N. ships mistakenly firing on their own side through bad weather conditions, signalmen misreading challenge signals, Fleet Air Arm aircraft being shot at by trigger happy sailors. Misunderstandings of sailors and airmen not recognizing each others friendly ships and aircraft, but our submarines, especially those on the surface, were particularly vulnerable to unwarranted attack. In July 1941 off the East Coast, a North and South bound convoy were passing each other within the limits of a swept minefield. For some reason the brand new submarine HMS Umpire was on her way from Chatham, where she was built, to Scotland for work-up exercises and added to the North bound convoy. Sadly she developed engine trouble and dropped behind, reported this to the convoy Commander. Sometime later when seen by the trawler Peter Hendriks she turned to

attack. Strangely neither the submarine nor the trawler exchanged recognition signals!! In a shoot first ask questions later attitude - the trawler rammed the sub. Resulting in 58 men lost and one brand new submarine sunk!

Equipment malfunction produced it's own problems. There's the famous story of a ship that torpedoed itself. The cruiser HMS Trinidad was escorting a Russian convoy in cold freezing weather, being attacked by German destroyers, she fired a torpedo that, because of the intense cold, turned completely around and hit the cruisers port side - disabling the ship. Despite makeshift repairs at Murmansk she foundered on the return home! There's also the strange case on board the battle cruiser Renown. In the course of a fierce Mediterranean action, a turret of the secondary armament over-riding it's training gear, result two shells were fired into the next turret, killing 5 and severely wounding 2! By far the worst friendly fire incident endured by the Royal Navy took place in broad daylight on a clear sunny afternoon - absolutely perfect weather conditions, Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August 1944. Off the coast of Normandy four minesweepers of the First Flotilla, consisting of Halcyon class minesweepers [850tons] - HMS Jason, HMS Britomart, HMS Hussar and HMS Salamander together with two DAN buoy layers the trawlers, Lord Ashfield and Colsay who marked the swept channels had been employed since D-Day clearing a safe channel between Portsmouth and Arromanches and also through to Sword Beach. However, a week before the Flotilla was ordered to clear a field of German magnetic mines laid only five miles from the French coast, between Fecamp and Cap d'Antifer. This area was needed by the heavy brigade - the battleship Warspite and the monitors Erebus and Roberts - all with fifteen inch guns, to move close to the shore and bombard German positions around Le Havre. On board the Minesweeping head quarters ship HMS Ambitious based at the Mulberry Harbour this change of orders was not transmitted to neither Army nor Air Force Commands, especially the latter, who carried out regular air patrols in the area, in short if any shipping was so close to the coast it must be hostile! With Double 'L' sweeps out the small force continued in working formation at their best speed of 9 knots. At about 1300 an RAF reconnaissance aircraft circled the ships, friendly waves were exchanged and the plane flew off. Twice the RAF asked the Navy were the ships identified as hostile to receive assurances that none of their ships were in that area!!!! Half hour later, with the blinding sun behind them, diving at 400 mph from the French coast, 16 RAF Hawker Typhoon aircraft of 263 and 266 Squadrons attacked - their first target was Britomart. [As with the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava, someone had blundered - and it wasn't the RAF.] The sheer fire power of the accurate Typhoon rockets was equivalent to the broadside from a destroyer. The attack, both by rocket and cannon fire, literally ripped this minesweeper apart wrecking the bridge and funnel, turned the upper deck into a mass of twisted metal, with below deck damage just as bad. Frantic signals went out both by wireless telegraphy and visual signaling both to the aircraft and Admiralty that a mistaken had been made and that the Flotilla was under attack from friendly aircraft. There was no mistaking the RAF roundels nor the D-Day aircraft makings of black and white wing stripes identifying the aircraft as Allied. With an axe a Warrant engineer gallantly severed the Double 'L' sweep - still pumping out into the sea 5,000 amps! Further attacks soon followed, with Hussar and Salamander heavily hit and the two trawlers. The air attack had lasted no more than a few minutes as smoke and confusion surrounded the small force trying to sort themselves out. Salamander had her stern blow off, worse still befell Britomart and Hussar within half an hour both had sunk! Signals went out for rescue and tug assistance for Salamander, damaged beyond repair, Jason the senior ship had only minor damage but assistance was required for the 2 trawlers. The in-going tide was hampering rescue taking them further towards the hostile French coast were German artillery began shelling creating further casualties. A total of 78 officers and men lost their lives with a 149 wounded, many seriously.

Two days later Admiral Bertrum Ramsey set up an enquiry and the awful truth emerged. It was the Royal Navy on board the Head Quarters ship HMS Ambitious whose failure to notify the Army and Royal Air Force of a change in minesweeping operating areas, who bizarrely asked the RAF to attack it's own shipping!!! Three senior officers were court marshaled and severely reprimanded. This may seem a light sentence - whether their consciences allowed them an easy nights sleep is another thing - knowing through their negligence that HM ships had been sunk, many lives had been lost and many personnel with permanent injuries to endure. [Based on "Friend or Foe" by Paul Kemp, pub. Leo Cooper, 1995]

## NAVAL PERSONALITIES [11]

Robert Newton [1905 -1956]



Robert Newton as Long John Silver [Bobby Driscoll as Jim Hawkins] in the Disney movie Treasure Island

