

# *HMS Phoebe Association*

*Newsletter*

*February 2011*



Have you forgotten already??

Whoever wished for a White Christmas certainly got their wish granted, although it did not snow on Christmas Day the snow that had fallen lingered on and on. I suppose we were lucky down here, just about reached 6 inches deep in places, but ice formed under the snow, and only some major roads like the A34 got gritted. We managed to get out on Christmas day to have dinner with our daughter Sharon, but had a job de-icing the inside of the car when we left to go home that night. Been raining quite a bit since, so hopefully we won't be getting too much salt on the car. Got a different car now, got to get used to the gadgets on it, one thing good about it is its a diesel and reckoned to do 50+ mpg, not quite sure about that! but our next long trip will be the 600 odd mile round trip to the FNA reunion in Blackpool, so we will soon see what it does.

The number of bookings we have for the reunion is low for this year, considering it is in Bournemouth we were expecting a lot more, but there is still another four months left to book in, so lets hope we get a few more. It is a very good hotel, we have had great meals there. All reunion payments must be completed at least two weeks before the venue.

The groundwork for the new TS Phoebe headquarters in Kings Park, Bournemouth should be well under-way by now, as it will be a pre-fabricated building it should not take long in its erection. (A MacDonalds is built in a couple of days). I may have reported this already? We were asked for a coloured photo of the Phoebe that could be enlarged, well coloured photos are pretty hard to get hold of, and most photos of the ship are of her entering Grand Harbour, Malta. We thought a different photo would be better, one of the ship at sea, so we have produced one, but we are not having it enlarged as such, instead we are having it copied into a large 4'x3' oil painting to be presented to the TS to hang in the entrance of the new HQ. It is being done now, and will take at least five months to complete, (hopefully). Perhaps it will be done in time to show at the reunion, it could even be that the new HQ is commissioned that weekend, and we can all attend the opening ceremony. Perhaps! Perhaps!.

I was about to write a report on the sinking of the liner SS Laconia, then I saw that it was to be a two part program on the television, so decided that most of you would probably have watched the program. We did and found it to be quite good, although it could have have done with a bit

less background noise and more drama. It was only in the follow up of the survivors stories that I found out the bullying of the Italian POWs was done by Polish soldiers. And the German woman who lost her baby could have had a better ending. I thought I would make a search on the internet of the sinking to see if there were any stories from the survivors.

I found a story written by a journalist a few hours after he was put ashore at Queenstown, Ireland from an RN minesweeper that had plucked him and other survivors, from a lifeboat 6 hours after the sinking of the Laconia? I thought it was a bit strange when he wrote he had embarked on RMS Laconia in New York, whereas the BBC program was of a Cunard Company liner! Reading further it came to light this journalist was on-board a Royal Mail Steamship named Laconia, which had sailed from New York on 17th September 1917, and was subsequently sunk by a German U-Boat, which culminated in the US joining the 1914/18 war. What a coincidence it was for two similarly named ships, and both liners, with a gap of 22 years between them, coming to the same fateful end.



At long last, now that most of the veterans have long since passed away, the government is recognising the magnificent work HM Ships and Merchant Navy crews did on Russian Convoys in WWII, it was a most dangerous and hazardous convoy operation to be on, and only recognised as such by Russia, who awarded the crews a medal that the MOD decreed could not be worn, although this was disregarded by many, and rightly so. There was no word of when this British medal will be issued, probably not till after more veterans have passed on. I hope that it will also be awarded posthumously. Those crews were truly the underpaid heroes of any war.



Anyone else got a Citroen C5 car I thought I had got used to the switches and quirks on mine. I eventually found how to make the suspension and windows go up and down, and I've got used to the wipers suddenly working and even the headlights switching on and off when using the indicators, also the window opening, but closing the door with the keys in the ignition, the drivers door at times locks, other doors still opened ok. Later found the drivers door has dead locks! the out side door handle has to be pulled twice to unlock the door. Slamming the door also locks it. Also found one must be doing the max mph for each gear before changing up, no good changing to 3rd below 30mph, it vibrates a bit. A comfortable car, but at the moment its like driving a jig-saw puzzle?

