

## **Voyages during World War 2**

**By Leonard King (1943/4)**

To: All at home, from Pte L King, 14345718, Northamptonshire Regiment

### **Outward Bound**

I expect this letter will be a long drawn out affair, as it attempts to recount my adventures since leaving Sheringham. Well after a hearty dinner we left there at dinner-time on Wednesday, quite a mob of us. It was rather funny to see the Company Commander on the platform actually waving to us! So we pushed off passing mainly through open country till a well-known racecourse town was reached, about 7 o'clock. Here a mug of tea was served up, and we carried on till we reached what I suppose is the oldest station in England. Here, some more tea. I noticed that the signals in this part were all electric, no arm signals at all. Some parts of the journey were accomplished with the help of an extra engine. After another stop at a famous shipbuilding town, by which time it was quite dark and the train had reached an enormous length- from the three coaches with which it started. We began to try to go to sleep. I noticed one or two more stops during the night and awoke about 04.30 hrs to find we were nearing the docks.

We alighted from the train at 6.00 am and made our way into a large shed, at the far end of which we passed out in single file and up the gangway on to our boat, ( a two funnel job of, I suppose, medium size). We were directed downstairs to our quarters. We eat and sleep in the same space. There are 18 tables (which are fixed at right angles to the side of the ship, 9 a side). They are placed so that you can just walk between. Our kit bags are stowed on racks above us. There are portholes, 6 ft apart, about 15 inches diameter. These are closed at night so it is a bit stuffy. We sleep in hammocks slung above our table, pretty close too. There are 560 men in our deck section, and I think about 4,500 all told aboard. So you can perhaps imagine how we have to queue for everything. The canteen is only open for four hours a day so it is almost impossible to get in to it. There seems to be plenty of stuff available, including tins of fruit, salmon etc. Cigs are 1/6 for 50.

Reveille is at 6 am, breakfast 7 am, dinner 12 noon, a mug of tea at 3.30 pm, supper at 6 pm and to bed at 10 pm. We get a loaf of bread each per day, about 5 inch cube, nicely sufficient and a pat of butter or margarine. Food is quite decent, but a lot of soup. We do boat drill at 10 every morning – at least, we take up our places on the deck. There are all branches of the army on board, including some 'darkies' from Jamaica, some WRNS and naval personnel proceeding to their stations. Also, quite a number of civilians. Time seems to fly and one continually feels sleepy – it must be the sea air.

We spent the rest of Thursday watching large cranes loading on stores and baggage. On Friday morning we moved off from the docks. As we passed down the river past shipyards and ships under construction, crowds assembled to wave us goodbye – a touching scene, I can tell you. On Friday evening we anchored out in the bay and waited for the convoy to form up. The scenery on either side of us was majestic rolling hills always shrouded in mist, and below fertile valleys, towns and villages. Morse signals by lamp could be seen occasionally from a station on shore, but it was a bit too fast to read it. Tenders come alongside to pick up mail etc. On Saturday, I with about 50 others am detailed for a fatigue party! Our job was to go right down into the hold of the ship and move kitbags – 4,500 of them. It was difficult to realise it was Saturday afternoon. Sunday was, I think, the strangest Sunday I have ever spent - indeed every day is more or less alike here – except that we had egg and bacon for breakfast.

On Monday we do half an hour's PT. Just to keep us in trim I expect. We are not allowed to wear boots on deck, only canvas shoes. We get the BBC news on the ships wireless, which is also used to give orders and make announcements. On Monday evening comes an important one – we are sailing at 8 o'clock. So everybody ties up his hammock and scrambles on deck to see her move. I secured a position on the starboard side (right side) and it was quite interesting to watch the scenery go by. Several lighthouses were passed and a signal station opened up with the signal: "Who are you", repeated until our ship replied. There must be about 20 ships now in the convoy and we seem to be going in a westward direction. Later we pass through an anti-submarine boom. The R.A.'s have now manned the guns, of which there are some dozen on deck. I think they do 4 hrs on and 8 off. As Tuesday morning comes all one can see of the land is just the faint outline of the hills and this fades away as

