

PHILLIP. PATRICK. HERLIHY (LIEUT. RANVR)

Essay: Life and War Experiences.

My life began on 13th July 1912 at 54 Moran St. Boulder on the Eastern Goldfields – the youngest of a family of three brothers and three sisters. Due to my Dad's ill health (Miner's lung complaint) and on his Doctor's recommendation to leave the dryness of the Goldfields and go to a coastal area we set up home in South Fremantle in 1922 where at age ten I continued my schooling at the Christian Brothers College in Fremantle.

In 1927 my father died and the week following I sat and passed the University Junior Certificate exam in seven (7) subjects and started looking for work. This was a time of great financial stringency in Australia and the world generally and jobs were hard to get but I had done well at the College and represented its senior teams in both cricket and football, so armed with my Junior Certificate and a rather glowing reference from the School's principal I was able to secure an appointment in the State Public Service as a Junior Clerk, starting in the Public Works Dept, in its Engineering Division. I continued studies at night school for an Accountancy Diploma and I also continued Naval Training in the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve attending the various drills at some of the weekends.

Up to the time World War II broke out I guess my life followed the pattern available to most fit young men of that period. I played football going through the grades for East Fremantle finishing with its Reserves and then switched to Hockey, and captained one of Fremantle's Junior sides. Took up Tennis and at 22, I also tried myself out in Professional running events at the urging of my brother Dan – he had won at Stawell in Victoria, the mecca of this sport. My efforts on the running track were rewarded with some modest successes but I wasn't any champion. My day to day work with the Engineers of the Dept was very interesting as they were responsible for the construction of the many projects set up by the Govt. to provide work for unemployed labour. Later I was appointed to a post in the Engineering Drawing Office as Statistical Clerk and Tracer and was working in that position when Australia went to war.

I didn't think about joining up at first, having met and married my heart's desire in 1938 and the following year we had a lovely little girl child and it wasn't till 1941 that I made an approach to the Navy. I was very fit and felt I had something to offer. In 1940-41 the Royal Navy endured serious losses in Ships and personnel in the war against the German U-Boats and Britain had made an approach to its Dominions to help fill positions which were becoming available as new ships construction were being completed. From this approach was born the Yachtsman Scheme as it was called in Australia. It offered Sub Lieutenant Commissions to those applying who first of all were under 40 years of age and who were able to measure up to prescribed Naval standards. This required studies in Navigation and Signals and one had also to satisfy the Naval

Examiners of one's competency in Boat Handling and Seamanship. Many of those applying had a peacetime interest in yachting. In my case I had the advantage of having already experienced four years of naval training and my work in the P.W. Engineering Drawing Office also stood me in good stead at the final interview for the Sub Lieutenant's Commission. I received my Commission dating 1st Oct. 1941 and with seven other newly made Sub Lieutenants left Perth on 26th Oct. 1941 for Flinder's – H.M.A.S. Cerberus – for a more informative course. On 17th Dec. 1941 having completed the course we left for the U.K. on a fast-refrigerated vessel, which had accommodation for twelve. We travelled unescorted across the Pacific not without some misgivings as only some few days before leaving Melbourne, Japan had attacked Pearl Harbour. This event and the knowledge that the war in the Atlantic was going bad for us, made us all realise that the chances of getting to England unscathed were lessening. However we were fortunate and reached Halifax to join up with a rather large convoy – 55 ships plus escorts – to make the Atlantic Crossing.

I must mention that since leaving Melbourne our Ship's Captain had arranged for us to stand watches with his Ships Officers. This was a plus for each of us as the Ships Officer's teaching and advice particularly in the proper use of the Sextant was a very useful requirement in the work that lay ahead. Now we were in Convoy in the Atlantic and we soon learned how hazardous that situation could get as three days into the Atlantic crossing we went to Action Stations as the escorts reported contact with enemy U Boats and shortly after began depth charging. This went on for some five days, the weather worsening all the time and I understand some merchant ships in the Convoy were lost. Eventually we reached England on Feb 8th. 1942. On arrival we were sent to H.M.S. King Alfred again to do further courses in Navigation Signals and Ship Handling, joining up with a very large intake of new Officers for training. When that was finished and being successful in the exams which followed I was selected along with three others of my group to do an Advanced Navigation Course, which I passed successfully and at its conclusion was sent to Scotland to undertake additional training as an Anti- Sub. Control Officer (Asdics)

It was as an A.S.C.O. that I joined a new ship – H.M.S. Clacton – about to commission at Troon in Scotland. "Clacton" was one of a Flotilla of eight ships comprising the 13th Fleet Minesweeping Flotilla. The main purpose of the F.M.S. Flotilla was to sweep mines but as they were equipped with Asdic or Sonar as it was later to be known and had reasonable armament, they were also used as Convoy escorts.