Newton was born in Shaftsbury, Dorset, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1905, son of the landscape painter Algernon Newton R.A., his mother a writer, his antecedents had founded the art supply company "Windsor & Newton. Educated at Lamorna near Penzance, then at Exeter School and at St. Bartholomew's School in Newbury, Berkshire. He confessed school never appealed, often he thought of running away to sea. When a chance came to go on the stage, it meant leaving school. His theatrical life began aged 15 as a stage hand and scenery painter at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1920. Slowly his acting career began, noticed by Neol Coward, this led to many West End performances even playing on Broadway in "Bitter Sweet." But in 1935 he took on film work in which he was to excel. By the time he was conscripted into the Royal Navy, aged 37, he had had parts in 15 films including a leading role in "Major Barbara" along side screen stars such as Rex Harrison and Wendy Hillier. After training, Ordinary seaman R. Newton was drafted to the minesweeper HMS Britomart [SEE previous Newsletter article "Friendly Fire."] Convoys to Russia were in progress and his ship along with other minesweepers were to be based at Murmansk clearing a safe passage for incoming and outgoing Allied convoys. Enduring almost constant enemy action, the bleakness of cold winters, the indifference of the Russian allies, no prospect of shore leave was the lot of these ships, all they had to look forward to was a U.K. refit every six months. Sometime in 1944 Newton received special leave, perhaps prompted by his friend Neol Coward, to play a leading role in a wartime propaganda movie "This Happy Breed" with Stanley Holloway, Celia Johnson and John Mills. The Minesweeping Flotilla returned for the D-Day landing operations. It was while he was making this movie that Britomart and Hussar were accidentally sunk by the RAF. According to Newton's second wife Annie, Newton was depressed for a long while afterwards because he knew intimately many who were killed and wounded. After the War more film work came his way, remembered for his performance playing ruffian villains such as Bill Walker in George Bernard Shaw's "Major Barbara," Bill Sikes in David Lean's "Oliver Twist" but the part he is perhaps best remembered for is that of Long John Silver in Walt Disney's "Treasure Island" the part he made his own with his unshaven face, bulging rolling eyes and exaggerated West Country drawl - Arrrrr matey - no one before or since has played a pirate better than Newton. Yet he could be very versatile as a virtuous law officer in the film "Jamaica Inn," or a disciplinarian Inspector Javert in "Les Miserables" or responsible Doctor Arnold in "Tom Brown's School Days." He excelled too playing Inspector Fix in Michael Todd's "Around the World in 80 Days." But for all that he was his own worst enemy, once alcohol was just an acting prop now it was his sole dependency. Sadly excessive drinking damaged a highly erratic film career, often finding himself unemployable because of his unreliability. He could never stop at just a few drinks but would take it too excess. Whatever film contracts came his way would have a clause stating that he must be sober throughout, otherwise he would forfeit his wage. Towards the end of his film life he tried to resurrect his pirate roll of Long John Silver or Black Beard for work in Australia, sadly never as successful as his original performance in "Treasure Island." Britain's Inland Revenue was on his track for nearly £50,000 of unpaid taxes covering many years, eventually demanding his bankruptcy. For obvious reasons he never returned to the U.K. but settled in Hollywood still chasing more film work that never came. He died aged only 50 in March 1956.

## NAVAL PERSONALITIES [12]

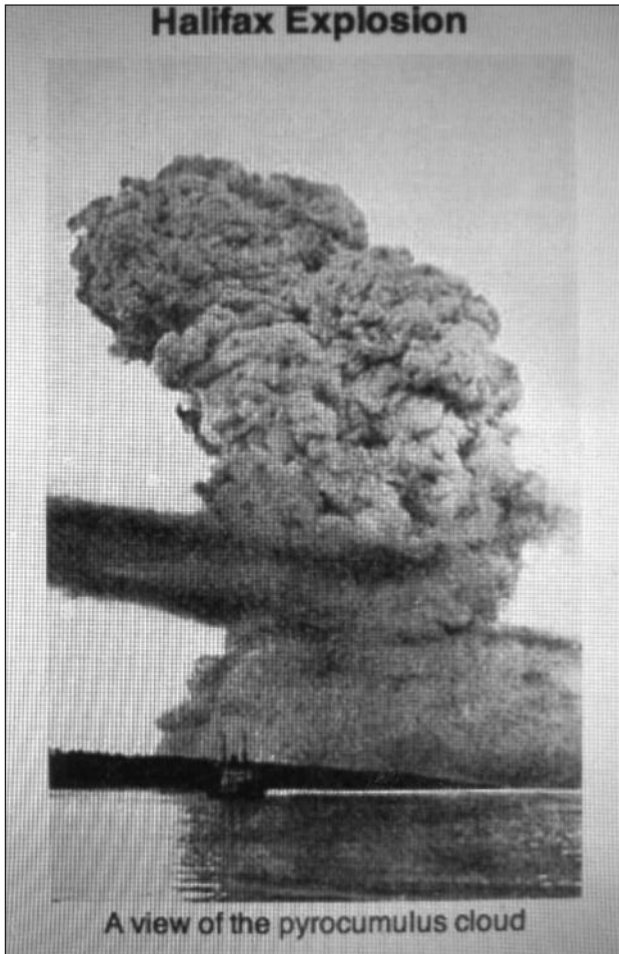
James Lind [1716-1794] Pioneer in Naval Hygiene



