

I was at Digby, Lincolnshire when I was posted abroad at the end of December 1942. I had all the necessary 'jabs' and should have gone on 14 days embarkation leave, but that was cancelled. I had to send a telegram to Pat telling her I would be away for a few years. She came up to Lincoln arriving at 5am on the 3rd January, the train had been delayed through bombing in the London area and I had arranged with Gertie Johnson for us to stay the night at my old digs. I saw Pat off on the 7am train back to London, on the 4th January. I left Digby on the 5th January for Blackpool; here was the main kitting out centre for the R.A.F.

5153 squadron was formed in 1942, men who had experience of Diesel (oil) engines, pumps and electrical installations, particularly those who had worked for electrical supply companies were brought together to run power stations etc., abroad. Some of the men had worked in shipyards, were colliery fitters, railway engine fitters and anyone used to large machinery. I went to Rustons in Lincoln and then to metropolitan Vickers at Trafford Park, Manchester, on a training course. I was posted at the end of 1942 and sailed in January 1943.

18th January – left Blackpool at 11am, embarked on the Dominion Monarch at about 3pm.

19th – sailed from Liverpool about 10am, anchored in the Mersey.

20th – weighed anchor at noon.

21st – dropped anchor in the Clyde about 9am, ships as far as the eye could see.

22nd & 23rd – in the Clyde.

24th – ship underway, not light yet. Heading west, Northern Ireland away on the port side.

Heading west all day, wind 40-45 mph, ship pitching and rolling quite a lot. Had a hot, sea water shower.

25th – ship heading south, rather rough.

26th – still heading south, one ship turned back and a destroyer went with her.

27th - heading south, slightly warmer.

28th – heading south, aircraft took off from 'flat top', landed again during the afternoon.

29th – still heading south, aircraft now doing patrols.

30th – ships heading east, split up during the afternoon. 7 ships and an aircraft carrier headed off E.N.E. and 2 ships joined our convoy, 1 was a merchant ship and 1 was an armed merchant cruiser.

31st – ships now S.W.S, quite warm.

1st February – still S.W.S., sighted land before lunch, quite close by 6pm. Canary Islands.

Started work in the generator room, six volunteers monitoring salt water evaporators, my watch was midnight to 4am.

2nd - passed an island last night and saw a town all lit up.

3rd – passed into tropics during the night, ships now heading S.E., maybe reach Freetown by Friday.

4th – heading S.E.S.

5th – heading about east, saw a number of small craft during the evening.

6th – sighted land about 10pm, anchored 11pm.

7th – in Freetown.

8th – The 'Empress of Russia', an old coal fired Canadian Pacific liner was 'coaling up', must have been laid up somewhere for years.

9th – underway about 9.50am, land nearly out of sight by 11.30am. 130°F by top evaporator.

10th – 133°F by top evaporator, coolest place is in the gen. room, 103°F.

11th – crossed the line during the night, saw quite a lot of lightning.

12th – heading south.

13th – one chap got 28 days detention for keeping a diary. Some of the ships went into Capetown.

22nd – passed Table Mountain and started rounding the Cape of Good Hope.

24th – still rounding the Cape.

25th – docked in Durban, there was a lady opera singer on the end of a quay, singing with a megaphone to welcome the ships and men. Went ashore and had the first bananas for 3 years.

26th & 27th – went ashore, swam in the Indian Ocean.

28th – ashore in dock.

1st March – sailed at about 8am, anchored in the bay until 3pm.

17th – arrived in Bombay and lay at anchor until Monday 22nd, docked at 2pm. Went ashore for the afternoon then back on board overnight.

23rd – disembarked 8.30am, across the quay onto an old Indian Steam Navigation ship (built in 1908), called 'Verella', sailed at 3.15pm.

28th – anchored off Shat el Arab.

29th – docked in Basra.

30th – on board all day in dock.

31st disembarked and went to Shaibah.

After getting to Shaibah on March 31st and into a transit camp, no one knew what we were or what we were supposed to do, typical of all the services. April 2nd we left for Abadan on a paddle steamer, to the Anglo & Iranian oil refinery; they knew nothing about us and we stayed the night in their entertainment hall. There was a piano on the stage and one of our lads could play it, in fact he was so good he could probably earn his living at it. April 4th, back to Basra and Shaibah.

The next three days we were in the transit camp. On the second day two Sergeants G.D. (we were all tradesmen), got all of us, about 100 men, out on parade and tried to make us march about, so they thought! After 15 minutes or so, one chap said, 'Sarg, I think I have a touch of malaria coming on,' the sergeant barked back, 'you can't have, you've only been here five minutes,' to which the chap replied, 'Yes, but I've done seven years in India.' We all started to laugh and walked away, they didn't try again.