H.M.S. Clacton with other ships in the Flotilla spent the next few months learning what minesweeping was all about and when that was concluded acted as escorts to small convoys running the gauntlet of the English Channel and the Straits of Dover. Every convoy had to face up to enemy air attack and on occasions 'E' Boats were likely to be encountered. In August 1942 – 'Clacton' along with other F.M.S. took part in the raid on Dieppe on the French mainland sweeping a

passage across enemy laid minefields to the lowering position for the following Allied assault craft. The attempt to secure Dieppe was a disaster as the element of surprise was lost. The enemy was seemingly on full alert when our troops landed and our casualties were very heavy, most didn't get off the beaches. Fortunately our Flotilla was able to return to base intact but some others of our Naval ships were lost. By this time I had been promoted to Lieutenant and was the possessor of a full Naval Watch Keeping Certificate. After Dieppe and a few more Channel escort runs the 13th Flotilla was then sent to the Mediterranean to take part in Operation "Torch" aimed at securing French North Africa as a preliminary to attacking the Southern belly of the German-Italy axis partners. The 13th was again one of those leading the way into the assault beaches our target being the eastern side of Oran. It was successful but not before it was necessary for our covering units of cruisers and destroyers to overcome some spirited resistance from two French destroyers.

Shortly after the Oran episode and for the next few months we spent a lot of time at sea always as convoy escort and generally with the slow ones. As the Army ashore was pressing eastward we were now required to cover greater distances to the front line ports and this meant the convoys had to endure a greater frequency of air attack as we penetrated further into enemy air space. Submarines too were becoming more prevalent but I believe the escorts had their measure, particularly as the escorting forces' numbers were being increased. One item that always intrigued me and that was the quality of the intelligence we received concerning movements of enemy forces arraigned against our convoys. Generally this intelligence was conveyed to us prior to our leaving harbour and indicated where we were likely to be threatened with air, Submarine or E Boat attack during the course of the voyage. The information was practically 'Spot On' so we were always ready for them if and when they did come at us. On the runs from Algiers to Bone one could be certain to meet trouble off Bougie, Cape Bougaroni and off Cap de Fer just before Bone and we were rarely disappointed. Algiers itself was a hot spot for sometime.

In May 1943 we lost our 1st Lieut. (No 1.) – he had been given his own Command and in the change around of duties I took over the duties of Clacton's Navigator who had been given the No 1's responsibilities. This change was to my good content and I entered into my new duties knowing that with all those earlier courses I had the knowledge and experience to perform satisfactorily. As it so happened the 13th Flotilla along with other units were then given the huge task of clearing the heavily mined Sicilian Channel to permit convoys to pass through to Malta and to the Eastern end of the Mediterranean. This task was known as Operation 'Antidote', it preceded the assault on Sicily – Operation 'Husky' and the taking of Pantellaria – Operation 'Corkscrew' in both of which Clacton took part in its usual role. At Pantellaria Clacton nearly met disaster as in an endeavour to make the harbour there after the fort surrendered two German Folke Wulf fighter bombers came out of the haze and scored near

misses against us. We were very lucky as no one on board was injured and the ship incurred only minor damage.

With the Sicily engagement behind us, the forces to effect a landing on Italy were gathering at Bizerte, the large French naval base in Tunisia and which had become our own operating base. The Italian target was Salerno- Operation 'Avalanche'- which is located just south of Naples and again the 13th M/S Flotilla led its group of assault craft to the designated positions off the beaches, sweeping a passage against fairly heavy enemy fire. We then withdrew to take up our position on the anti-sub screen set up to protect our Headquarters and other support ships in the area. It was a very torrid time and it was now we saw the effect of the new wireless controlled bomb, which the enemy used, against our heavy ships. The American Cruisers. 'Philadelphia' and 'Savannah' were damaged as was the British Cruiser 'Uganda' the latter rather badly. The old 'Warspite' was also hit but was able to return to Malta at slow speed.