Lind was born in Edinburgh 4<sup>TH</sup> October 1716 and entered the local university at 15 to study medicine, leaving 8 years later, then entered the Royal Navy as a surgeon's mate. Admiral Anson's circumnavigation voyage attracted world attention not for the feat but for starting out with 2,000 men and only returning with 300 – most had succumbed to, scurvy! Yet since prehistory native cultures advocated herbal cures to control scurvy, even Hippocrates in 380 BC described the disease. Many others before Lind had found that citrus fruits gave benefits from the disease. What is scurvy? It's a disease resulting from a deficiency of Vitamin C required for the synthesis of collagens in humans. Early symptoms are a lethargy or malaise, followed by an outbreak of spots on the skin on various sites of the body – spongy gums, bleeding mucous from membranes. Patients look very pale, feel depressed and suffer periods of immobility. As the disease progresses health deteriorates jaundice appears so does fever, neuropathy, convulsions and death! Sailors on long voyages were especially prone to this disease when fresh provisions ran out. In 1746 Lind carried out perhaps history's first ever clinical controlled trial - on seamen from his ship HMS Salisbury in the Channel Squadron while patrolling the Bay of Biscay. After 2 months at sea the ship was afflicted with scurvy. He divided 12 scurvy sufferers into 6 groups of 2 all receiving the same diet, but in addition group 1 was given a quart of cider daily, group 2 had drops of sulfuric acid, group 3 six spoonful of vinegar, group 4 half a pint of sea water, group 5 received two oranges and a lemon and the last group a spicy paste plus a drink of barley water. Group five showed the best improvement. Seven years later, having left the Navy he published his findings in 1753 "A treatise of the Scurvy," sadly virtually ignored! However, in 1758 the Navy did appoint him chief physician of the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar at Gosport. Again in 1762 he went into print with "Essay on the most effectual means of preserving the health of seaman" Advocating growing salad – watercress [662mg of vitamin C in 100g] – grown on wet blankets. This was put into practice in the winter of 1775 when the British Army serving in North America were supplied with mustard and cress seeds. However, Lind, like most of the medical profession believed scurvy was the result of ill-digested and putrefying food within the body, bad water, excessive work and living in a damp atmosphere which prevented healthful perspiration. Though he recognized the benefits of citrus fruit he never advocated citrus juice as a single solution, believing that scurvy had multiple causes that required multiple remedies. While experienced officers and surgeons were convinced that citrus juices provided the answer to scurvy even if the medical reason were unknown. Lind also did valuable work on the treatment of typhus advocating better hygiene for sailors who were regularly stripped, shaved and scrubbed provided with clean clothes and bedding. Giving our Navy a competitive advantage over the French. He discovered that steam from salt water was fresh, proposed the use of solar energy for distillation of water and much else of practical use to men of the Royal Navy. Where he lead others followed, by 1800 scurvy was eradicated from the Fleet. Lind died in Gosport aged 77 on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1794.

## HALIFAX - the GREAT EXPLOSION

The story of the world's largest man-made explosion before the nuclear age



This explosion happened in Halifax harbour, Nova Scotia, Canada at precisely 35 seconds after 9.04 am [local time] Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> December 1917. Twenty minutes before the empty Norwegian ship SS Imo collided when her prow struck the starboard bow of the fully loaded French ammunition ship SS Mont Blanc - broaching the hull plating. Sparks flew igniting the deck cargo of benzol fuel, immediately a fierce fire erupted and grew rapidly, a huge cloud of oily black smoke enveloped the deck. The ship had come into harbour that morning to join an Atlantic convoy, first stop the Clyde, final destination Bordeaux. Five days before she had picked up her 2,611 ton cargo at New York consisting of:- 233.2 tons of TNT, 1,577.3 tons of wet picric acid, 535.7 tons of dry picric acid, 55.4 tons of guncotton and 219.6 tons of benzol fuel. Knowing the nature of their cargo the crew of Mont Blanc abandoned ship, that drifted across the harbour and collided with Pier 6 starting fires. Attempts were made to extinguish the deck fire by a harbour tug, the local fire brigade had now reached Pier 6 - then the big bang came!!! The noise must have been tremendous. The explosion ripped the ship apart, some pieces were tiny others huge all red hot and hurled sky high to rain down on the Richmond shore of Halifax. The explosion sent a dense cloud of brownish smoke up to

20,000 feet above the harbour. A 4 ton anchor was found 4 miles away. The barrel of the ship's deck gun was discovered in a house 6 miles away from the explosion. A two mile radius around was sheer devastation, brick buildings collapsed, the shockwave felled trees and the tsunami wave of 60 feet high drowned many who had survived the blast. Fifteen hundred died immediately a further 500 in the hours and days following. Sadly many of the injured had been hit by falling buildings or flying glass from domestic windows - blinding many. Ten thousand were rendered homeless, the city's four hospitals overwhelmed with casualties. Other parts of Canada and from the United States came help with humanitarian aid for this catastrophe. Just to make matters worse that night produced a very heavy snow fall of 26 inches that hampered rescue and continuing for days that further blocked roads. Strong winds created snowdrifts. An investigation was set up to discover the cause of the explosion that despite rumours was not made by the German military but by two ships colliding. It soon became evident that SS Imo was running late to reach New York, there to load supplies for the relief of refugees in Belgium and was travelling at 7 knots, 2 knots above the harbour maximum speed, also on the wrong side of the Narrows when she met the ammunition ship, doing only 4 knots, who correctly followed the International Rule of the Road to meet head on traffic keeping to starboard and passing port side to port side. Mont Blanc sounded her steam whistle once [directing my course to starboard] to say I have right of way and that Imo should move over. She replied with a 2 whistle blast, meaning I'm staying where I am! A flurry of whistle signals followed, surprisingly both had harbour pilots aboard who should have immediately sorted out the problem - but didn't! At the last minute Mont Blanc turned hard left while the Imo went hard astern, if one or the other had not carried out these manoeuvres a collision could have been avoided, as it was it became inevitable!