On April 8th, a bunch of us were sent to a bomb dump at Zubair, sorting and restacking bombs. April 12th we returned to Shaibah and on the 14th started work in the new power station, about three miles out of the camp. 2-500 KW sets, 8 cylinder Rustons, and four Skoda men from Czechoslovakia were doing the job, they had been working in Iran when their country was invaded, so they couldn't go home. I worked on the assembly of these sets until May 18th. May 19th, I left Shaibah for Sharja. After a 2 hour flight in an old Dakota, we landed at Bahrain and the next day, after a 2 ½ hour flight, at Sharja.

The R.A.F. camp was a collection of 'brasstie huts', part of the cookhouse was built of coral, the roof was just palm leaves. The runway was sand, rolled and bound with crude oil, the aircraft were Blenheim bombers. Whilst I was at Sharja, they sank a German U-boat in the approaches to the Gulf, two survivors were brought into Sharja.

May 28th, first mail from home.

Sharja village was just a collection of buildings mostly of coral and nearly on the beach. There was no sanitation, the back of the village was used as a latrine, complete with a few dead donkeys, a camel or two and vultures about 3 feet high. The working day was from daylight until 11am, and then from about 2.30pm until dusk, unless you were on shift work. If you were working outside you had to cover your tools up, otherwise you could not pick them up because they were so hot. The R.A.F. camp was about 2 or 3 miles from Sharja village and right beside a large stone fort. It was probably about 100 feet square, the walls were 18 feet high and the entrance was through a large steel gate. The fort was built as a refuge for passengers of any B.O.A.C. aircraft that may have had to make a forced landing; they would have been safe from any marauding tribesman. Flying boats used to make a run from Southampton water right down to Singapore. The water for Sharja village was transported by donkey from wells about 4 miles inland, usually in old petrol cans. Our water came from the same place, also in old petrol cans but on a four wheel drive truck, that was until our chaps laid a 2 ½ inch steel pipe from the wells, the water was very brackish.

The daily temperature was usually around 105– 120 °F and dropping to about 90°F at night and the humidity was 90-95%. The generators were 3 or 4, 30KW Lister sets. Around 1pm each day, a 3 ton, 4 wheel drive truck would take a bunch of us over the sand dunes to swim about a mile 'up-wind' of Sharja village; that was until August when the water got too hot. We started again in September. A supply ship would anchor off shore about every twelve weeks and all supplies were off loaded into small dhows and landed on the beach. The rations were all Indian army, rice that had been threshed on the ground complete with small stones. Bags of Indian flour with its complement of weevils, after being stacked for a few weeks the bags could move on their own. The other thing was tins of Maconochie stew.

August 2nd, a wire from Pat saying we have a daughter, Sheila, born on July 24th and all is well.

I left Sharja on February 24th 1944, in a converted Hudson bomber and arrived at Shaibah after a 41/2 hour flight, and then back to the sets I had been working on the previous year. One job I did at Shaibah was to remove a Blackstone gem set, which weighed about 6 tons and had been 20 feet underground (for protection). With about 8 Arab labourers, we took it up an incline and then about 100 ft onto a railway truck for transport to Bahrain.

A few months after getting back to Shaibah, there appeared on D.R.O.s, (Daily Routine Orders), - did anyone have any experience of looking after pigs? – (we were in a Muslim country!) Having been brought up on a farm I knew a bit, anyway it was worth £2 a month from P.S.I. funds, (quite a lot of beer!). Where they got them from I don't know, I imagine they must have been flown out from England. They were five or six scraggy little toads. I was told I could do what I liked and as there was a huge supply depot a few miles away, it didn't take long to get a good lot of wilted green stuff and also plenty of scraps from the cook house. In a few months the pigs were all up to bacon size, 7-8 score each, (140-160 lbs). A few days before Christmas, we slaughtered the lot. One of the chaps in the cookhouse had been a butcher in civvy street and we borrowed a .45 from the Police and did the lot. They were all divided up between the Airmen's Mess, Sergeant's Mess and the Officer's Mess. The day we butchered the pigs, four of us went back to the cookhouse and had liver and onions, as much as we could eat. We hadn't had anything like it for years!

