

Dennis Cox, P/JX 276993 Naval Service WWII

Edited by Paul Spencer and Christine Hancock.

I was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1922 at Stallingborough in Lincolnshire to John and Elsie Larder Cox and I had 2 brothers and 3 sisters.

My early schooling was done in a Church of England School in Skegness in Lincolnshire, but I left in 1936 to start work at a butcher shop. Later I was a maintenance man in a factory, still in Skegness.

I joined a local Home Guard unit on the outbreak of war and when I turned 18 wrote to the nearest Royal Naval (RN) recruiting office which was in Lincoln applying for a short service enlistment (7 years in the Seaman Branch) and 5 years on the reserve.

Having submitted the required application form I was ordered to present myself at the nearest Recruiting Office which was in Lincoln, 50 miles away for an interview and medical examination. I then had to return home and wait. Some days later I was disappointed to receive a letter stating that recruiting had been suspended except for hostilities only and if interested I could re-apply on that basis. I did so and had to go through the whole procedure again.

I eventually received instructions to report to the Lincoln Recruiting Office. It was with much pleasure that I handed in my notice to my Boss - I didn't like the job anyway - so I packed my bag and headed for Lincoln. At the Recruiting Office I met several other lads on the same journey. We were issued with railway passes and put on a train bound for London. It was the first time I had been to the Capital. I was amazed at the Underground Train system, the building damage, and the sand-bag protection of important buildings. We had to cross London via the Underground System, a real eye-opener for me, to Waterloo Station where we boarded a train for Portsmouth. We were met there by a Naval Petty Officer who put us on board a Royal Navy lorry and we were transported to a training establishment at Fareham near Gosport, Hampshire, H.M.S. "Collingwood". So began a 10 week basic Naval training course under the guidance of our instructor, a Chief Petty Officer called out of retirement.

My training in the Home Guard proved to be beneficial as I was familiar with most of the parade ground drills and discipline. I also knew a bit about firearms, especially the Lee-Enfield 303 rifle. Others learned the hard way. We were taught the basics of seamanship, rope work, knots and splices, boat work on Portsmouth harbour, and lots of physical exercise in the gymnasium. We were kept hard at it all the time. Some of the blokes were not very fit and it showed.

The course also showed how men from all walks of life, married and single, could live and work together and soon sorted out those who for one reason or another didn't fit in. At the end of it we had made new friends and after the passing out parade we farewelled each other and went our separate ways, initially on seven days leave. After that I returned to a temporary transit camp near Portsmouth to await whatever the Navy had in store. After a few days I was sent to the Naval Gunnery School at Whale Island which is in Portsmouth Harbour. This was reckoned to be the premier gunnery school of the world at that time. A six week course followed after which I was rated gun layer class 3 (L.R.3) It was a tough course and discipline was very strict. All the instructors were seasoned Petty Officers who really put us through the mill. All movements had to be "at the double." On the rifle range it became evident that I was a good shot. The problem was that I naturally fired from my left shoulder, my left eye being better than my right. They tried to make me fire from my right shoulder but

when they saw that I was a better shot from my left than most of the others in the class from their right they left me alone.

Whilst on the course it was announced that the leader of the French Free Forces General Charles De Gaulle was to visit the Island and a guard of honour had to be paraded for him. I was one of those chosen to form the guard and this meant extra training over and above our normal routine. On the day we marched to what was known as "The Quarter Deck" behind a Royal Marine Band - I felt very proud. We formed up in fours, to await the arrival of the General. Spare ratings were on hand to give our uniforms a final brush down and to pin our collars down to prevent them blowing about in the wind. A bit further along from us on the "Quarter Deck" was a Free French Naval Guard of Honour and I have to say that compared to us they were a shambles.