## SHIPMATES HUMOUR

Somehow an elderly lady had lost £100 in the Post, her intension to treat her friends to a Christmas lunch. The local sorting office heard about this and had a whip-round raising £96 and sent this to her anonymously. She was relating this to one of her friends saying that £4 was missing and blaming the loss on those thieving bastards at the Post Office.

My wife is suffering from depression, she phoned to say she felt like throwing herself under a bus and that you are not doing anything to help.  
So I sent her a timetable.

I can't stop thinking about prisons..... my mind works in Strangeways.

Did you hear about the fat alcoholic transvestite. All he wanted to do was eat, drink and be Mary.

Since the snow came all my husband has done is look through the window. If it gets any worse I'll have to let him in.

My mate has just hired an Eastern European cleaner – took her 15 hours to hover the house. Turns out she was a Slovak.

Two Indian junkies accidentally snorted curry powder instead of cocaine. Both are in hospital one is in a korma while the other has a dodgy tikka.

In the first few days of the Olympics the Romanians took - gold, silver, bronze, copper and lead.

Seven wheelchair athletes have been banned from the Paralympics after testing positive for WD40.

Just a reminder – in last years riots those who stole electrical goods – your one years manufactures warranty runs out soon.

A Briton has started his own business in Afghanistan! He's making land mines that look like prayer mats. It's doing very well. Prophets are going through the roof.

Two women called at my door asking what bread I ate – when I said white they gave me a 30 minute lecture on the benefits of brown bread. I think they were those Hovis Witnesses.

A mummy covered in chocolate and nuts has been discovered in Egypt. Archeologists believe it may be Pharaoh Roche.

Just had my water bill of £175 drop on my door mat. That's a lot! Oxfam can supply a whole African village for just £2 a month. Time to change suppliers I think.

One morning a little old lady answered her door to find a young well dressed man with a vacuum cleaner. "Good morning Ma'am – could I take a couple of minutes of your time to demonstrate the latest high powered vacuum cleaner. "Go away – I'm broke and haven't any money," proceeded to close the door.

Quick as a flash the young man wedged his foot in the door and pushed it open. "Don 't be too hasty, he said not until you have seen my demonstration and with that emptied a bucket of horse manure onto the hallway carpet. Now Ma'am if this vacuum cleaner does not remove all traces of this horse manure from you carpet, I will personally eat the remainder." With a smile the little old lady stepped back and said, "Young man let me get you a spoon, I've told you I'm broke, so only this morning the Electricity Board cut me off!"



[An email was received recently -hope you like]

## WATER DISPLACEMENT Number 40

The following is taken from a genuine advertisement for the product “WD 40” from about 1964

Do you have tight nuts – or a rusty tool?  
Then use WD 40

Comes in a man sized pressure pack – stands nine inches high, 1.5 inches diameter

Makes tools like new again

Tools slide in and out with ease

Lubricates dry passage ways

Makes screwing a pleasure

Gives better protection

Buy some – try some

Keep a spare pack in your car for emergencies

WD 40 - IT'S GOOD STUFF

### Some background information

WD 40 developed by Dr. Norm Larsen – founder of the Rocket Chemical Company, San Diego, California. WD 40 is the abbreviated form of ‘Water Displacement 40<sup>th</sup> formula.’ Larsen was attempting to create a formula to prevent corrosion in nuclear missiles – displacing standing water that caused corrosion.

He succeeded on the fortieth attempt.

His secret formula is made up of various hydrocarbons.

The product first came on the market in 1958, didn't reach Britain until the early 1960's.

Ain't that interesting!

Yesterday my daughter again asked why I didn't do something useful with my time. Doing something useful seemed to be her favourite conversation topic, suggested I go down to the senior citizens centre and hang out with the chaps. So I did, but decided to get my own back – telling her I had joined a parachute club. She said, “Are you mad? You're 84 years old and you're going to start jumping out of aircraft at your age.” I proudly showed her that I had a membership card. She said, “Good grief, where are your glasses! This is a membership card for a Prostitutes Club not a Parachute Club.”

I'm in trouble again and don't know what to do – as I've signed up for five jumps a week.

She fainted.

Life as a senior citizen is not getting easier – but sometimes it can be fun.

## FIRE AT SEA

by Sam Edgar



The aircraft carrier HMS Eagle [1951- 1972]

Although I spent most of my thirty odd RN years in submarines, there was quite a lot of General Service time as well. Of course Opossum and Mounts Bay as well as two other frigates Duncan and Palliser. These together with a commission on the carrier Victorious before I joined the submarine service in 1965. All the surface ship experience was to stand me in good stead after I was commissioned as a Sub Lieutenant Marine Engineer Officer in June 1970. After further training at Greenwich and Madadden my first appointment was to HMS Eagle in April 1971. In those days it was thought appropriate to send newly commissioned Chiefs from submarines to a big ship to be “Steamed Cleaned.” We sailed bound for Singapore to cover the withdrawal from the Far East.

