
George Main

R279696

When World War II broke out, in September 1939, I was aged twelve and resident in Edinburgh. I attended Boroughmuir High School in Bruntsfield. Following several Luftwaffe sorties aimed at the Forth Rail Bridge, from which the fallout struck several residential areas, the total school population in Edinburgh was evacuated to the adjacent towns and villages.

I was evacuated by rail to Cupar, Fife where I was billeted on the Turpie family who lived in Dalgairn Crescent and from there I attended Bell Baxter Academy. (Their house was built of steel, a surplus left over from World War 1 warship construction, they had two sons.)

I returned to Portobello a district of Edinburgh about a year later where I attended Portobello High School and where I completed the Lower Leaving Certificate.

At age 15 I attended the Leith Nautical College to study Navigation and Seamanship and where I earned six months remission of sea time, on completion of the course.

Comprehensive rationing of food and clothing occurred soon after the War started. All bread was made entirely from one flour, neither white nor brown, but somewhere in between. Butter was restricted to two ounces per person per week. I remember that cheese was available, so cauliflower cheese and macaroni cheese became a large part of my diet. One egg a month was the ration. The collection and presentation of the Coupons required to obtain food or clothing was a great hassle.

I joined the "Ocean Viceroy" an American built ship owned and operated by Henderson line of Glasgow as a Cadet in May 1943. The Captain was Neil McFadyen, a native of Tiree, with whom I served my entire apprenticeship.

In June 1943, aged sixteen, I sailed in the Ocean Viceroy to Freetown in convoy, thence independent to South America, Buenos Aires, Rosario, Montivedeo. One seaman, Hector, a native of Barra, fell overboard during one night, but under strict orders no attempt was made to stop or search for him.

Several ships sailing independent and bound for South America were torpedoed not far from us. A company ship the Henseda was hit in No.3 hold and sank, the 3rd Officer Harris, sailed his lifeboat and crew to Santos. Returned to Liverpool with a cargo of grain including linseed, again independent to Freetown, thence in convoy of some 135 ships.

The next voyage from Liverpool / Glasgow, fully laden with tanks, ambulances, munitions and a tween deck full of dry stores in reserve in event of delay, was to Murmansk in Russia.

We sailed to Loch Ewe where the convoy of nineteen ships was assembled. The weather in northern Scotland was cold with snow on the mountains. The convoy sailed north under full escort, thirty-two destroyers, some from Scapa Flow to the Faeroes and others based in Iceland on to the Barents Sea and the Kola Inlet.

The convoy was attacked by Stucka and Junkers aircraft flying from aerodromes in German occupied Norway during the hours of daylight, or twilight really, between about ten in the morning and three in the afternoon.

The weather steadily deteriorated and the temperature fell below freezing. The seas and the swell were mountainous and the ships pitched and rolled excessively. Flag signalling was precluded, as the bunting froze stiff. All communication was conducted by Aldis, out and down each column, i.e. "position for the day after tomorrow". The hands encased in three finger woolly gloves and the body clothed in a parka, leather boots and long socks, the task of transmitting Morse in the biting wind on the unsteady platform was a hazard.

On the day before Christmas, the Ships Cook was determined to prepare a chicken dinner. The ovens were loaded with chickens etc and with the galley awash and the rolling of the ship, fat slopped over in the oven, caught fire and sent a blazing beacon of light streaming from the galley funnel.

Captain McFadyen sent me, (I was on bridge watch) down to the galley to tell the cook to extinguish the fire. I negotiated the sheets of ice on the deck and approached the galley door behind the wooden black out screen. The top half of the galley door was open and in that corner the Cook was filling a pie dish with boiling water. At that moment the Scullion slid across the deck and released the oven door locks. The flames blazed out into the galley and at that moment the Cook threw the water into the ovens. There was a huge explosion, which engulfed the Cook, and the burns he received kept him out of commission for the rest of the voyage. I was fully encased in arctic foul weather gear and only my face was exposed to the blast. The Cook had the brains to push me before him on to the deck, where the cold air made the burns excruciating. How the Cook suffered I shall never know, but we managed to raid the medicine chest and make what dressings we could. The message from the Captain was look after the Cook and yourself, which I did for a couple of days, returned to watches and cared for the Cook in my watch below.

