

Frederick James Baker – Wartime Recollections

I joined the Royal Navy as a boy of 15½ years at the beginning of April 1939 and started my training at HMS St Vincent, which was a land based ship at Gosport. When war broke out in September 1939, it was decided that Gosport was an easy target for German bombers, so we were all evacuated to Douglas, Isle of Man where we continued our training uninterrupted.

Early in 1940 I found that my training completed, I together with the rest of my class were destined for the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet. We were sent to Portsmouth barracks for a few days to be kitted out with tropical clothing and to await a convoy to take us to join the ships we were going to be assigned to.

It was whilst we were here that I had my first taste of the war, in the form of air raid alerts where a few bombs were dropped, but luckily we were in the shelters and no injuries and only slight damage was done.

To reach the Eastern Mediterranean we went in convoy to Cape Town, Durban, Bombay and through the Suez Canal to arrive at Alexandria, the port of Egypt where the fleet was based. I travelled on a luxury liner, the Andes, which had not yet been converted to a troop ship, with civilians going to India, Ceylon and Australia. At Bombay the Naval contingent were transferred to a troop ship which was very crowded, with troops from Australia, India and New Zealand, and continued our journey through the Suez Canal eventually arriving at our destination.

This then was going to be the start of my war proper. I was assigned to a Tribal Class Destroyer, HMS Mohawk, one of several destroyers making up the 14th Destroyer Flotilla. Some of the famous names were Jarvis, Janus, Juno, Greyhound and Nubian, all were modern up to date ships. We now formed a small but important part of the huge fleet and had many different roles to play.



HMS Mohawk

The main task of the Fleet was to keep the shipping lanes open, so that supplies could be safely transported to our bases where and when needed, and to do this it was necessary to find and sink the Italian Fleet which was operating in the area. We received information that the enemy had left port and was travelling eastwards towards the eastern end of the Mediterranean, thus menacing our bases in Cyprus and Haifa.

The huge contingent of our ships left Alexandria and went looking for them. Our ships included the Battleships Warspite and Barham, and Aircraft Carriers Illustrious and Eagle, three or four Cruisers and numerous Destroyers. We eventually found the enemy and a terrific battle ensued, on this occasion we were completely victorious, having sunk or disabled the entire enemy fleet.

On another occasion our flotilla of six ships escorted the Battleship Warspite to the south of Italy and under cover of darkness pounded the port of Toranto where we had reports that other enemy ships and submarines were hiding.

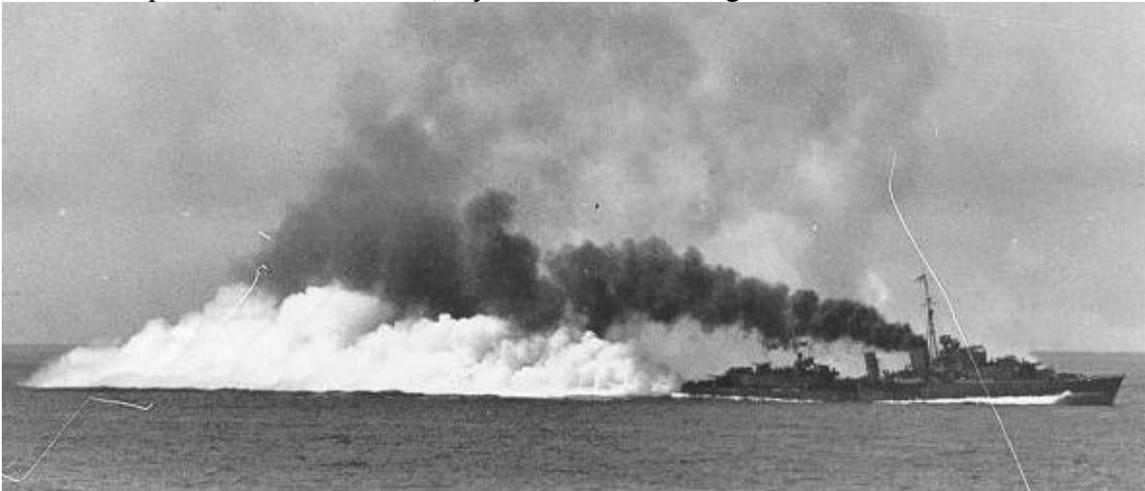
It was now apparent that although we had silenced the ships in these waters, the Germans were moving vast quantities of their famous dive bombers to bases in Italy and the South of France where they could stop supplies going through the Mediterranean via Gibraltar reaching Malta which was now beginning to feel the pinch becoming very short of food etc. We were once again called upon to escort the Illustrious and try to beat the blockade from the eastern end. All was well until we were within sight of Malta when suddenly the Germans sent in what appeared to be hundreds of Stuka Dive Bombers to attack us. They mainly targeted the Illustrious and she was hit several times. Two other ships were also hit and one of our sister ships in the 14th DF was sunk. We were all thankful when darkness fell and we crept into the safety, as we thought, of Valetta Harbour in Malta. We soon found out that this was a far from safe place and the bombing attacks continued unabated for several days.

