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My Story

Leaving Scotch College in 1942 I attended the Marconi School of Wireless, which was run and operated by Amalgamated Wireless of Australia (A.W.A). I passed my second-class commercial operators certificate of proficiency certificate number 775 on the 21 November 1943. This qualified me to become a radio officer on any merchant ship, which meant I could operate and maintain any ships radio station.

A.W.A supplied radio officers to all Australian and foreign ships that required radio officers in Australia, be it replacements, additional radio officers, etc. All Australian and foreign vessels sailing overseas were required to have three radio officers to cover 24 hour watch under British Admiralty Regulations. Australian coastal vessels usually only had one radio officer aboard.

While continuing my studies to obtain my first class certificate a Royal Dutch shell tanker, the M.V. Cleodora came into Melbourne and required an additional radio officer. As I was available and had the qualifications I was appointed to the M.V. Cleodora as the third radio officer.

The crew consisted of 11 Dutch officers, 1 Scottish officer, 1 Australian (myself) and a six man D.E.Ms gun crew (4 British, 1 South African and 1 Canadian) and 40 Chinese.

We departed Melbourne in December 1943 for Abadan. I was aboard the M.V. Cleodora from December 1943 until March 1945 during which time we saw action in the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, North and South Atlantic including the English Channel on D Day and the Pacific area.

During my time aboard the M.V. Cleodora we sailed from Melbourne to Abadan where we fuelled up with diesel fuel and sailed from Abadan through the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean. We discharged all our cargo bunkering a number of Royal Navy and Merchant ships at sea. Whilst in the Mediterranean the "Cleodora" was taken over by the British Admiralty as a His Majesty's Transport (HMT) ship. This placed me in the peculiar position as an Australian citizen under Dutch law taken over by the British Admiralty.

After we discharged the last of our cargo we formed up in convoy and headed for the United States. We did lose a number of ships going through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean direct to New York.

We took on our cargo in New Jersey then anchored in New York Harbour for approximately 10 days waiting for sufficient ships to form a convoy. Departing New York we sailed up the east coast of New Found Land where other ships joined the convoy then we headed for the United Kingdom. Usually we received a coded morse code message about 2 days from Ireland directing where each ship was to

discharge its cargo. This was the time we usually came under air attack.

On our first crossing we were directed via Loch Ewe to Scarp Flow. On our second crossing we were directed to Milford Haven to lay in wait. Three days later we entered the English Channel at 6am on the 6 June just as the D Day invasion of Europe commenced. We were supposed to act as a bunker ship in the English Channel but were finally directed to Plymouth to discharge our cargo from 7th to the 10th of June. Our third and final crossing was via Milford Haven to Portsmouth.

As we had discharged our cargo we always headed for Belfast where we anchored awaiting for sufficient ships to form a convoy and headed for the United States. The number of ships in the convoy varied from 300 plus to the last convoy, which was 540 ships. The rougher the weather the safer we were from submarine attack. Often we would be in fog for 7 to 10 days and all you could see was the fog buoy, the ship ahead and possibly the ship in the column on either side of you. All changes of course were done by radio.

Our escort vessels usually consisted of 3 or 4 corvettes, possibly a destroyer and a converted large tanker with a flat deck converting into a small aircraft carrier.

Our own armament consisted of a 4-inch navel gun on the stern, a 12 pound gun on the forecastle, 2 Oeriklons on the bridge wings and a Hotchkiss in the stern area near the life boats. When we went into action my job was to take the lifeboat emergency transmitter/receiver to the gun emplacement and man the Hotchkiss machine gun.

On return to New York after our third crossing of the Atlantic we sailed unescorted via Guantanamo to Curacao where we loaded our cargo for the Port of Spain in Trinidad. We then sailed unescorted to Cape Town for engine repairs, which took one month then to Diego Suarez in Madagascar for dry dock. Then to Abadan where we took on cargo for Colombo then back to Abadan where we took on cargo from Bombay then back to Abadan where we took on cargo for Fremantle.

At Fremantle I left the M.V. Cleodora and returned by train to Melbourne on leave. Late April 1945 (half way through my leave) I received an urgent message from A.W.A to proceed to Sydney immediately to join the SS River Burdekin as a second radio officer, which was sailing to Texas. When I reported in to Sydney it was decided the Burdekin was not going overseas hence only one radio officer was required. As the first radio officer was senior to me he was appointed.

I was then appointed to the S.S. Marella from 8 May until 18 May and never left Sydney. As the Marella had to undergo major repairs the whole crew was signed off and reported to other ships. I reported back to A.W.A for another posting – nothing available at present – I had to report to A.W.A each morning at 9.00am to be told at 9.15am to come back at 9.00am the next day. This continued until June when I was signed on the S.S. William McArthur.

The S.S. William was a 3000 tonne collier owned and operated by R.W Miller, ship

owners and coal merchants, which traded between Newcastle and Melbourne. The ship only sailed between Newcastle and Melbourne. Loading time in Newcastle was 12 to 18 hours, then three days sailing to Melbourne. Once the ship entered Port Phillip Bay the crew commenced removing the hatch covers etc. By the time the ship tied up at South Wharf the first grab load of coal was ashore. It has its own unloading facilities, which took approximately 18 hours, then 2½ days back to Newcastle. This pattern was a continuous operation week in week out.

I was ashore in Melbourne on both VE and VJ day and can remember the celebrations that took place. Like all service personnel I was very glad when peace was declared and hostilities ceased.

When I left Australia as a kid of 18 it was an exciting sense of adventure without the true appreciation of what lay ahead. On return at 20 I was a very mature young man, which my family and relatives remarked on often.

I joined the Elwood RSL Sub-Branch (suburb of Melbourne) as of 1 January 1946 membership number 188 and am still a financial member of that Branch.

On the 10th July 1946 I received the authority to wear campaign awards for the Mercantile Marine, which included the 1939-1945 Star, the Pacific Star, the Atlantic Star and the War Medal.

I left the S.S William McArthur early December 1945 transferring to the beam service of A.W.A as a wireless beam operator. The beam service handled the press and commercial traffic by short wave radio all around the world. This was considerably faster than the direct cable service. The operation was 4 shifts a day, 7 days a week rotating weekly. On 4 August 1947 I obtained my first class commercial operators certificate number 1222. I enjoyed the work involvement but couldn't see any long-term future nor was it congenial to married life.

In 1948 I accepted a position to manage Jones Groom Pty Ltd, a small engineering company, and even though I was offered a partnership after approximately 2 years I could not see my future in that company. I resigned in early 1951 and joined Utah Construction Co as it was named then.

My 17 years of service with Utah was wide and various predominantly in administration, personnel/industrial relations and troubleshooting with locations in almost every state in Australia.

In 1968 I was approached by Mr Alan Poon to join his company as State Manager. This came about as a result of my experience with Utah, particularly with operating 3 large construction camps. I joined Poon Brothers in April 1968 and remained with them until 1987 when I retired.