Another event that took place while I was doing that course was a shooting competition. How they found time to do this during wartime I'll never know. Teams of six from Army regiments, R.A.F. and police from all over the country were entered. Of course Whale Island had to enter a team and it was a matter of great pride to me that I, a green Ordinary Seaman, by a process of elimination was selected for the team which consisted of a Lt. Commander, a Lieutenant, two Chief Petty Officer Gunners' Mates, a Petty Officer, and me! The competition was held on Whale Island rifle range. We were taken by Army lorry to a place 5 miles away and after a forced march back to the range carried out the shoot at various distances on the range.

There were three divisions in the competition, which lasted all day. The Whale Island Team came second in two of them and third in the other, which was a good effort considering there were over eighty teams comprising some of the best shots in the Services from all over the Country.



**Able Seaman Dennis Cox**

On completion of the Gunnery course I was drafted to my first ship. Security was extremely high and your orders only told you to report to a Naval Regulating Officer at a certain railway station. These officers, usually Petty Officers, were found on most mainline Railway Stations. Producing your travel pass you were told which train to catch and so on until you arrived at your destination. In my case this was Belfast, Northern Ireland. There I was put on a boat and taken out to my first ship, H.M.S. "Tywnald" anchored in Belfast Lough. The "Tywnald" was an auxiliary anti-aircraft cruiser of approx 3000 tons and had a crew of about three hundred. She was attached to Western Approaches Command and employed as an escort vessel for convoys inbound and outbound across the Atlantic. We were to patrol that dangerous area south of Ireland and into the Irish Sea. My action station was gunlayer of "B" gun, a twin 4 inch dual purpose mounting just below the Bridge. While at sea we were continually on alert and not even allowed to sleep in our hammocks. Our bed was the deck, down below of course. Our duffle coats doubled as a blanket and our life jackets for a pillow. We were officially based in Belfast. Sometimes we anchored out in the Lough which meant we didn't get ashore, and at other times we went alongside the dock in Belfast for re-fuelling and re-arming etc. When in Belfast we usually got all night leave until 9 a.m. next morning. We could get a bed at a shilling a night. Or we could sleep on board in our hammocks.

The "Tywnald" often accompanied convoys down to Milford Haven in South Wales and an anxious moment I recall was when we were attacked by enemy aircraft one night. They stayed out of range of our guns but they laid mines across the harbour entrance. When we

left next morning to meet an incoming convoy all hands were ordered on deck except engine room staff, with our life jackets on but fortunately we got out alright. On another occasion in Milford Haven on our way out of harbour to meet a convoy we ran aground and two tugs had to come to our assistance. The Navigating Officer was understandably carpeted.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour the Americans started turning up in Belfast in their thousands. They were better paid, better dressed and never seemed to have any thing to do. The local girls went for them in a big way. We were not in the race!

The task of convoy escort was wearisome and hazardous. Apart from the ever present threat of the enemy, there was the weather to contend with and the Atlantic can be very unforgiving at times. The Battle of the Atlantic was continuous and "Tynwald" was a small part of it.

Later that year (1942) I contracted mumps while docked in Belfast. I was examined by the ship's doctor and ordered to pack my bag and hammock and leave the ship immediately. An ambulance was sent for and I was taken to an Isolation Hospital about six miles out of Belfast. That afternoon some of my messmates came to see me and informed me that the ship was sailing the next day. I was in hospital for 2 weeks then taken to the naval base in Belfast where I was examined by a Naval Doctor.