time goes on. During the day a school of porpoises is seen and I interest myself and also in trying to read the Morse signal from one ship to another. We are told we are passing through the danger area and our accompanying escort closes in a bit. We get one or two alarms and rush to our boat stations, but they do not last long. The sea is wonderfully calm and the boat just rolls slightly but not enough to make anybody sea sick. I omitted to mention that before we sailed everyone was issued with a life jacket. This is an affair consisting on two pillows, attached so that one is worn on the chest, and one on the back. Attached to it is a red torch on a lanyard and a tin of emergency rations. The whole has to be carried everywhere, like we used to carry our gasmasks. Well, I hope we do not have to make use of them.

We now do ½ hrs PT every day and have a rifle inspection. As the week goes on there are rumours of U boats and Focke-wulfes, but I think they are only rumours. One day we see a Liberator circling the convoy. Another day one ship drops out through engine trouble and a destroyer stays with it, but next day they catch up again. The ships barbers, (a group of soldiers), are doing a good trade by now. On Saturday night we are ordered to change into our tropical kit, which consists of vest, open shirt and shorts, so we all begin to look like boy scouts! 20% are now allowed to sleep on deck as it is so hot down below with the port holes shut. Since embarking we have put back our watches 2 hours, so we now have Greenwich time. We now get the news on the British Empire service. I suppose we are too far away to pick up the Home service.

I don't think any of us will be sorry when the trip is over. The news of Mussolini's fall is received with joy on board. Today a flying boat encircled the convoy, and at night land was sighted, all lit up like England in peace time – quite a sight. Barrage balloons are now put up on the ships. The boat begins to roll now and I feel seasick but it soon goes off. A black dot is sighted on the water and it turns out to be a boat of survivors which are picked up by a destroyer. Next day we put into a North African port and change to another ship. I noticed that there are no seagulls, like British ports. Here we set foot on terra-firma for a few minutes. Next day after a short march we board another ship where conditions are a lot better –spring beds and pillows – but only for one day as the next afternoon we reach our destination, and after picking up our kit are put on lorries for camp.

So ends my first voyage; not altogether a pleasant experience,

Best wishes, Len.

## Homeward Bound

As I described my outward voyage to you, I think I ought to try to describe my return journey. I think I started the other with the departure from Sheringham, so I will begin this at the 92<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, (where I was treated for leg wounds from shrapnel), my last static position in Italy. We left about 12.30 and sped down the long winding hill to the Via Roma, Naples' main street. As I occupied a top bunk in the ambulance I was able to peer out of the small window and see a glimpse of the people and shop windows, which seemed to be pretty full of goods. Arriving at the docks we are greeted by music which comes from loudspeakers via Radio Naples. This is typical of the Americans, who control the port, - music while you work! Next comes tea, biscuits and cigarettes provided by the indefatigable Red Cross. After a short wait we are taken out of the ambulance and carried up into the ship. I say up because she is a big ship and the water is at a high level so the gangway is at about an angle of thirty degrees. It is difficult to avoid slipping off the stretcher and I'm afraid the rear man had a rather unpleasant time with my feet in his stomach. Only the nose of the ship is at the dockside so it is a long way to our bunks, which are right at the stern. In fact I think we must be right over the screws as there is a bit of vibration, making writing difficult.

When we get settled in, those who can walk are given white shirts and shorts which are nice and cool to wear. It is quite hot. The only snag is that there are no pockets in them. I can soon take a stroll on to the after deck from which the higher part of Naples can be seen. A number of interesting things are taking place in the harbour. The ship at right angles to us is having the bottom of the hull painted. It is an American ship carrying landing barges and the job is being done by three fellows using a barge with the ramp down. They are not making much progress as they just get near enough to put on a couple of brush-fulls then the barge floats away again! There are a few naval units here, which I think the king has inspected a day or two ago. At 7.00 we prepare to move. As usual a tug at each end pulls us away from the quay and in ten minutes the one

at the stern casts off, the other one pulling us round to face the harbour entrance. This does not take long and soon we are under our own power.