Hopefully that background information will explain how a submariner came to be in charge of one of four machinery units of an aircraft carrier. Each unit comprised of two boilers, engine room, gear room, steam generators, evaporators and various other machinery spaces. My unit was “B” the starboard outer – “A” unit was the port outer – while “X” and “Y” were inner units. The terms inner and outer refer to the propellers they were driving. At sea all four units were controlled by the Machinery Control Room [MCR.] There was always two Engineer officers on watch, one in the MCR while the other did rounds of the machinery spaces. We alternated these duties. Thanks to my previous steam plant experience I felt really at home on Eagle.

One of the essentials on an operational carrier is a plentiful supply of liquid oxygen [LOX]. This is used to supplement the rocket fuel in weapons carried by the aircraft and for keeping the high flying air crew supplied with breathing oxygen. However, in a concentrated form it is very dangerous stuff and will ignite spontaneously if it comes in contact with organic material oil, grease or even clothing. [ You will find a wealth of information if you “Google” it.] Eagle had two LOX plants, one each side on four deck, or weather deck. Good ship design as it turned out.

We had got used to being very busy operational flying in the tropical heat. Sometimes our old machinery suffered a bit, with nearly full power required all the time for flying operations. Even the “silent hours” provided no respite night flying was carried out or changing areas at high speed. Our watches seemed to pass in a blur of activity. However, in late July respite was on hand, after a self – maintenance period in Singapore, we sailed South through the Sunda Straights bound for Australia. It was a Saturday afternoon and all flying had finished, after a plane had landed bring the mail. During the Dog Watches I was on watch in the MCR, for hours on end it felt most unusual steady steaming at

fifteen knots. The whole ship was preparing for "Saturday Night at sea," with no further flying, a Sod's Opera was set up in the for'd dining hall, there would be entertainment in the wardroom and Senior Rates Messes. We were all pleased that we would be off watch for the festivities, but the watch was a bit boring and I wrote an entry in the unofficial log that we kept for passing information and writing dits. It was the last entry and the following day I was shown what I had written. Almost immediately all the "A" unit machinery spaces [Port side] reported that they were filling with smoke. I told them all to evacuate and leave the boilers, engines and machinery running. Phoned the Officer of the watch on the bridge and asked him not to alter the revs and informed him of what was happening. Very shortly afterwards he had piped that there was a fire in the Mail Office [Port side, on four deck, next to the LOX plant] Almost a sigh of relief, the duty fire party will sort it out. In the MCR we all joked that someone had got a "Dear John" in the afternoon mail and had traditionally set fire to the Mail Office.

It quickly got more serious. The second engineer, doing rounds was by a stroke of luck close to the scene of the fire. He gave us precious minutes by letting me and the bridge know that the fire was actually in the Port LOX plant and a very real danger to the ship. He also organized the initial firefighting effort. The fact that he was close to the outbreak was to prove crucial. The Captain had arrived on the bridge at the first fire alarm and was on the spot to order emergency stations when the real situation became known. I was relieved in the MCR by the Senior Engineer and raced up to my damage control station, very close to the burning LOX plant, but one deck above.

A very tense two hours followed and at times we all wondered if we were going to beat the fire. Later investigations established that for some reason the LOX plant ERA had entered the compartment, it is not known if anything he did sparked the fire. Sadly he died and the Leading Hand on watch suffered severe burns. Not having any flying for many hours there were three full LOX bottles. The fire melted the seals in the tops of bottles and they became three giant oxygen torches burning up through the decks above including the dental surgery that became vaporized – no trace of the chair or stainless steel instruments just an unrecognized molten mass. The fire continued to burn through the next deck above [2 deck] only checked when the flight deck fire crews attacked with three inch hoses.

I have many memories of those two hours of containing by massive boundary cooling, all we could do until the LOX plant ran out of fuel. The stench of burning paint work, rubber, molten steel and boiling sea water. The intense heat, red hot bulkheads and yes "the hairs on the back of your neck" fear as we prayed that the bottles wouldn't explode before they were exhausted. The good ship design became apparent as we realized that we could hit the fire with as much water as necessary and it would flow over the side which was kept starboard side to the wind. We were told afterwards that the LOX escaping from the bottles had the effect of cooling the liquid remaining, making it unlikely to explode. At the time I wish someone had told us.

We were all a bit shocked that the fire could burn with such savage fury. The damage was total, but confined to a relatively small area and the ship remained fully operational. This was thanks in no small way to the Second engineer who acted so promptly at the outset. Around midnight we were all exhausted and very hungry when the plant was made safe. Corned dog sarnies and a can beer never tasted better.

The incident was a valuable reminder that emergencies will sink their teeth into your backside when you least expect it. The next day the Senior Engineer showed me my last entry in the log. I had written "Boring watch, the lazy dogs drag on."

This is the type of personal story this Newsletter has sadly lacked and one I've been appealing for from the Opossum Association membership for more editions that I care to mention. Each of us have a story if not on Opossum then on another ship in our naval careers that would make interesting reading for the rest of us. Sam has shown the way - Ed.

