

Written by Eric Hollingshead

12 months memories aboard H.M.S Colombo Aug 1st 1939 to Aug 1st 1940

I joined 'Colombo' a month before war broke out for 'Extensive Training', after the Kings Review of the Reserve Fleet at Weymouth Bay we left for 'Gibraltar', it was whilst we were there that the war against Germany begun, I remember it quite well. I was sunbathing at the time upon the [??] (Sept 3rd) when the sailor mate came around 'Piping' 'We are now at War with Germany'.

We sailed almost at once, and started on our very first patrol it lasted for just over a week. On our arrival back at Gib another job was given to us, taking some soldiers to 'Casablanca' (French Morocco). On reaching there we found the Harbour inches thick with oil. We learned from ashore that whilst loading a minelayer with mines, one had fell, exploded, and killing 138 had sunk, we could still see the funnel and super structures protruding through the oily mass.

Back at Gib a few days later, I was in the E.Rs workshop below decks, when a terrific noise suddenly set up, the Deckhead immediately above me quiver as a jelly, officers and ratings were rushing about in chaos. I took about 2 seconds to reach the upper deck, it was then I saw the cause of the panic, midst dense smoke lying on the deck running at top speed, was a torpedo which had been fired accidently during the process of cleaning. The propellers had dug themselves well into the deck. Well that was another hit of excitement.

I think we can claim that we were the first warship to escort a convoy, we came back to England with 28 ships at a speed of 8 knots, we reached England without mishap and we got our first leave of the war (48 hours) from that I managed to get 16 hours home comforts proper, (the rest of the time was taken up in travelling). It was during this period of leave that I became engaged to my sweetheart.

Well leave over we left Plymouth to start on our patrols of the North Sea in the vilest weather even after a fortnight tossing around during which time I had wished myself dead a thousand times. I started to sit up and take nourishment without having to rush onto the upperdeck and hang over the Guard rails.

We sent many ships in to the contraband authorities, one was a German merchantmen which, we put a prize crew aboard and sent her in as captured. It was whilst we were having a few days respite, oiling and provisioning in the Shetlands, that we had our first air raid, bombs were dropped but fell far from us some fell on the land and it was this raid in which the well known rabbit was killed. That evening I went ashore and found a bomb fragment which I now keep as a souvenir.

We were lying about a mile from where the Royal Oak was when she was sunk, it was said from different sources that she was 'torpedoed' but I have my doubts, perhaps after this war the real cause will be made known, it seems rather funny that no one aboard our own ship heard the explosions of the 4 torpedoes which it is alleged struck her.

I was frequently one of the motorboats crew during our stay up north. One day just as we were to be hoisted and put to sea on another patrol, we had orders to take our doctors over to the 'Nelson' she had last come in. As we approached her, we could see she was low at the bows, she had struck a mine as she was coming in and 48 of her crew were injured. The Iron Duke was bombed by aircrew and to save her she was beached, during the 3 months we were up on the Northern Patrol we certainly had some excitement. It was during a patrol that we fired a torpedo by accident during a practice, we lost the fish which went straight to the bottom. We finally left the North Sea and came back to Plymouth for a refit and a much needed rest. We were given 21 days leave during which time I decided to marry. I arranged everything for the Sunday before I went back on the Monday. Imagine the shock when after 10 days I received a telegram saying, 'Return Forthwith'. I told my fiancé to cancel the arrangements and back I went to Plymouth feeling as if I could have killed the sender of the 'wire', but what a stroke of good fortune awaited me on my return. The Ship was to go to Belfast for her refit, we had been called back to take her over there. I was able to get word home to stay the cancelling of the following Sunday's wedding programme, I caught the S/S Minster (which incidentally was sunk two days later by a German torpedo) from Belfast to Liverpool and arrived in good time for my wedding and an extra 14 days leave. The ship that took us back to Belfast S/S Ulster Queen went aground a few days later whether she sunk or not I do not know, but I have always said since, that we all had 'charmed lives'.