As we pull out a few half submerged wrecks come into view but there does not seem to be many of them. The sun is setting behind the hill at the back of the city as we thread our way between scores of merchant men anchored in the harbour, mostly U S vessels. A magnificent sight this. As we proceed the whole of the bay of Naples comes into view with Vesuvius proudly and defiantly smoking in the background, against which the countless white buildings in the foreground stand out conspicuously. I daresay none of us are sorry to leave Italy, (I for one am leaving it a bit more ceremoniously than I entered it), though we remind each other that we are exchanging what those of us who have been hospital patients for a long time have had – a land of plenty, for a land of rationing, blackout and where cigs are 2/4 for 20! But we gladly say 'Finito' to the land of Benita. Surprisingly to me blackout is enforced on the ship, but this is done to show up the illuminated Red Crosses more plainly. I went on deck again at 9.30 pm to find we are passing the Isle of Capri. In the twilight it is just a black mass of mountain with scores of lights twinkling at the base. It is used by the Americans as a rest centre for airmen. And so to bed!

The second day finds me up at 5.30 am and after a wash and shave I go on deck to find the sun had risen almost due astern so we must be going due west. The fresh sea breeze is most delightful. At 7.00 am breakfast is served in the second class dining saloon. A short description of the ship would not be out of place here perhaps. She is a lovely job, completed just before the war and made only one trip as a liner before being converted for her present use. She is very fast and is said to have unofficially broken the Queen Mary's record for speed, and is expected to do the trip to England in 5-6 days. I think she is a bit bigger than the one I came out on, which was 10,000 tons and carried 4,500 troops. The degree of comfort we are enjoying may be gauged from the fact that she is carrying about 1/5<sup>th</sup> of that number. It is really a luxury trip. The third class lounge and library is available to us, with the second class dining saloon. This is elaborately laid out with its light and dark oak panelling, diffused lighting, nicely upholstered seats etc. The food is excellent too.

There are hot and cold showers and everywhere is spotlessly clean. There seems too, to be very few restrictions and we can smoke everywhere at all

times. This is a Dutch ship as the name 'Orangi' suggests, and she flies her own flag. She appears to have been built for the Amsterdam - Batavia Dutch East Indies route. Her first trip as a hospital ship was from Suez –Durban, the event being commemorated by a plaque fixed to the promenade deck. Whilst the officers are Dutch, most of the crew are Javanese and the hospital staff is mainly from New Zealand. I have not seen the Auckland Weekly News lying about, but there are some periodicals in the library containing pictures from it. Some of the crew have their parrots which they bring on to the deck for an airing. We are making good speed and the steady hum of the engines make a pleasant rhythm as the blue waters of the Mediterranean go rolling by, the sun lighting on the waves here and there.

I choose a book from the library and settle down to it. "My Motoring Reminiscences" by S.F.Gedge, one of the pioneers of British Motoring. It goes back to the 1890's and is quite interesting to me and in places, amusing. What a contrast this is to the voyage I made over these same waters just twelve months ago. Then we were herded together like pigs, amidst filth and stench, now everything is just the reverse! But there is another side to the picture. Some of my fellow passengers will never walk again, some will never see. Many have lost a leg or an arm, though there are many who like myself are not too badly wounded. May I never forget the mercy that spared me, nor the kindness of those who have tended me.

During the morning we pass another hospital ship going in the opposite direction. After lunch, having not slept very well, I lay down, the period between 2 and 4 pm being siesta time, and get soundly to sleep, when I am awakened by the M.O. who is doing his rounds. He does not have a lot to say, as my condition is satisfactory. Soon afterwards we are issued with a canteen coupon so I make my way to the promenade deck where the canteen is situated. I am pleasantly surprised to find I can buy six bars of Cadburys chocolate, 3 1/2lbs sweets and 150 players for 5d. I try to figure out how many coupons this would require at home. I also find there is a shop on board where I can buy genuine Gillette razor blades at 1/9 a dozen. Needless to say I make good use of the opportunity. Our money has of course by now been exchanged into English, the jingle of which is good to hear after the fiddling little Italian paper notes! Dinner tonight includes fried fish and chips which are greatly

relished by all. After dinner a film is to be shown in the dining saloon, and I retire to the lounge to write my journal.