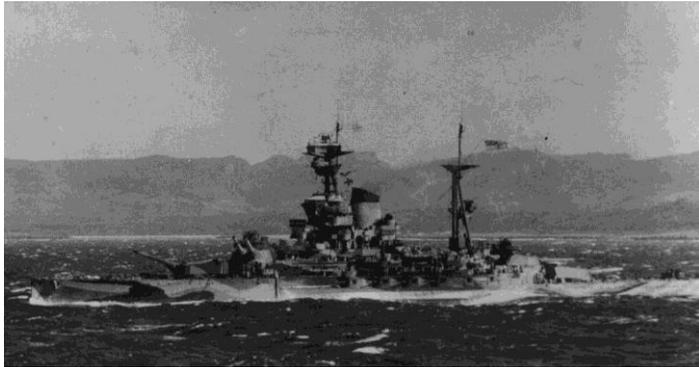


**The Tynwald**

I requested that I be sent back to my ship but was informed that its whereabouts were not known (for reasons of security). I was to be sent back to my depot at Portsmouth and had to put in a request to re-join when I got there. So, after nearly 2 days travelling I arrived at Portsmouth Naval Barracks. There I was informed that they didn't know where the ship was but they would inform me as soon as they knew. Meanwhile I was given a temporary job in the Anti-gas Store issuing equipment to new entrants, and survivors. Imagine my surprise when one morning in the queue were some survivors from the "Tynwald." I had to take a few comments I can tell you. As soon as I was off duty I was able to seek them out and listen to the story. It turned out that the "Tynwald" was part of the escort for the convoy bound for North Africa to take part in the Allied invasion, "Operation Dynamo" I think it was. Anyway, in the Mediterranean the "Tynwald" struck a mine and went down very quickly. The Starboard Watch was below decks at the time and there were very few survivors from it. I was in the Starboard Watch so it was a lucky day for me the day I got the mumps. The survivors got ashore at Bougie, North Africa and had to make their way to Algiers before being shipped back to England.

After a short period of leave I was sent on an anti-aircraft gunnery course. This was at Eastney Anti-aircraft School, a subsidiary of the Whale Island Gunnery School. Anti-Aircraft armament was fast becoming an important part of a ship's defence. I also happened to be proficient in aircraft recognition, an ability which for a long time had gone unrecognised. On completion of the 6 week course I was able to sew the crossed guns A/A badge on my uniform sleeve. While waiting to be drafted to a ship I was assigned to guard duties at a Naval Establishment on the mainland just across the water from Whale Island. The guard comprised of eight men with a Leading Seaman in charge. We were billeted in an empty house nearby and we looked after ourselves. While there we adopted a stray dog. She was dirty, hungry, and generally neglected. We bathed and fed her and she soon made herself at home. We called her "Snowball". She had not been with us long when to our surprise she

presented us with a litter of pups, 14 of them! We didn't even know she was pregnant. Not long after I was drafted to a ship so I never knew what happened to Snowball and her tribe.



**The Ramillies**

Following the usual procedure I found myself on a train to goodness knows where but eventually arrived in Scotland and the river Clyde. Moored at Gourock was the ship to which I was drafted, the Battleship "Ramillies". I remember being awed by the sheer size of her compared to the "Tynwald" and it took me a while to find my way around the ship. Even more surprising to me was that moored just ahead of us was the Liner "Queen Elizabeth" discharging troops. What an amazing sight she

was. Not long after I boarded the "Ramillies" we sailed to Scapa Flow, the important Naval Base north of Scotland where there were many ships of all shapes and sizes including a couple of American battleships. It was a cold bleak place, not much to do ashore except visit the canteen and count the sheep! While at Scapa we had to put to sea urgently one night as it was reported that the new German battleship "Tirpitz" was at sea and we were to go and look for her. We hoped to God we didn't find her as we feared she would have made mincemeat of us. Fortunately we didn't find her and returned to Rosyth for refuelling.

After a short stay there we put to sea again, going round the North of Scotland and to the mouth of the Clyde where we rendezvoused with two Destroyers and an Aircraft Carrier, and headed out into the Atlantic. There we ran into a full gale, the worst weather I had experienced up to that time. Our fo'c'sle and quarter deck were constantly awash and were roped off for safety reasons. Water got below decks and life was generally uncomfortable. The Aircraft Carrier was rolling alarmingly; no aircraft could have taken off or landed. The poor old Destroyers seemed to be under water much of the time. When they were in a trough we couldn't see them. After several days we finally ran out of it and going on deck one morning we were pleased to see the sea flat calm and there ahead of us through the haze the coast of North Africa was visible. As we got nearer natives in their dugout canoes came out to greet us. In response to their urging we threw coins in the water and, quick as a flash they were over the side of their canoes and diving down picking up the coins before they had sank too deep. Getting back into those narrow fragile canoes was an art in itself but they did it so easily.