The night was freezing cold as an estimated 10,582 people (perhaps more) were crammed into the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. Most folks on the overcrowded ship, designed to carry 1,865 passengers, were German women and children. They thought they were escaping certain death at the hands of the Soviet Army. It

Its January 30, 1945. The Third Reich was collapsing. Admiral Doenitz, head of the German Navy (*Kriegsmarine*), had ordered the *Gustloff* to evacuate U-boat crew cadets. Leaving Gottenhafen, its port of four years, the ship would also ferry civilians. Opening the gangplanks to a rush of people seeking safety, the ship's captains (both civilian and military) were left with too many refugees on board a ship with too few life boats. For a time, *Gustloff* had served as home base for U-boat training crews. It also served as a hospital ship. One of the Reich's great vessels, its passengers could hear Adolf Hitler live whenever he addressed the country. On the night of January 30, 1945, the Fuhrer gave one of his speeches. A few minutes later, the Wilhelm Gustloff was mortally wounded by three direct torpedo hits from a Soviet submarine. Most folks think the *Titanic* was the deadliest maritime disaster of all time. But its death toll (1,522) was significantly less than the *Wilhelm Gustloff's*. There were so many people crowded into the ship and so many bodies in the Baltic Sea that January night, historians can't be sure of the count. Their best estimate? Somewhere between 9,300 - 10,146 victims. During

World War II, Danzig was part of the German-controlled territory called east Prussia. Today, as Gdansk, the city is famous for its shipyards and politics. It was the birthplace of "Solidarity," the Polish freedom movement. By January 30, 1945 the *Gustloff* was no longer safe in Gottenhafen/Gdynia, or Danzig/Gdansk. The Red Army was liberating territory from German control. The Reds were not far from East Prussia. All Germans needed to flee. Thousands of displaced families travelled over treacherous ice and snow to reach a safer place, or board fleeing ship. Soviet propaganda highlighted what would be done to Germans if captured. ***Kill! Kill! In the German race there is nothing but evil; not one among the living, not one among the yet unborn but is evil! Follow the precepts of Comrade Stalin. Stamp out the fascist beast once and for all in its lair! Use force and break the racial pride of these German women. Take them as your lawful booty. Kill! As you storm onward, kill, you gallant soldiers of the Red Army.*** German women and children knew the Red Army would not spare them.

The *Gustloff* would provide their means of escape.

As the *Gustloff* left Gottenhafen shortly after noon on January 30, tugboats pulled the overcrowded ship from her berth and into the Bay of Danzig. She would travel west to Stettin. The weather was not favorable. Karl Hofman, a surviving crew member, describes the situation: ***"The weather was bad: Wind strength of 7, snow, ten degrees below zero, ice flows on the water's surface"***. Once into the open Baltic, the decks were slick with ice. Hoffman continues: ***"It was freezing cold as layers of ice began to form on the deck. In order to be ready for any emergency we crewmen had to constantly work to remove ice from the guns. A small mine sweeper patrolled in front of the Gustloff in search of mines. Night fell and it became even colder. Below decks, the high spirits of the refugees began to wane as many became seasick. But most were lulled into a false sense of security, believing that in a few days they would reach Stettin or the coast of Denmark"***.

A Soviet Sub, *S-13*, was lurking in the Baltic's frigid waters. Her captain, Alexander Marinesko, could see the *Gustloff* was about 20 miles offshore. Not knowing which ship he had sighted, he presumed her crew was trying to avoid an attack by a submarine which

needed deeper water to dive in. Marinesko faced a tough decision. He was in water fairly shallow (about 170 feet). If he fired torpedoes at the *Gustloff*, and she returned fire, he would have trouble diving his boat. Risking counter measures from the German ship, Marinesko's crew used their night sight and fired four torpedoes, the *Gustloff* took a direct hit from three. Hoffman describes the scene of panic aboard the stricken ship: ***"Thousands of people broke into a terrible panic. Many jumped overboard into the icy Baltic Sea. At first the ship leaned to starboard under the force of the explosion, but then righted herself, only to suffer another hit by the forecastle. We immediately began to broadcast an SOS and fire signal flares...The desperate crowd of thousands had only one thought: to reach the upper decks, away from the massive flood of water"***. The ship sank in about an hour, not far from the Danish island of Bornholm. Panic gave way to death as thousands of people succumbed to hypothermia. Many had died before the ship sank, choosing suicide over drowning. Of the many nurses on board the *Gustloff*, only a few survived. Dr. Hans Rittner, a survivor, reported what he saw: ***"The Gustloff had disappeared beneath the waves. But all around me were the bodies, like dark, pitiful rag bundles - some crying, some praying, some screaming"***. In the freezing water, Karl Hoffman was sure he would also die. ***"I jumped into the water, swimming quickly away from the ship so that the suction would not carry me into the depths. At first I did not feel the icy cold of the water at all. I grabbed the side of a fully loaded lifeboat and held on for dear life...Death screams and cries for help filled the air. Two children who were still alive clung solidly on to me and screamed for their mother. I lifted them the best I could into the crowded lifeboat. If they were later rescued, I cannot say"***. Trying to stay alive in the water, Hoffman fought back the ice and death. He, and about 550 others, were rescued by T-36, a German torpedo boat. On board the rescue ship, people died of exposure and exhaustion. Three babies were born on T-36 that night. (The rescue ship itself sank on May 5, 1945 after it was bombed by Russian planes.) As Hoffman related what he and fellow crew members did to save civilians, he also commented on his service in the German Navy: ***"We, the almost 1,000 survivors, had escaped death one more time. We members of the German Navy were comrades, loved our homeland, and believed we were doing the right thing through our service. None of us wanted to be heroes, and we do not honour our casualties as such, only as human beings who had done their duty according to the oath they had taken"***.