We came back to Plymouth and started to get ready for foreign service.

Well after drafting the majority of the Royal Fleet Reserve men to their respective depots and receiving the new draft of Hostilities Only Men (H.Os) and Boys we left for Australia. Unfortunately Italy's entry in the war prevented us from carrying out our progress which was to train these H.Os and Boys for active service.

Well we left Plymouth for our first port of call which was Gibraltar after staying the night we left for Malta. There we stayed a week to wait for the 'Ceres' which was in Dry dock there, after that in company with the 'Ceres' we made our way to Port Said. We stayed just long enough to refill our fuel tanks, then along the Suez Canal we went passing El Kantara and some other smaller villages on the way, owing to the narrowness of the Canal we had to drop speed, only to have to reduce it again when across the Lakes. It was now about 30 miles to Port Suez which took us about 4 hours to reach. We didn't stop there, and again we increased speed and took our course for Colombo. I was watch aboard at the time so I didn't get a chance to have a look around. From Colombo we went to Singapore, and that was as far as we went.

After a few patrols around Singapore, which I should have said, was after Italy's entry into the war, we went into the 'floating dock' for repairs to our 'Bilge Keel' wheel was damaged by one of our own Paravanes. After a fortnight in dock we resumed our patrols it was whilst on patrol that we crossed the line so we had the honour of having a visit paid to us by 'Neptune'! It was good fun watching the ceremonies and the punishments (duckings). We were relieved whilst on patrol by an Armed Cruiser. Our orders were then to proceed to 'Freemantle, Australia', but when we were within a day and a

half run from there, orders came thro' for us to return to Singapore. From where we were in Singapore, the town was 15 miles away. It cost us a 1/- by naval bus there, or 3\$ (7/6) by taxi, there was many Ban Yan parties (free shows) whilst we were there such as supper and cabaret, and supper and cinema shows.

Well after a few weeks there we made our way back to Colombo, again I was unlucky as unable to get ashore. From there we went to Mombassa. A very popular place at Mombassa was the 'Services Canteen', which was run by wives of the Europeans living there, with a sing song each week and good cheap meals each day plenty of games, library and writing rooms. The men in uniform soon appreciated this, sort of, Home from Homes, services. We had made some courtesy visits to the Governor of Dar res Salaam. We saw at the last named place, the floating Dock which last war when the place was a German possession, was sunk in the Harbour entrance to stop our ships from getting in. From Dar res Salaam we went to Aden, there we were attacked by Italian aircraft, we drove them off with our N.Q. Guns, but not before they had dropped their bomb, which fell on land and wiped a family of seven out.

After staying a few days there we made our way back to Mombassa it was on this journey that we almost met our doom, the date was July, the 23rd and we sneaked as near to an Italian port as we dared to have a look around. It was about 11.00 am and we were closed up at our action station, some say although I didn't see it myself, that a smoke shell fired from land exploded above our ship. Nothing untoward happened until about 5.15 pm when we were making for home (Mombassa) most of the ships company were playing Tombola on the upper, suddenly straight from out of the sun came an Italian Bomber it passed from our starboard $\frac{1}{4}$ to our port bow dropping bombs so close that bomb shrapnel fell on the decks, and took quite a bit of paint from our portside. The plane was so low that it seemed as if it was possible to have aimed a stone at it. We all swore it was no more than a 1000 ft above us a perfect target for both the plane and ourselves. The plane was well away before we could get a shot in. I think we would have brought it down if it hadn't been for orders, which stated that no guns were to be fired until orders came from the Captain. After that raid which nearly spelt tragedy for us, orders were changed for the better.

We arrived back at Mombassa and found that 38 H.Os had arrived for training, that meant a draft chit for some of the ships company, I was picked to go back to Chatham, so an eventful 12 months abroad H.M.S Colombo came to an end.