Early in 1945 I was posted to North Africa, and travelled by an old Dakota to Habbantya, (the principal RAF station in Iraq), and not far from Bagdad. Stayed overnight and then on to Damascus I think. Refuelled there and then onto Cairo. After a few days in a transit camp, we left by train for Tobruk. I can't remember how long it took but I 'acquired' a ship's hammock, which I was able to fix up in the carriage. At the end of the railway line we were taken by truck to the R.A.F. station at El Aden, which had been built by the Italians, they had ruled Libya for years.

I did various jobs at El Aden, at one time I spent several months with an army well drilling gang, a percussion rig. The chap in charge had been drilling most of his working life. We were drilling for water on the escarpment below the R.A.F. station, down to 400ft and the water was still brackish. Every day a truck took anyone off duty who wanted to swim, down to Tobruk harbour – by the middle of 1945 most of the oil had dispersed. There was always an army chap up on the rocks at the entrance to the harbour, with a whistle to warn people of sharks approaching. I counted the remains of about 70 ships of various sizes in the harbour. Not far from the cove we used, there was an Italian cruiser, which looked as if it was afloat, but it was sitting on the bottom with a broken back. Between El Aden and Tobruk there was (and probably still is), a huge cemetery with many hundreds of graves.

Probably towards the latter part of 1945, I was posted onto Castel Benito, Tripoli, taken by road stopping at Derna and then overnight at Benghazi. Some of the time there wasn't a lot to do; anyone found kicking around 'spare' often got collared for guard duty. I was sent out with some other chaps to guard the remains of a Sterling bomber that had crashed on take off a few miles from the airfield. It had been used for 'trooping home' service men from the Far East. There were no survivors and walking around in the dusk, I kicked a boot and there was a chap's foot in it. After all they had been through, to end like that, so near to home.

About the time of my birthday in November, Pat sent me a large photograph of Sheila, she was coming up to 2 ½ years old. I was in a small billet, with probably 8 other chaps, the photo was on my locker and had been there a few days when one of them came in and said, 'There you are John, I have made a frame for your photo,' he was a carpenter by trade and that was typical of many of the men in the R.A.F. The photo is still in the same frame. He came from Wiltshire, but I have forgotten his name. At that time I was put on the last mechanical job that I did in the R.A.F. It was installing a large oxygen compressor in an Italian owned oxygen factory, it was brand new, 3 cylinders, about 3 tons and made by British Oxygen. I think there were four of us and we were housed in the British Army rest centre, right on the beach. The food was top class and we were waited on by Italian POWs. Tripoli at that time had quite a few Italian restaurants and quite a few shops, there was no shortage of food and you could get a very good meal at a reasonable cost.

One evening, just before Christmas, I was around with some of the lads for something to eat and drink. I had probably had 'ample sufficiency'; I must have stepped over a barrier or fence and caught the leg of my trousers on something sharp, which ripped open the seam to above my knee. I went into a shop and asked the man if he knew where I could get it mended, he called up the stairs, 'Mama' and a lady came down, took a look and indicated upstairs. In their sitting room she said, 'trousers off', I handed them to her and sat down whilst she machined the seam. I was sitting there, without any trousers on, when up the stairs came a gorgeous young lady of about 18 years, she took one look at me, said something to her mother and went into another room. If I remember correctly, Mama wouldn't take any payment for the repair. I was due to leave Tripoli within a few days, (being married the stint abroad was about 3 years, single men did 4 years), so who knows I may have gone back to that shop again!

I left Castel Benito by air for Cairo during the first few days of January 1946, landed at Cairo and then to a transit camp half way down the Suez Canal. After about 3 days there, 1000 of us went by train and in cattle trucks to Port Said. A few stops on the way with Egyptian fellows selling 'eggs a bread'. A fried egg between two slices of bread, cooked on the platforms over charcoal. It didn't matter about the dirty hands, we had all been out there for a few years, so we had all the necessary antibodies. The other thing was 'shi' tea. At Port Said we boarded a Cunard liner, I think it could have been the Ascainya, but I'm not sure. It took five days to reach Toulon and the Mediterranean was really rough. Running into the port there were a few rusty warships, which the French had sunk to stop them falling into German hands. It was about the 12th January and the transit camp consisted of some tents, nine inches of mud and a cookhouse. It was cold with sleet and rain, none of us even tried to sleep. The next day we boarded a train, some of the carriages had wooden seats and some were upholstered. The line had been wrecked in places and some of the bridges were shored up with timber, so progress wasn't very fast. I believe it took 3 days and nights to reach Dieppe.