When Hitler learned of the *Gustloff* disaster he wanted to keep the terrible news from the German people. Why risk concerns about his invincibility?

Captain Marinesko and his *S-13* crew had not exhausted their supply of torpedoes. Not many days later, *S-13* struck again, the *Steuben*, another overcrowded ship the same as the *Gustloff*. One might think Alexander Marinesko, who did not realize he had sunk the *Gustloff* and *Steuben* until he returned to port, was a Soviet hero. He wasn't. Because he had torpedoed ships loaded with fleeing civilians, including many women and children, he was vilified in his native land. After the war, Marinesko found himself in the Gulag. His crime? Allowing a friend to take bricks from a construction site. After his release, Marinesko worked in an automobile factory. He died in 1963, forgotten by all but his victims and their families. There were more than 14,000 of them.

## Casterways.

In 1629 a Dutch East India ship *Batavia*, with 316 people on board, was wrecked off the coast of Western Australia. Most of the people on board made it safely to the near by Abrolhos islands. A fanatic named Jeronimus Cornelius led a mutiny and with 36 men under his command began systematically murdering, raping and torturing men women and children. Before help arrived, 125 people had been murdered and their bodies dumped in mass graves. Cornelius and other mutineers had their hands cut off after they signed a confession and then hanged. Two of the youngest of the mutineers, Wouter Loos, and Jan Pelgrom avoided execution when they were sentenced to be marooned on the Australian mainland. They were given some provisions and put ashore near the mouth of the Murchison River and were told to explore the land and to try and make contact with Aborigines. They were instructed to keep watch for a vessel to take them off after two years. They were never seen again, and might be considered as Australia's first known European residents. Later European exploration recorded Aborigines with blue eyes, suggesting at least one of the men survived. Also: The mass graves were later excavated and became a morbid tourist attraction.

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In 1943, John F. Kennedy was the 26-year old skipper of PT-109. As the PT-109 was prowling the waters late at night a Japanese destroyer suddenly emerged and in an instant, cut Kennedy's craft in half. Two of his 12 member crew were killed instantly and two others badly injured. The survivors clung to the drifting bow for hours. At daybreak, they embarked on a 3.5 miles (6 kilometers) swim to the tiny deserted Plum Pudding Island. They placed their lantern, and non-swimmers on one of the timbers used as a gun mount and began kicking together to propel it. Braving the danger of sharks and crocodiles they reached their destination in five hours. After two days on the small island without food and water, Kennedy realized they needed to swim to a larger island, Olasana, if they were to survive. Kennedy and his men were found and rescued by scouts after surviving six days on coconuts. The island where Kennedy's crew washed ashore has become a minor attraction, and has been renamed Kennedy Island.

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In 1835 Russian sea otter hunters clashed with Indian people living on remote San Nicolas Island. The bloody conflict drastically reduced the native population. Missionaries requested that these Indians be moved to the mainland for their own safety. When a ship was sent to pick them up high winds forced it to depart early leaving Juana Maria behind. In 1853, a party headed by sea otter hunter George Nidever found the Indian woman alive and well. Clad in a dress of cormorant skins sewn together, she lived in a shelter made from whale bones. She willingly went with her rescuers bringing along only a few possessions. Nidever brought her home to live with him and his wife in Santa Barbara, California. No one, including the local Chumash Indians could understand her language. The new living conditions altered her diet and affected the woman's health. She contracted dysentery and died after she had been on the mainland for only seven weeks. The Lone Woman was baptized conditionally with the Christian name Juana Maria (her Indian name is unknown) She is buried at Mission Santa Barbara where a plaque remains in her memory. Juana Maria's life story was turned into a book "Island of the Blue Dolphin"

At long last tablets that have been held back by N.I.C.E are now becoming available on prescription. The best bit of news I think is the help that some of these medications will give to people suffering Alzheimers.