Our Destination was the port of Casablanca. We tied up with our stern to a mole and one of our anchors out forward (forrard in Naval terms). Starboard watch was given shore leave first and we were transported across the harbour, (there was no access to the shore from the mole) by American motor boats to the shore. The Americans seemed to be in control here. To many of us it was our first visit to foreign places and it was fascinating, different to anything we had ever seen. We walked around the town trying to take it all in. Some of the older hands had seen it all before and were soon in the bars getting drunk and into fights. Our shore patrols were kept busy. The next day Port Watch was ashore and they got into even more trouble. The outcome of all this was that we had to leave Casablanca sooner than was originally planned and went off bound for Freetown in Sierra Leone, West Africa. We spent three weeks there during which time repairs and maintenance made necessary by the gale were carried out. One of the tasks my part of the crew had to undertake was to wash down and paint the mainmast. Volunteers were called for; anyone with bathers or football shorts and foolishly I put my hand up. We washed down and painted the mast and

yard-arm, about 75 feet up. When I came down off the yard I was told I should have had a lifeline on. Pity no-one told me that before! When we had finished the Chief cast his eye on the job from the deck and said "you have done a good job there Cox, that will be your job for the rest of the Commission." So much for being thorough. Going ashore in Freetown was an education. It was very primitive and the natives would take you "for a ride" if given half a chance.

We left Freetown bound for Cape Town, South Africa. On the way we crossed the Equator and even in wartime had to go through the age old ceremony of "Crossing the Line." This provided a bit of welcome relief from routine for a little while. The whole thing was entered into with gusto by Officers and men alike. Cape Town for many of us gave us our first glimpse of Apartheid, and a bit of a shock it was too. We didn't stay there long but long enough for each watch to get a run ashore. We soon farewelled Cape Town bound for Durban, Natal, where we stayed long enough for the ship's company to be given some leave and the ship given a bit of a re-fit. Another lad and I went up country to stay on a farm which was very interesting.

When we left Durban we were farewelled by "The Lady in White," a fabulous singer who stood on the dockside and sang some of the popular songs of the day. She brought tears to the eyes of many who heard her. She apparently did this regularly for ships visiting Durban. Some said she was an opera singer and did this in her spare time to entertain the troops and ships crews. Whoever she was she did a wonderful job.



**The Lady in White**

The "Ramillies" was now sent to join the eastern fleet which was based at Mombasa in East Africa. On the way various naval exercises were undertaken – full speed trials, firing the 15 inch guns, abandon ship drill, and we also landed shore parties in some God forsaken bay. It was here I celebrated my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday - hardly the place for celebration. A few days later we were in Mombasa and celebrated Christmas day with typical navy tradition. Turkey and Christmas pudding and the youngest rating on board was Captain for the day.

Not long after in early 1944 the "Ramillies" was ordered to return to England. We found this a bit strange as we had travelled what seemed half way round the world for nothing. (It was to take part in the D-Day landings in France although that was naturally top secret and we had no idea of it.) As is usual in such circumstances those of us that had just joined the eastern fleet were taken off board and replaced by men who had served their time in foreign waters. I was quite disappointed to find myself transferred to a small scruffy looking mine sweeper, the HMS "Springtide". A bit of a comedown after the spit and polish of a battleship!