Along the way the army had set up depots beside the railway line, sometimes it was hot food, but mostly it was sandwiches. On reaching Dieppe at about 2pm, it was into another transit camp, a better class one though, we had hot food and rest. About 11pm it was announced over the tannoy that breakfast was at mid-night, and at 2am they started trucking us down to the docks. We boarded one of the old cross channel ships with an open bridge, and sailed for Newhaven at about 6.30am. I was stretched out on deck trying to get some sleep, we had been underway for about an hour when a shout went up, 'mine on the starboard side', fortunately they saw it and we arrived at Newhaven at roughly 11am. Disembarked and onto a train to an R.A.F. station near London, but I cannot remember which one, booked in and then into a bed, the first one for five nights. I slept for more than 12 hours, then it was to get paid, leave pass, rail pass booking out, train into London and then down to Bath. Arrived at about 9 pm and all the buses had stopped running at 7pm. Fortunately a large open-fronted taxi was waiting for an army officer. I asked the driver where he was going and it was about 2 miles from Midsomer Norton, when the officer arrived, the driver asked him if he could give me a lift, and better still went a slightly different way and dropped me off at the end of the road where Pat lived. I was knocking on the door at 11pm, it was January 18th 1946.



The Dominion Monarch, 27 000 tons, was built by Swan Hunter in 1937/38, at the time she was the largest refrigerated ship in the world. I was told by the engineers, that she could carry 20 000 tons of frozen mutton and 640 passengers. She belonged to Shaw, Saville and Albion, and apparently she had made two trips from London to New Zealand, out via Columbia and back through the Panama Canal, about 30 days each way.

The Dominion Monarch was requisitioned for troop carrying in 1939, a lot of the cabins were removed to make long areas where 200 men or so, ate and slept. Some under the tables, some on the tables and the rest in hammocks slung from hooks. The holds had been fitted out with timber gantries, so there were layers of bunks etc. As there were over 4000 servicemen on board, temporary latrines had been erected on the fore deck.

She was a quadruple screw motor ship, four 5-cylinder Doxford engines, each 8000hp, with a service speed of about 19.5 knots. In the generator room were 4 x 1000hp, six cylinder Allen engines driving 600Kw 110 volt DC generators. Also in the same space there were two large thimble tube boilers, which were normally exhaust fired from the main engines, but as we were in convoy at about 10 knots, they were oil fired. (The two outboard engines were idling). The refrigeration system was ammonia.

On leaving England – there were 24 ships in the convoy though one turned back with engine trouble. The convoy included 1 aircraft carrier, 2 armed merchant cruisers and 5 or 6 destroyers. On our starboard bow was a P&O liner, 'Stratheden', ahead of her was a ship called 'Mooltan', and ahead of us was a large Dutch liner, but I cannot remember her name. I know nothing about the 7 merchant ships that left the convoy on the 30th January, heading for Gibraltar, but the rest of the ships carried on, eventually to Bombay and during that time, not a shot was fired in anger. It could be put down to luck perhaps, the convoy I was in was carrying 25 000 or more servicemen.

The Dominion Monarch was a lucky ship, when we were in Durban I bought a small wooden carved elephant. As no one was allowed to write or communicate in any way, I gave the elephant to one of the engineers with Pat's address. He sent it on to her when he got back, with a letter apologising for the delay. The Dominion Monarch had sailed from Bombay to America and then carried G.I.s for the landing in Algeria before returning to the UK. She survived the war and returned to run to New Zealand, before being eventually broken up for scrap in Japan.

The old Verella, (built in 1908), I was on between Bombay and Basra, was a twin screw, triple expansion steam ship and got along at 12 – 14 knots, unescorted. It took only 5 days to reach Basra, so it must have been about that speed.

I think I can say that during my time in the R.A.F., and all those with me, we always travelled safely. I learned a lot, one chap I was particularly friendly with had worked for a company that specialised in reconditioning engines. He and his wife came to visit us a few times after the war. I joined up in March 1941 and was demobilised in June 1946. I was taken off the reserve in 1954.

My time in the R.A.F., in this country and abroad was nothing unusual, hundreds of thousands of other chaps did exactly the same thing, I was lucky, I had a very easy time. During January and February 1943 over 200 ships were lost in the Atlantic. From 1939 to 1945, 2 200 ships were lost and 32 000 seamen, most of them in the Atlantic.

In October 1997, I was in hospital for a bit of an operation, and at the weekend after a few people went home some of the beds were ‘shunted’ around into other wards. I was put beside a man about my age and we started chatting. He had been an engineer at sea during the war and I mentioned that I had travelled to Bombay on the Dominion Monarch, he said, ‘I came back on her after my ship was torpedoed in the Indian Ocean,’ stupidly I forgot to ask him his name or the date.