The third day finds me in the uppermost deck at 6.00 am in the hope of seeing the sun rise but as it is too cloudy I am denied the pleasure, but the various reflections on the sea with the coming of daylight are a sufficient reward for my effort. After breakfast I go up to the lounge and settle down with my book. Twice daily the padre puts on a gramophone programme over the ship's loudspeakers. It sounds like a symphony concert this morning and forms a pleasant background. During the morning land is seen on the starboard side, presumably the S.E. coast of Spain, but it is soon lost to sight again.

After lunch most lie down again and suddenly we notice that the engines have stopped. Looking out through the portholes we notice that a fog has enveloped us, but this does not last long and soon we are underway again. In the evening Gibraltar comes into view. This is the first time I have seen it, as last time we passed it was dark. Two sides of the rock are almost vertical but we are not near enough to see much of the harbour. A hospital ship is entering just in front of us and a plane is circling round but there seems very little flat ground anywhere. As darkness falls we reach Tangier on the other side with its lighthouse winking out its warning. I express the hope that this is the last I see of N. Africa. After watching a golden sunset I retire to bed. Awakening on the fourth day I find the boat rolling a lot. We have turned north and are skirting the Bay of Biscay. After half an hour I am slightly seasick and return to bed minus my breakfast! However this passes and later I get up and go and draw my pay. It is noticeably colder and we change our shorts for slacks. The ships officers too have changed their immaculate white shirts and shorts for their equally smart uniforms. I manage to do justice to dinner and take my usual forty winks. As we have travelled some hundreds of miles west without altering our clocks, it is quite late before the sun rises and it is too chilly to spend a lot of time on deck.

The fifth day the boat is still rolling a lot but I manage to eat breakfast. One of the patients has died and is buried at sea. This takes place as follows: - The ship stops, and after the service on the deck the coffin is lowered to water level from a crane. Then the rope is cut by means of a hook from one of the portholes, and so it sinks to the bottom. The ship now rolls so much it is

difficult to walk straight and we keep bumping into one another. To go on deck is to get covered in spray. It is so chilly that I am glad to get into bed to get warm and am soon asleep. The sixth day is Sunday. The ship is much steadier this morning and at 9.30 a convoy of 20 ships is seen on the port side, accompanied by a lone destroyer on each side as escort. In the afternoon another is seen on the starboard side but only one ship is plainly visible. There is a service in the dining saloon this morning. All goes well until the second hymn comes to be sung, when the piano is found to be hopelessly out of tune and we have to continue without it. The padre takes for his subject 'courtship' and gives quite a good address stressing that in the true and ideal partnership each is the gift of God to the other, a sentiment with which I heartily agree.

Everybody is now on the lookout for the coast of N. Ireland which is sighted at 5 o'clock, but is lost to view until seen again at 8. The sea is now remarkably calm and glassy. The seventh day after breakfast the ship stops and we find we are at the entrance to Liverpool harbour, exactly 5 1/2 days from the time we left Naples. After a short time we get going again and pass between some groups of structures, which from a distance looked like big oil drums on posts but which on approaching we find to be AA sites – 6 buildings on stanchions connected by platforms. What a lonely job. Soon we enter a channel of marker buoys, the first one of which is appropriately named Alpha. Shortly the battle ship K.G.5 passes us. Singularly it is just 12 months since I saw the same ship at Algiers.

Soon we are running into the channel with New Brighton on our right and the shipyards of Liverpool on the left. A couple of pleasure steamers pass packed with holiday makers who raise a cheer as they pass. I recall that as we sailed from Grenock last year we were also cheered by crowds lining the riversides. Little did I think then I should come back in a hospital ship. The green grass on the N B side is certainly good to see, whilst out of the mist the twin towers of some building (which proves to be the signal station) comes into view. More trippers pass and the signal station sends out the signal – "Who are you?", to which our ship replies. Soon the engines cut out and two tugs take up the load, nosing us into the side where dockers are waiting to tie us up. We are due to dock at 11 o'clock and it's just 2 minutes past when we finally bump the quayside. A most enjoyable voyage is over – and we are HOME!                      Len.