The convoy was attacked by the Pocket Battleship "Scharnhorst" on Christmas Day. S/S Viceroy led the inside column in sight of North Cape when the attack opened on the starboard quarter. The trajectory of the shells, aimed at the middle of the convoy, flew well above the first two columns, although for me, the noise of their passage was frightening.

Scharnhorst attacked again on the port quarter some hours later, but by this time she was engaged by "Duke of York", "Belfast" and "Glasgow" and the extensive screen of escorting destroyers. The Scharnhorst was sunk in action, her escorting destroyers were never sighted and the convoy proceeded to the Kola Inlet and Murmansk and arrived on the 2nd January 1944.

Murmansk was a blitzed and battered place where there was no entertainment or relaxation. No wharves were intact. Most heavy lifting was done by ships like the Gotland which was anchored there permanently.

Aerial attack and the constant harassment of the approaches to the Kola Inlet by "U" Boats resulted in a large accumulation of ships waiting to head south. With

the minesweeping and anti submarine sorties by the Royal Navy it was finally possible to muster a convoy southbound.

Viceroy carried 32 Navy personnel with a Royal Marine Sergeant in charge. There was a 4.7 ins Dual-purpose weapon on the poop, a 12-pounder forward and six Oerlikon pits to port and starboard. My action stand was the midship starboard Oerlikon. I emptied the two magazines in a matter of seconds and spent most of the time reloading; tracer, armour piercing, H.E. I recall I was scared to death up in that exposed gun pit with the Stukas screaming down.

Viceroy discharged her cargo and sailed south in ballast to the Pentland Firth, where she joined a two-column convoy bound for Hartlepool. The dangers on this trip were the lurking "E" Boats which moored to the buoys awaiting a target. Viceroy arrived unscathed.

After leave, we sailed north about to Glasgow and Liverpool, thence to the Middle East, ADIBYA, in the Gulf of Suez, with the wherewithal to re-inforce the Eighth Army. Suez was under threat from the Luftwaffe in Crete, who managed to sink the "Georgic".

The ship proceeded independent to Melbourne where she discharged Dom nuts etc from the Sudan and produce from Durban. On completion and fitting of shifting boards, sailed to Wallaroo on the Spencer Gulf and loaded a full cargo of bulk wheat, where the wheat arrived alongside in bags and on rail trucks. Every bag was slit, emptied and returned to shore.

The Bay of Bengal was under siege by the Japanese forces in Burma. The wheat was discharged by hand in baskets by innumerable dockworkers, their wives and children and it took a long time.

With part cargo still aboard the Viceroy made the crossing to Rangoon where the suburbs were still occupied by the Japanese army and where the much needed wheat was well received.

It is worthy of record that Henderson Line traded from the United Kingdom to Burma pre-war. The company were major shareholders in the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company and Steel Brothers Teak loggers and millers. One wonders if for those reasons Viceroy was selected to sail in the first convoy into Rangoon. Could well be.

I am unsure whether the remainder of the wheat was discharged in Trincomalee, but I do remember that we called there and I was seconded to the hospital ship Amarapoorra, where I joined eight other Cadets in transporting the wounded to and from the shore in huge cutters with Kitchen Steering gear, which helped to make the trips smooth and bump less.

I served my time, and then qualified finally as Master Mariner in 1953. I met my wife in Gladstone in 1954, by which time I was accepted for entry to the Royal Naval Reserve. I completed my initial training in 1954, served aboard HMS Adamant in the second submarine Squadron. Joined M/V Tulagi of the Burns Philp Company and arrived in Sydney in 1955.

We married in 1955 and I worked with the Stevedoring Authority as a Delegate of the Arbitration Commission in all ports from Melbourne to Cairns. Transferred to Fremantle I joined and served with the Royal Australian Naval Reserve where I earned a Reserve Decoration. Now resident in St Ives Retirement Village, Subiaco. Herewith my profile as recalled from memory.

I