NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY

BILL CRAWFORD'S WAR

Read what Bill Crawford has to say about his World War II experiences

I was called up to fight in the war when I turned 18, in 1942. This was three years after the beginning of the war. I chose the Navy and spent my first seven months at Ayr as a telegraphist learning Morse code. Later I also learnt semaphore and joined my first boat at Lowestoft. We used Morse code to send messages with an Aldis lamp from ship's bridge to ship's bridge, and semaphore to send messages from ship to ship with flags. There were no mobile phones or satellite phones and we could only use our radios in an emergency because the enemy vessels might hear us and discover our plans.

After two years I was sent to Egypt where I was trained to work on mine-sweepers.

We had a lovely time in Egypt. I swam in the warm sea during the day and went to the cinema at night. In-between we had classes revising and practising our Morse code so we didn't forget it. We were also trained to prepare and drop depth charges and after sea trials we were sent to Greece. At this stage I was 20 years old.

Then, on Sunday 15th October,1944 at 11.30 in the morning the big event of the war for me happened. I was on a motor launch in the Aegean Sea, near the island of Aegina. We – the Allies – had driven the Nazis out of Greece, and my motor launch, ML 870, was part of a fleet of ships that had been sent to clear German mines from the sea.

We'd already been mine-sweeping for about two hours. I was down in the galley peeling potatoes when the telegraphist on watch banged on the bulkhead and told me to go up to the bridge where the captain needed me to read a flag signal from another motor launch, ML 866. The signal said: Disregard our movements. What were ML 866's movements? Very odd indeed: it had gone in large circle, sweeping for mines, ending just ahead of our bows. It was out of control.

I looked at it and saw that a mine had suddenly appeared behind it. ML 866 had cut a mine loose and it had bobbed up just six metres ahead of us. The captain yelled: 'Hard to port!' to try to avoid hitting it. But we were too close, and a couple of seconds later the mine hit the starboard side of our motor launch and exploded. Just before the blast I had thrown myself flat on the

deck, with my hands over my head. The explosion completely blew away our wheelhouse, bridge and mast. I was thrown into the sea by the explosion, together with several other crew members. Luckily, the rest of my flotilla was nearby, and ML 865 picked us up. It was a bad day for the fleet, because five mine-sweepers hit mines in less than four hours. Three sank, including us, and the other two were badly damaged.

Afterwards I discovered that four members of our crew were killed in the explosion. These were the two men I was chatting to in the galley, the captain and the telegraphist who had called me up to the bridge. I had been standing close to the captain and to this day I don't know why I wasn't killed too. A piece of flying shrapnel cut into my left ankle. Luckily it was a clean wound, although I could see my ankle-bone through the cut.

I was transferred to a hospital ship and then to the hospital in Athens. But that stay didn't last long because the Greeks started fighting among themselves (Communists versus Royalists), and the hospital was in the thick of it. From my hospital bed I could see the Royalists' planes bombing the Communist bases. So the commanders moved all the patients to a hospital in Italy where it was safer.

I spent the rest of the war in Italy, first recovering from my wound then working as a telegraphist on the Italian island of Ischia because I was no longer fit to go to sea.

On Ischia I had a wonderful time swimming every day in the warm Mediterranean Sea. There were no tourists, just a few of my shipmates. For a young lad from Sunderland this was heaven.

I go every November to London to place a cross in the Garden of Remembrance and walk past the Cenotaph, in memory of my shipmates who were killed.

On the 50th anniversary of ML 870 being blown up, I went to Greece to lay a wreath in the sea on the very spot where it happened. I have been three more times to Greece for the anniversary.

For a map of the Mediterranean see
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mediterranean_Relief.jpg

Vocabulary

Aldis lamp – A large lamp used by telegraphists to send Morse code messages from ship to ship. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldis_lamp

base – a town or port from where the Navy, Army or Air Force operates

bridge – the part of a ship from where the captain or officer on watch runs the vessel

bulkhead – a wall within the hull of a ship. The hull is the outer skin of the ship

communists – people who want a society with no classes and no private property and collective farms and factories

depth charge – a bomb that explodes at a pre-set depth under water; used against submarines

flotilla – a small fleet of ships or boats

mine-sweeper – a ship equipped to detect and destroy, neutralise or remove mines in the sea

Morse code – a system for sending messages using short and long flashes of light or sound. You can combine the long and short signals to make all the letters of the alphabet. You can write it down, too, using dots (short) and dashes (long). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code

Motor Launch (ML) - A Motor Launch (ML) is a small military vessel in the British navy. MLs were designed to defend harbours, sweep for mines and chase submarines. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_Launch

port and starboard – left and right on a ship

royalists – people who want a king or queen in their country, as we have in the UK

semaphore – a system for sending messages using flags or your arms in different positions. Each position stands for a letter of the alphabet. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semaphore

telegraphist – a telegraphist is someone who uses Morse code to send and receive messages. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telegraphist

vessels – ships

Nuffield Primary History project

General editor: Jacqui Dean
Author of this story: Bill Crawford

© Bill Crawford

downloaded from www.primaryhistory.org