A friends wife contracted the illness which developed so quickly she had to be placed in a care home, but she got a lot worse and became aggressive which meant she had to be sectioned. One of the tablets she was prescribed when first becoming ill but was denied it, is one of the tablets that have now become available. If only she had been allowed it then; perhaps she would now be leading a normal life, instead of having to pay £2,500 a month for residential mental care.

The N.I.C.E committee needs a swift kick up the jacksie.

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No holiday in Dorset is complete without a visit to the famous Wimborne Market and Grand Bazaar "over 400 stalls under one roof". Opening times Saturday 7.30am - 1.30pm. Sunday 8am - 3pm. The largest car boot and flea market in the south. Massive open and covered market - Over 500 stalls ! Multi Story and open car parking. (Pay & Display).

Use your bus pass to get there, its not too far from Bournemouth.

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### **Sunday Coach Trip.**

I could not include a coach trip on the booking form as nothing had been arranged, but we have come up with a trip that we hope you will like. Its not a long journey, about an hour or so. Its to the Bovington Tank Museum.

I have been told it is a great day out. I have had words with the visitors department ref' group prices resulting in veterans having free entry as long as we are wearing our vets lapel badges, so make sure you have yours with you. For non Vets Under 65 it is £8 and for OAPs. £6, (but you need not concern yourself with that, we may be able to cover this in with the coach costing). Due to 20% VAT & cost of fuel rising our usual coach ticket price is increased by one pound, it will now be a non returnable £3 pp. I am in the process of sorting out a coach that is reasonably priced, hopefully the next newsletter will have all the info we want. We are asking for you to tell us how many seats you require, please phone us on **01235 211501** it will be easier, and cheaper than filling in a form, phone in the evening, we are sure to be in then. Please book a seat ASAP. We're sure you wont regret it. (Do not send ticket money now).

NB: A 49 seat coach is now booked at a very good price. Phone to reserve a seat now. Please note: We must submit all details regarding how many Vets, OAPs and others to the museum ASAP to get the above offers confirmed.

Obituary: It is with the deepest regret that we report  
 Kenneth Bartlett, Cpl/RAF,  
 crossed the bar peacefully in his sleep on  
 Saturday morning 22nd January.

Some of you may wonder and think it odd for an RAF man to become a member of a warship association, Ken became a shipmate in 1945 when the ship was taking part in the Burma campaign. His job aboard was the RAF Fighter Direction Officer, keeping in touch with the pilots and instructing them where to go and what sortie to carry out. Although only aboard for a few weeks, Ken told me that he came to love the ship and its crew, who he said were courteous and kind towards him, loaning him better fitting tropical gear than he was issued with. We visited Ken and Catherine at their home a couple of times and were made most welcome. Ken told me that before he was called up he was in the Civil Service and was a Major. After passing his medical etc and choosing the RAF, he was, because of his civil classification, put forward to automatically be an Officer, but Ken refused, his reason, it was not fair on others who had better qualifications. And so Ken became a common 'erk' but did not stay long in that capacity. I have forgotten now all that Ken told us of his later pursuits, although I do believe he took up his old post in the Civil Service and achieved higher positions.

*“Goodbye my friend may you find a good anchorage in placid waters”.*  
 Roy.

Shipmate Jim Hutchinson goes into hospital on Wednesday Feb 2nd to have a tumour removed, we wish him well and hope everything is successful. He will be in intensive care for sometime, after which he hopes to have a replacement knee operation. (Hope it'll work better than mine)?

**A few subs are still outstanding check to see if yours are. 01235 211501.**



The Pride of Kent: The new and bigger cross channel ferry made its first sailing in January. It can carry 195 Cars, 180 Freight vehicles, its speed is 22 knots, crossing to Calais in 90 minutes. Why are we showing this new P&O Ferry, because I reckon it makes S/m John Barratt proud, his son Paul is the Captain. “Congratulations Paul”.