The "Springtide" had a crew of about 70 and the skipper was a "wavy navy" Lieutenant. The ship's armaments comprised one 12 pounder mounted aft, two 20mm Derlikons (one starboard and one port), a quadruple .5 Vickers machine gun (midships) and two twin Lewis guns on a platform above the bridge. I was the senior Gunnery rating on board and was responsible for maintenance of these weapons, answering to the Gunnery officer, a Sub-Lieutenant.

The "Springtide" was equipped to deal with most types of mines – contact, magnetic and acoustic. Her other main task was to render other ships immune to magnetic mines. This process is too involved to be discussed here but was known as de-gaussing. It involved changing a ship's magnetic field so that it was unaffected by mines. In a nutshell the work was hard, unglamorous and tedious. The skipper refused all requests for transfers so that was that.

As the Japanese were driven back in the Pacific the eastern fleet moved its base from Mombasa to Trincomalee on the northeast coast of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Due to mechanical problems we were not ready to sail when most of the fleet left Mombasa. We eventually set out with an American Coast Guard vessel as escort. Not long after, unbelievably we broke down again. I remember it was a night of heavy seas and we floundered helplessly with the American vessel circling us in case of attack.

Next morning after several attempts a tow line was attached between us and we commenced back to Mombasa. An ocean going tug had been despatched from Mombasa to our aid but in the meantime we had no hot food or drink, the deck was awash and untenable. In a word we were thoroughly cheesed off. Eventually the tug found us and with some expert seamanship managed to come alongside. Another tow line was secured by hand and suddenly we were off at 15 knots, faster than our normal top speed.

Finally we got back to Mombasa — not a happy lot. And we were met by the cheers and jeers of crew of other ships that knew us, and of our engine problems before leaving the first time. It was embarrassing to say the least, especially for our skipper.

More repairs were completed and this time we headed to the Seychelles, stopping of at Diego Suarez for refuelling. Being a smaller ship we did not have the fuel capacity to sail straight to Colombo, so we were forced to make several stops. At Mahe, the main island of the Seychelles, the skipper allowed the natives on board to sell fresh fruit and we took full advantage. The Seychelles were known as the Islands of Free Love — we had been fully warned of diseases etc. as usual but the girls were certainly beautiful. Then on to the Maldives where there was nothing but a radio station so no shore leave was possible. We were refuelled by an oil tanker and sailed again finally arriving in Ceylon, at Colombo. After a few days we moved to Trincomalee. This was a large natural harbor ideally suited to accommodate large fleets. There were ships of all kinds and operations against the Japanese were organized from here.

After several tedious months of hard work we were given a short leave and sent by lorry into the mountains. At one stage a large group of baboons blocked the road and refused to move so we had to wait until they decided to move on. The trip took all of 15 hours, often on a long, narrow and winding road. Fortunately our driver was good and we made it OK. One funny incident here was that bicycles were available for roaming around. Several of us took off freewheeling downhill for miles and miles not worrying about how we were going to get back. At the right time an old bus, chugging along in first gear came through. We were able to hang on to the back and get a free ride up the hill to the cheers of the passengers.

Christmas 1944 found me as the mess caterer and I took great pains to make it a fine occasion. I found a tablecloth and glasses — all was set. But sadly too many of the chaps had “illegally” saved their rum rations for a while and they were too drunk to see all the effort I had put into the meal! Good food went to waste – a most disappointing day.

As 1945 came round we all wondered what the year would bring. The Japs were being slowly pushed back in the Pacific. At one stage an American warship was berthed next to us and I was invited for a look around. I was amazed to see how much better they were looked after — ice water, Coca-Cola, ice cream machines and a well-stocked canteen where all sorts of luxuries could be purchased. Later some Americans were invited over to us for a meal and I was again mess caterer. I did a good job but was quite turned off by their continual smoking etc. during the meal and was glad when they left.