Whilst in the area of Malta our Flotilla was given another task and this was to try and stop the supply ships of the enemy reaching North Africa, which was now becoming the scene for the important battles between Montgomery and Rommel. As you can imagine it was very dangerous for our ships to be caught at sea during daylight because of the superiority of the enemy planes, so we would leave Malta at dusk, do a wide sweeping search and rush back to Malta before dawn. On one of these occasions just as we were turning for home one of our ships sighted the enemy. We instantly engaged them in battle and after a short while we had successfully sunk the complete convoy of five troop or supply ships together with the three Escorts.

Unfortunately for me, my ship the Mohawk was hit by a torpedo which immobilised us causing considerable damage in the engine room and causing us to stop. We then became a sitting target and in a few moments we were hit again. This time we started to sink rapidly, so we had to abandon ship. After swimming away as fast as possible for a period, which seemed like hours, although in fact was only a few moments, I turned and saw the outline of the stern of the ship disappear under the water. I now became very frightened seeing many men in the water trying to cling to any debris they could find. I saw fairly

close by one of our life rafts and struck out to reach it. I was recognised by some of my ship mates and was hauled on board. We then were miraculously spotted by one of our ships which was looking for survivors and I finished up on board HMS Nubian which coincidentally was the ship my elder brother [Charlie] was on, so it became a happy reunion for me.

We survivors arrived back in Malta with no kit or money and were made very welcome by the Maltese who seemed to know what had happened only a few hours before, news seemed to travel very fast there. I was soon back to normal having been kitted out again and found myself on the way back to Alexandria and to another ship. This time because my brother was on the Nubian I was sent to join him, but this was short-lived as she received a direct hit on the stern and although we managed to get back to harbour needed a long refit of a new stern, so most of the crew were taken off and sent to replace other crew on ships which needed them, my brother was amongst these.



HMS Nubian

I stayed with the Nubian and took her firstly through the Suez Canal to Port Teufik where a temporary repair was carried out and then on to Bombay where the major repair was to be done. This took about six months to complete and during this time I was loaned to another ship which took me down the coast of India calling at Cochin and on to Colombo in Ceylon, as it was called then. We were on our way to Singapore but by the time we reached Colombo our replacements arrived and we travelled back to Bombay over land by train, a great experience taking three nights and four days in all.

Eventually the ship was completed and we were again sent back to Alexandria, and after a short spell there I was chosen to return to England having been away nearly three years, but not by the easy route.

I was to take another ship which was badly damaged to America this time for repairs, it was the Arethusa and because of the damage it could only do short trips before refuelling and could only travel very slowly; so we crept down the east coast of Africa round the Cape and up the west coast to Freetown having called in at every refuelling point on route. We then went to the Canary Islands across the Atlantic, finally arriving at

Charlestown, South Carolina in America. Having safely settled the ship in the dockyard we travelled up to New York where we picked up a convoy bound for Liverpool, England.

After completing another training course at HMS Vernon I was drafted to the Aircraft Carrier HMS Hunter and again found myself back in the Mediterranean, this time giving support to our troops landing in Italy, and later after the Normandy invasion supporting landings in the South of France.

CVE-8 HMS Hunter



HMS Hunter

After this it was becoming apparent that we were going to win the War and the ships were starting to revert to smaller peace time crews, so I with many other sailors were put ashore and formed into landing parties destined for Crete and Greece. After extensive and very tough training were finally disbanded without carrying out the missions we were trained for, because of events in Europe it was found not to be necessary.

I finally finished up in a transit camp in Malta helping to make arrangements for the huge masses of men returning to England after VE Day. I eventually returned in May 1946 having survived the horrors of war and I was now able to continue my Naval career until my retirement in 1963.