

ONE MAN'S WAR – BY DAVID HOBBS



David Hobbs in uniform

After five years at King Edwards, I left school towards the end of 1937 and, on the basis that it must be a good thing to go where the money was, entered the service of the National Provincial bank at their Southampton branch. However, they didn't seem anxious to part with the money as I commenced on a salary of only £60 per year. Some 18 months later England and Germany were at war. Previously I had heard that a branch of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve was to be formed at Southampton and I had left my name as I was interested in joining. Following this, shortly after the start of the war I received a letter from the Admiral commanding reserves giving me the option of joining the Royal Navy. After a medical I was accepted as an Ordinary Seaman Train for "Hostilities Only Commission" and given my first days' pay two old shillings. A party of us were then sent to Skegness to Butlins Holiday Camp which had recently been commandeered by the Navy and was now HMS Royal Arthur. After six weeks training we were split up between the three naval

barracks Chatham Portsmouth and Devonport and I was sent to Portsmouth. A further six weeks training took us to the end of 1939 and at the beginning of 1940 we were drafted to various ships and I and five others were sent to join a rather elderly destroyer HMS Vivacious based at Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire. The duties of the ship were to escort convoys and to hunt and destroy enemy submarines. After a few months, a couple of friends and myself decided to seek to improve our lot and with the recommendation of the captain were sent to Portsmouth to appear before a board for a commission. This was in May 1940 and the German forces had already started their successful campaign in France which was to lead to the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk and other French ports. On 9 June I was in Portsmouth barracks when volunteers were called for to take various small craft from Poole across to France and in due course I found myself with an officer, an engine room artificer and five other seaman on a small commandeered coaster heading for St Valery to evacuate the 51st Highland Division and other troops. We had no radio on board and our armament consisted on one Lewis machine gun. We arrived at the town at night, it was on fire and under attack, so we approached the beaches to the east. We had ladders attached each side of the vessel at the bows and were able to come in close enough to enable the troops to wade out and climb the ladders. Once loaded we took them offshore where larger vessels were standing by and transferred the troops to them. Daylight came in due course and after a number of successful trips disaster struck. On a falling tide our bows grounded and we were stuck on the beach. About this time the forces ashore surrendered and after the German artillery had put a shell through our vessel we had no option but to follow suit. As one of my captors then remarked "For you Tommy

The war is over". We jumped down onto the sand and joined up with the Highland division. It was six days short of my 19th birthday. We then commenced a march, sleeping in fields at night, through France to Holland where we were embarked on large barges and taken down the river Rhine to a town on the East side named Emmerich. From there we were taken by rail in closed trucks to Poland where I spent the next two years in various camps. As I was of non-commissioned rank I was on working parties mainly on manual labour which was probably better than being confined to camp as were officers. The winters in Poland were quite cold with plenty of snowfall. Rations were quite basic consisting mostly of a portion of bread possibly some spread and a large bowl of soup. Matters were of course improved when Red Cross parcels were received. These were routed through Switzerland and in theory one per person should have been received each week but that was not always the case. From Poland I was moved to a place called Blechhammer in Silesia. Here prisoners of all nationalities had been since 1940, initially clearing a forested area of about 12 km² to make the site on which the Upper Silesian Hydroworks were building a vast factory to extract by-products from Silesian coal, oil, petroleum, coke etc. The factory was not completed during the period that I was there but was in fact at times bombed by the Allies. On one raid about 40 British prisoners who were in an air raid shelter were killed. Bad luck after being prisoners for four years being killed by friendly fire. By the beginning of 1945 the Russians were advancing westward and were not far from our camp. When the sound of gunfire was heard the camp was evacuated and we commenced a long march through Silesia, Slovakia and into Germany. Conditions on this march were of course vastly different to those in June 1940. In January and February, the weather was severe with many cases of frostbitten feet. We marched by day and slept mainly in barns at night. Any kit was carried. Rations were very sparse until we reached Slovakia where the inhabitants managed to produce some food, goodness knows from where, and were kind to us. After a couple of months, we reached Regensburg where we were put in trucks, on a train which took us nearly to Moosberg where we entered a large camp containing a variety of nationalities. A fortnight later the camp was overrun by the Allies, the sixth American army under Gen Patton. The British took over the administration of the camp and after about 10 days evacuation commenced. I with others was taken to a neighbouring airfield and flown by the Americans to Rheims. From there we were flown in a Lancaster to a wartime airfield called Westcott in Buckinghamshire. We stayed there overnight and the next day, the 12th May, after visiting a naval reception camp, I made my way home. After repatriation leave, with my naval career drawing to a close, I was given a job locally pending my demobilisation. What had formerly been the South Western Hotel down by the docks in Southampton had been taken over by the Navy as HMS Shrapnel. After a short period here my "demob" notice arrived. My last task was to collect my civvy suit. End of story.

David Hobbs