## **AN OLD SALTS THOUGHTS**

I've been to sea in Navy ships, I've been around a bit, I've had some fun, I've drunk the rum, I've heard some matelots wit. I've been to Okinawa, Yokasuka in Japan. I've drunk most, almost anything I could afford to buy, I've even drunk the stuff they said would kill a guy. Since I left the Navy, I guess I've been a rover. I've been from Plymouth to Dundee, from Liverpool to Dover. Some times I'd go roving, find a pub with a Joanna, I'd play "Don't fence me in" or "I'm going to Montanna."

## MY LAST SHIP & Later

by your Newsletter Editor



My last ship, as you can see, was less of a ship and more of a boat. Her name was HMS Aberford I joined her from Portsmouth Barracks at Devonport in late August 1964. She was to be a gift to the Kenyan Government, now granted independence, and to be the first ship in their Navy. A company of twenty manned her for the long voyage of 6,546 miles from Plymouth to Mombasa, via the Suez canal. Classed as a Seaward Defence boat - designed to defend harbours their purpose to detect, locate and destroy enemy submarines, including midget submarines. They had comprehensive electrical equipment and depth charges to achieve their task. Aberford was one of 20 Ford Class patrol boats, taking her name from a village in West Yorkshire. Built by Yarrow of Scotstoun, as yard number 2031, launched 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1952. Displacement of 120 tons, length 117ft., a beam of 20 ft. and a draft of only 6ft. Propulsion - two Paxman 12YHAX 550hp diesels on the outboard shafts and a Foden diesel on the centre shaft - could produce a combined speed of 17 knots. A single bofor gun was still mounted on the fo'c'sle all other upperdeck equipment had been removed.

When we joined she was secured to the outboard side of the submarine depot ship HMS Woolwich, HQ of the Reserve Fleet, in a creek of the Hamoaze; looking down on such a small vessel to be making a long open sea voyage. Our company was made up of 3 officers, 2 chiefs and 13 junior ratings - 5 seaman, 4 stokers, 2 electricians a communicator and a ships cook - as a Leading seaman I was rated as Buffer. What passed for the wardroom was claustrophobic accommodation, the ratings enjoyed a bit more space and even bunks, the galley was between the two compartments. Two days later we made our first trial run as far as Drakes Island and on to Wembury firing range. On board came some of their staff including my commission's Boy's Killick John Hahn now a Petty officer Gunnery Instructor. He told me that four years previous our Opossum had been scrapped here in Plymouth at Sutton Pool where the firm of Demellweek & Redding did the dismantling. I was the bofor gun's aimer and fired a four round clip of 40mm ammunition., proving that the gun was fully tested. The Chief ERA reported that the big diesels worked OK, though very noisy below decks. Clearly she was not a new boat! We loaded 50 jerry cans of fresh water, stowed in what would have been the depth charge compartment back aft. Refuelled and with six days of provisions were as good as ready, though we didn't carry any radar or a small boat or life saving rafts - Health and Safety regulations were still years ahead. As we pulled away the Woolwich ships company gave us a big chuck-up, some were noted to be shaking their heads or revolving an extended forefinger to the side of their head indicating what they thought of our chances on a fool hearty adventure. A Bay class frigate would follow a few miles behind for the first day or so. Before Aberford reached Plymouth breakwater to my utter shame, from the back end, I was feeding the fishes - though I did notice four or five others had a similar gastronomic disturbance - what a way to begin a trip! Who decided we should begin our voyage that day is uncertain but a gale was blowing outside. With a very lumpy sea we made slow headway down the Channel, after two days of discomfort it was decided that we would shelter in Brest harbour, twenty-four hours later we cracked on for Gibraltar.

The boat worked four watches, having endured years of nights at sea - I worked the watchkeeping bill that I always had all night-in, but was ready on hand to do what was necessary if required. A long swell

was endured on the way to The Rock and the navigation lights could have shone with a greater brilliance especially the overtaking light. Every thing was on Lilliputian scale, it was possible to stand on deck and reach up and touch the top of the funnels, while the ships wheel was enormous but required little movement to keep on course, few paces in any direction was the limit of a walk. No one thought to bring along an uckers board, set of draughts or chess let alone a pack of playing cards and a crib board. Our library consisted of an out of date Western Evening Herald, someone's local rag and four paper back novels; recall one was a western by Zane Gray. After six days we make port and I went ashore for the mail, on returning the tide was out and the boat couldn't be easily seen from the dockside, except walking along the edge. Our mail was two largish official brown envelopes addressed to the CO and three love letters to one of our stokers.

The sun shone and the blue Mediterranean Sea was on it's best behavior as we made for Malta, five days with little incident and we parked near St. Angelo where we stayed for a week mainly having maintenance done on the engines. The CO, a film addict, acquired a collapsible screen and Bell & Howell 16mm cine projector – with a speaker - as well as a few movie films among them “The Pumpkin Eater” and these films provided nightly entertainment all the way to Suez. We also acquired five 7.62mm SLR rifles and ammunition, probably left overs from the Army – also a gift to the new Kenyan Navy. The Middy had done a one day course on this armament and between the two of us we stripped and oiled all the moving parts. A few cans thrown overboard provided targets to test the weapons that absorbed their own recoil unlike the previous Service issued Lee Enfield .303's.