Another incident that nearly saw the end of me happened here. We had a duty boat (a rowing boat with 4 oarsmen) for ferrying the men to shore. One completely dark, wet night

with a heavy swell running I was coxswain in charge of the duty boat when two officers wanted to go ashore. Heavens knows why – it was a totally miserable night. I was the first into the duty boat before the rest of the crew as the rudder was removed whenever the duty boat wasn't in use and I had to replace it. This was a difficult task under normal conditions, and almost impossible this night, when I was tossed overboard by a sudden swell. I had on my heavy oilskins, no life jacket and I was being swept past the boat when I managed to grab hold of the gangway. The tide was quite strong and flowing out to the harbour entrance and with no life vest I would have drowned within minutes. I clambered up onto the platform at the end of the gangway and then up the steps to the "Springtide". One of the officers asked me "...Is the boat alongside cox'n?" I replied "No Sir." Then "where the bloody hell have you come from!" he asked. I told him what had happened but he showed no sympathy at all for the fact that I had come so close to drowning. He curtly told me to go below and change clothes and be back on deck quick smart! Later I told the crew what had happened and we all had a good laugh. I hadn't thought of calling out. The Gods were certainly looking after me that night.

Life went on and ships came and went and we carried on with our normal duties. One day we heard that an immensely destructive bomb had been dropped on Japan. When we were still talking about that, news came that a second bomb had been dropped and that the Japanese had surrendered. What great news - the war was over. Our skipper ordered "splice the mainbrace" – a double issue of rum – and no further work was done that day.

The gradual repatriation of men home and demobilisation began. Under a points system married men went first and single men like me were way down the queue. However I was eventually transferred to a destroyer, HMS "Vigilant" for the journey home through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean. We stopped at Malta and Gibraltar before arriving at Harwich just before Christmas 1945.

I was given a few days leave so decided to go home – in some ways expecting a big welcome. I arrived at night and dropped into the local pub on the way. There were a few people I knew there but all I got was a "Hello!" So continued on to home to find only mother. Dad was working in the WD Police at the Notts Army Depot in Chilwell and everybody else was absent. Like me many were still not discharged. Probably the only reason mother was there was that she had broken her leg in a skating accident a few weeks before! So it wasn't much of a homecoming and after a couple of days it was back to the ship at Harwich. It was a lonely birthday and Christmas – I don't recall much about them. We all wanted to be discharged and sent home for good.

Early in the New Year I was given a week's leave and this time the family had a real get together. John was home on leave from the R.A.F., Peter on leave from the Army and brother-in-law Wally was home as well. He had been de-mobbed after 4 years' service in India and Burma. Edna had been discharged from the W.A.A.F. and Marge's husband Henry had been repatriated from a prisoner of war camp in Germany. Father was the only one unable to make it still being on duty in Chilwell. There was a lot of celebrating I can tell you! Usually we headed for the pub in Skegness. I remember once the five blokes – John, Peter; Henry Wally and I, cycled the 5 miles to Skegness and the same home. That night we had celebrated extremely well and I don't think any of us remembered a thing about the cycle home. How we made it none of us knew!

I was then granted Foreign Service leave, then normal leave until being demobbed in 1946. I went into the insurance industry and this entailed moving around the country as I was promoted. I moved from Skegness to Peterborough (Northamptonshire), to Wisbech (Cambridgeshire), Chippenham (Wiltshire) and was then promoted to District Manager in Maidstone (Kent). I had married my wife Marion in 1949 in Hucknall in Notts and we had four

children – David (1951), Catherine (1953), Jim (1958) and John (1964). It turns out that every time we moved Marion got pregnant as all were born in different parts of England.

In 1965 I saw a job advertised in Adelaide, Australia in a professional insurance newsletter. There was a push for migrants at the time. It was an enormous decision but eventually Marion and I decided to emigrate with the family. I worked for Elders for many years before retiring in 1982.

I first joined the Plympton RSL in 1966, but in 1970 we moved to our present home in The Crescent in Brighton and I transferred my membership to the Brighton Sub-Branch where I am still a member today.



**Dennis at the R.S.L. July 2011**