All of our shipping was subject to enemy air attack almost continuously for a period of some 5-6 days and everyone on 'Clacton' was feeling the strain, sleep was nigh impossible and one kept going on 'Benzedrine' tablets. Salerno was nearly a disaster but British and American forces ashore had the numbers and certainly the equipment and eventually got the upper hand. We in 'Clacton' were glad to leave the place and with other ships of the Flotilla set sail for Malta and we hoped for some rest.

I had now been aboard 'Clacton' for some eighteen months but at Malta I learned the unwelcome news that I had to leave her for a post on a Sister Ship of the Flotilla – H.M.S. Rhyl, despite objections to my transfer raised by Clacton's Captain. I caught up with 'Rhyl' which was in the Naples area in company with three other ships of the Flotilla carrying out sweeping operations off Ischia, as a preliminary, to the Anzio assault. I arrived in time to experience another very heavy enemy air attack, which nearly saw the end of H.M.S. Rhyl. Bombs landing close along either side lifted her out of the water and she sustained serious damage to her propellers and driving shafts as a result. We were however able to creep away and got back to Bizerte where temporary repairs were effected. Eventually Rhyl reached Gibraltar where it was determined that it wasn't possible to repair her and as a consequence its officers and ship's company became available for appointments and drafts. While awaiting my own posting news came through that H.M.S. Clacton had hit a mine in very foul weather and had gone down very quickly. Three of her officers - all good friends - and a greater part of its complement could not be saved. To me the loss was grievous, it was like losing members of one's own family and I will never forget them.

At last my posting came through I was to go to Malta to serve under its Vice Admiral Sir Louis K. Hamilton and to get there took passage in a Hunt Class Destroyer, standing a watch in her during the voyage, another new experience

for me. Being ashore at Malta for the next four months helped me to get back to normal again. The work as a Drafting Officer was interesting enough and kept me busy. I made some new friends and was able to get some real exercise playing hockey and tennis but I had now been away from Australia for three years and wanted very much to return. However it wasn't much longer before I received instructions to return to England for onward transit to Australia via New York.

Reached home late Dec 1944 and after a month's leave was given an appointment as Navigating Officer in H.M.A.S. 'Burdekin', a River Class Frigate employed on Convoy escort duties with American Destroyer Escort groups on the runs from New Guinea to the Philippines. It was a very quiet time really and I can only remember two occasions on those runs going to 'Action Stations' once at Leyte and the other at Lingayen Gulf, north of Manila. However Burdekin did take part in the assault on Tarakan and later on 8th Sept. 1945 took the surrender by the Japanese of Northern and East Borneo on board. It was a memorable and proud occasion for Burdekin and for Australia.

After the surrender we spent time working closely with the Army and at one period, on a visit to Banjarmasin picked up some 100 Japanese returning them for disposal to Balikpapan. On other occasions we visited most of the previously governed Dutch areas in Celebes usually with Dutch personnel aboard but in some of these places it was quite evident that the Indonesians did not want the Dutch overlords back. Finally the surveillance operations with the Australian Army came to an end and following a return to Morotai where we celebrated Xmas, my fifth away from home, 'Burdekin' received orders to return to Sydney which we reached on 5th Jan '46. Both the Captain and myself had received earlier information that we were about to be relieved and so it happened. I left Sydney on 15th Jan and arrived home several days later to a very happy homecoming.

My discharge records I had served from 13th Oct 1941 to the 15th Feb. 1946 and includes Active Service at sea, so now I had to give consideration to how I would make a living in the future. Really all I wanted to do at this stage was to be a husband to a beautiful wife and a father to my lovely little daughter who scarcely knew what it was to have a father around all the time. I was fortunate my civilian job was still available to me so I was sure of employment. On that score I was given the opportunity to apply for a short-term commission to continue in the Navy while the uneasy situation in Malaysia and neighbouring States persisted. This last had little appeal so I resumed with my old job at the Public Works Dept but after a few months transferred to the State Housing Commission which at the time acted as agent for the Commonwealth in administering the War Service Home Act in this State. This Act enabled the provision of financial assistance to eligible War Veterans to allow building or purchase of their homes. I became involved in the Act's Administration and continued with it until I retired in 1972. For me the job had great appeal and gave much satisfaction.