Normally when approaching Port Said, knowing the number of bum-boatmen who would surround the ship waiting for passage through the canal, hoses would be rigged to keep them at bay, we had but one small rubber hose and not much pump pressure. Our low free board made it easy to come on board, welcome or not. All we could do was stow away all moveable gear and shut down all access to the hull and hope for the best. Fortunately a billet was soon found for Aberford in the next South bound convoy and with a pilot on board and a large light rigged on the for'c'sle we were in between a large tanker and a merchant ship both towered over us to make the night time transit. The engine room crew suffered in the heat of the Red Sea, what few salt tablets had long gone, eventually we reached Aden and secured to another RN ship. Refuelled and provisioned and heard that Harold Wilson and the Labour party had won the general election. My only recollection of our stay was visiting a Service club and an evening drinking pernod and later stopping a native guy for a non-alcoholic drink who had a tea urn strapped to his back and small cups dangling beneath.

At first all went well for the last leg of the voyage from Aden to Mombasa, leaving the Socotra islands group to Port - rounding the Horn of Africa we found the off shore current much stronger than expected, for many hours with all three engines going flat out we made only slow progress. Nowadays this a notorious area for Somali pirates to board ships, kidnap crews and sail to secret destinations there demand ransoms, but in the early autumn of 1964 thankfully we were unmolested. Further down the coast there was no ceremony held as we crossed the Equator. For our last night at sea, before entering Mombasa harbour, the evening entertainment was the showing of the movie “A Night to Remember,” Walter Lord's story of the “Titanic’ tragedy starring Kenneth More and Honor Blackman. A small welcoming party awaited our arrival as we secured to the old gun wharf.

For those with valid passports left for the passage by air back to the UK, one officer, to be the new CO when handed over to the Kenyans, and five ratings remained - we awaited passports.

During the next six weeks we made the best of things, enjoyed swimming parties, played in an international football competition, I played left half for Southern England – sadly losing 2-1 to Germany. Night time was too hot to sleep onboard with others I slept at one end of a large hut at the other end was a colony of bats hanging upside down. It became a good working arrangement, when we came to bed down they were off on their nightly wonderings, on their return in the morning we went down to the ship. Though it was a bit unnerving hearing their high pitched squeaking and wing flapping of the few who remained behind. For some reason I developed a medical problem, [nothing to do with the bats I'm told] every night I would see coloured haloes around lights [an indication of pressure behind the eyes known as glaucoma] The Navy had no medical facilities so all I could do was visit a civilian doctor who offered very little but recommended I get it checked out on my return to the UK.

The day our small party left on the night train for Nairobi our boat was re-named KNS [Kenya Naval Ship NYATI] and was thus transferred to their navy. The power boat building firm of Vospers had

orders in hand to build new boats, adding to the Kenya Navy and these would be delivered the following year. We returned by a B.O.A.C. Comet aircraft from Nairobi via Rome onto Heath Row airport to the chill of a British winter. A train journey from Waterloo and back to Portsmouth barracks. On New Years Eve I had a medical examination at HMS Dolphin and endured a full day having my eyes prodded and poked by their medical team. Withstanding seemingly buckets of eye drops and having small coloured wheels attached to each eyeball, these were then revolved while having strong light shone-in to see the results. Thankfully all proved negative and no further eye trouble developed, [must have been the buckets of eye drops that did the trick!] Returned to barracks that evening to receive a crash draft to the Patrol Headquarters in Portsmouth here I began Travelling Escort duties on a nine day rota, three days duty, three days stand by and three days off. Got to know the insides of various prisons both civilian and naval, travelling up and down the country collecting naval prisoners either by train or van and returning to Portsmouth D.Q.'s to be 'weighed' off. After twelve years service discharged from the R.N. in May 1965 a few months later I was informed that I'd passed educationally for Sub lieutenant SD, but then there would be a stiff professional test and exams to follow - this all came a bit too late to take up the offer.

Happy Days [well some were!] Another example of Naval service life that might be of interest to the Opossum membership, Ed.

### **KATHIE'S JOKES AND OTHER HUMOUR**

I think it wrong that only one Company makes the game Monopoly!!

How many mystery writers does it take to change a light bulb? Two, one to screw the bulb almost all the way home and the other to provide a surprising twist at the end.

At a nudist colony for intellectuals two old men sit on the porch. One turns to the other and says, "I say old boy have you ever read Marx?" The other replies, "Yes it's these wicker chairs."

During the War women were told girdles would have a longer life if they were removed by a big jerk. This caused much merriment followed by amended instructions that said girdles should be removed by a big strong yank.

Talking of men from the USA, an American warship was paying a Portsmouth visit, at a local boating lake many US sailors were out rowing. One British matelot was watching remarking to his mate, "They are all qualifying for their Foreign Waters Medals."

Local Council tenants have their say:- I wish to complain that my father hurt his ankle when he put his foot in the hole of his back passage. The lavatory is blocked - this is caused by the boys next door throwing their balls on the roof. My toilet seat is cracked, where do I stand? Our lavatory seat is broken in half and is now in three pieces. The toilet is blocked and until it is cleared we cannot bathe the children. This is to let you know our lavatory seat is broken and we cannot get BBC 2. Would you please repair our toilet, my son pulled the chain and the box fell on his head. I am writing on behalf of my sink, which is running away from the wall. I am still having trouble with smoke in my built-in drawers. Will you please send a man to look at my water, it is a funny colour and not fit to drink. Can you send workmen to mend our broken path, yesterday my wife tripped-up and now she is pregnant. I want some repairs done to my cooker, as it has back-fired and burnt my knob off. The tenant next door has a large erection in his back garden which is unsightly and dangerous.

### **A COUPLE OF PAINTERS**

Vincent Van Gogh was at the bar of his local pub when his mate Rembrandt walked in. "Fancy a pint?" he asked. "No I'm alright, replied Van Gogh, I've got one ear!"

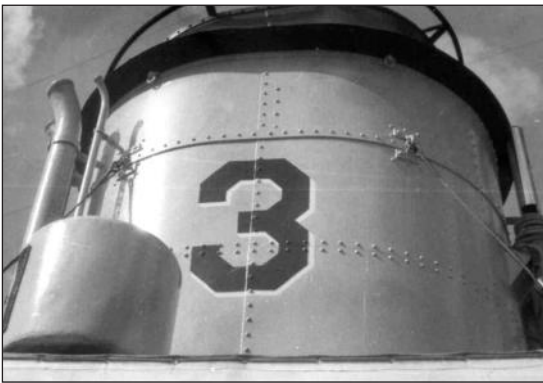
Some of Charles Parker's photographs of the 1957 Opossum commission  
- kindly supplied by his family



Charles Parker a new recruit



In the engine room



Third Frigate Squadron emblem



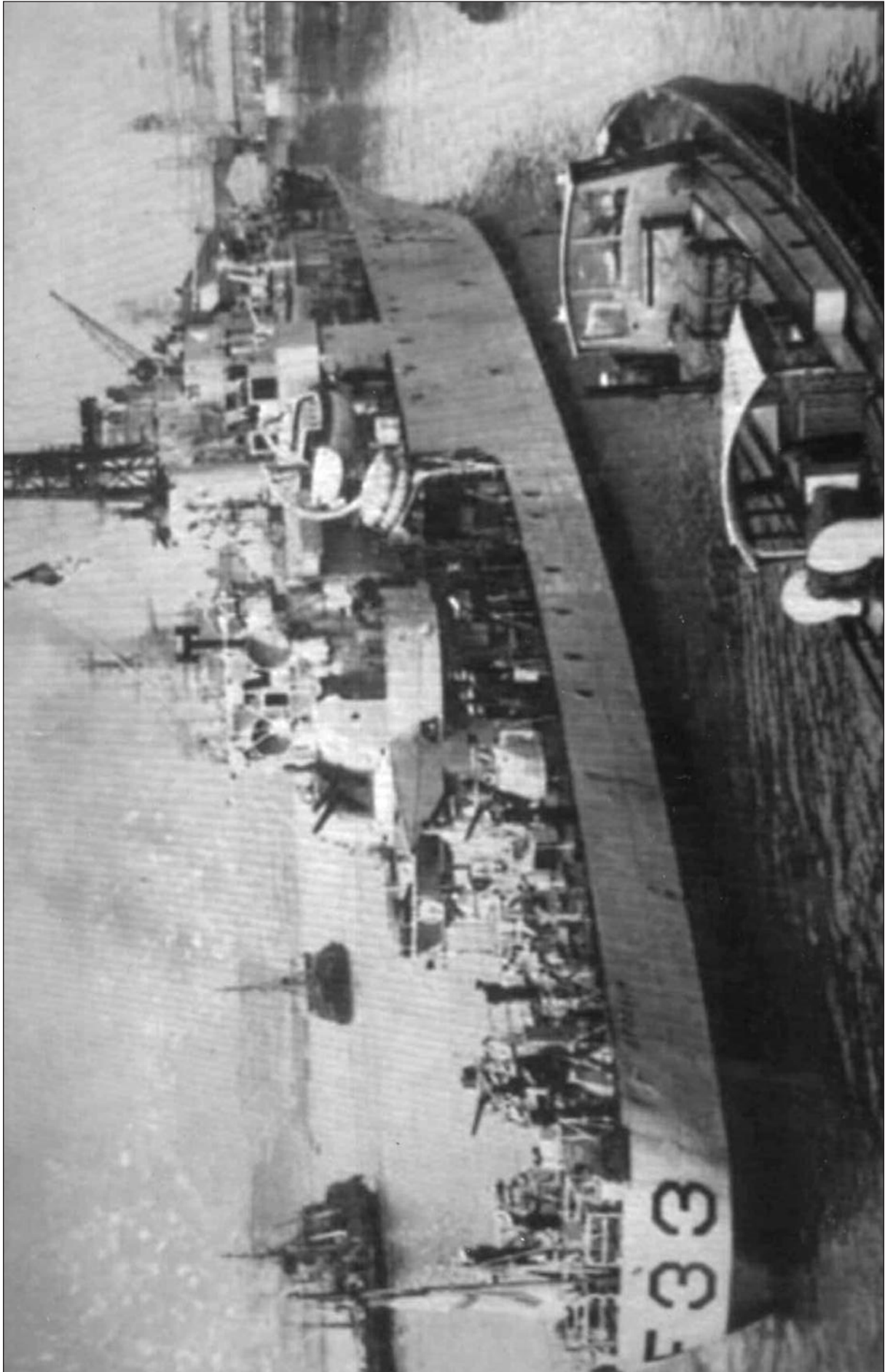
Starboard side looking fo'ard



Looking aft on a very damp quarterdeck



Re-fuelling from Gold Ranger



HMS Opossum finally arrives at Devonport from South Africa in January 1958, never to go to sea again. Two years later she was sold to the shipbreakers Demmelweek and towed to Sutton Pool Plymouth for dismantling.