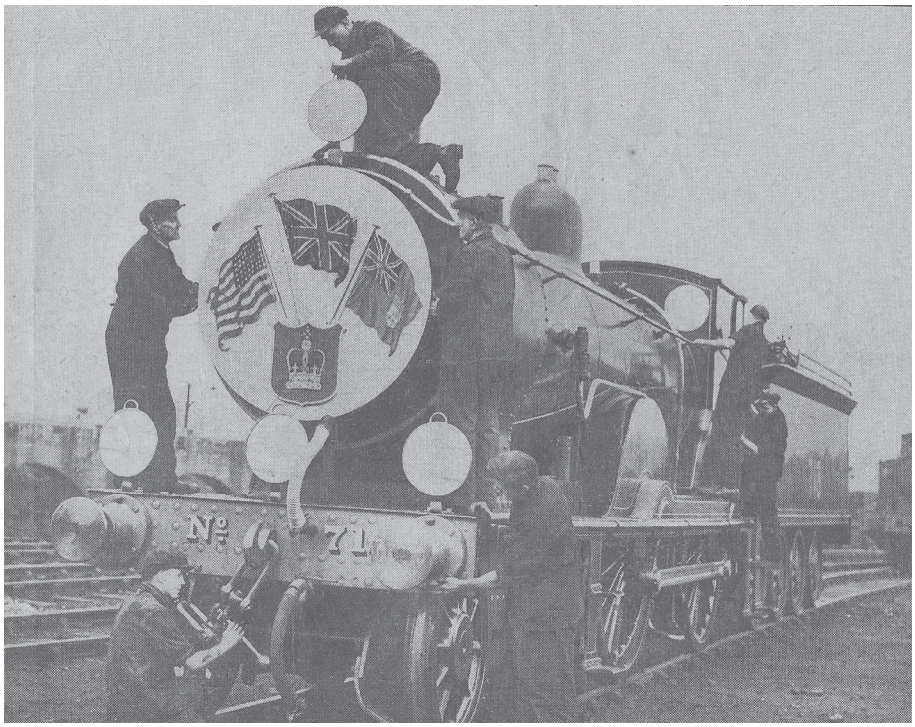
FROM SIGNWRITER TO SAILOR

This essay covers the period from when my dad put down his paintbrushes at his workplace for Southern Railway, through being trained as a sailor, to serving aboard HMS Sikh until her final, fateful mission.

Among the fading press cuttings are those of his work from happier times, just two years before he painted the headboard fixed to the train that took the King and Queen from London to Portsmouth on their visit to Canada and the USA (6/May/1939).



Heaven knows what it must have felt like knowing this old world may be gone forever and you were about to become a sailor in the Royal Navy.

The transition from civvies to military must have begun on Thursday, 29 May 1941, with a two-hour train ride to Fareham and registration at HMS Collingwood, the Royal Navy's training establishment in Hampshire. Dad was almost 34, a husband and father and leaving behind his civilian life for who knew what. Just days earlier, he'd been working at Cannon Street in London; now he was boarding a train from Waterloo or Victoria station, about to become an ordinary seaman.

I'm sure he must have spoken about that period, but at the time I was too wrapped up in my own world to listen. All I recall is that, during his service on HMS Sikh, he was 'running Malta convoys', whatever that meant, and that he bought Maltese lace for my mum, all of it lost when the ship went down. He never spoke of seasickness – though I never thought to ask – and he seemed to enjoy sleeping in a hammock. Such scraps are all I know: a handful of half-remembered details and the regret of never asking more. Not a single photograph or letter remains from those days; only a few brief lines preserved on his Navy record card:

Collingwood – OS	29/05/1941	06/08/1941
Victory	07/08/1941	11/09/1941
Cormorant	12/09/1941	10/12/1941
Nile (Sikh)	11/12/1941	31/01/1942
Nile (Sikh) – AB	1/02/1942	14/09/1942

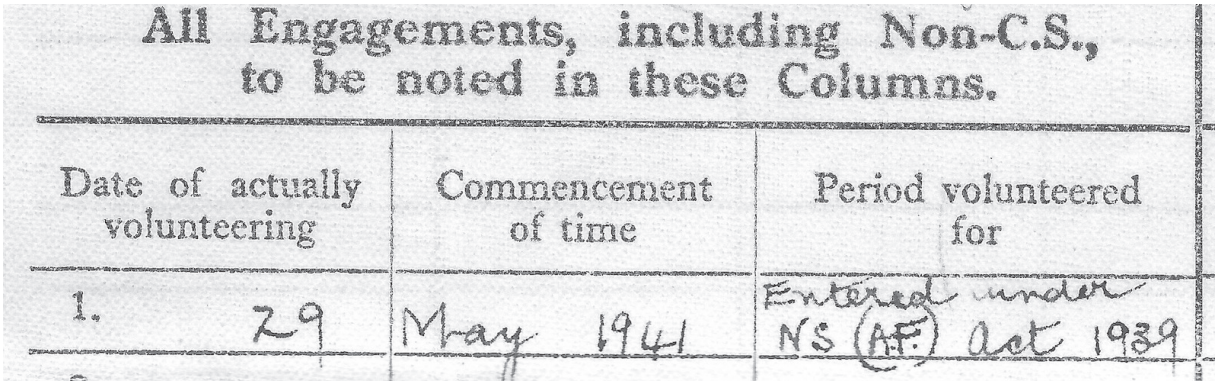
Fortunately, much has been written about these naval establishments and the operational record of HMS Sikh, which can fill my void of personal knowledge. Yet despite these resources, I am still left with many unanswered questions.

What training was my dad given? What was life like as crew on a destroyer? I know he was part of the gunnery team – what did that involve?

The first question I would ask, and where this essay begins, is: did my dad volunteer or was he conscripted? When did he first know his war had begun?

CALLED TO WAR

I was able to answer these two questions surprisingly quickly. There was a small box on his naval personnel record that read: 'Entered under NS (AF) Act 1939.'



All Engagements, including Non-C.S., to be noted in these Columns.

	Date of actually volunteering	Commencement of time	Period volunteered for
1.	29	May 1941	Entered under NS (A.F.) Act 1939

The abbreviation refers to the National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939. This was legislation introduced five hours after the Prime Minister had declared a state of war with Germany, enabling the government to conscript men aged 18–41 years. The exact wording said that these men: 'become liable under this Act to be called up for service in the armed forces of the Crown'. Basically, this gave the government access to this pool of around 10 million recruits.

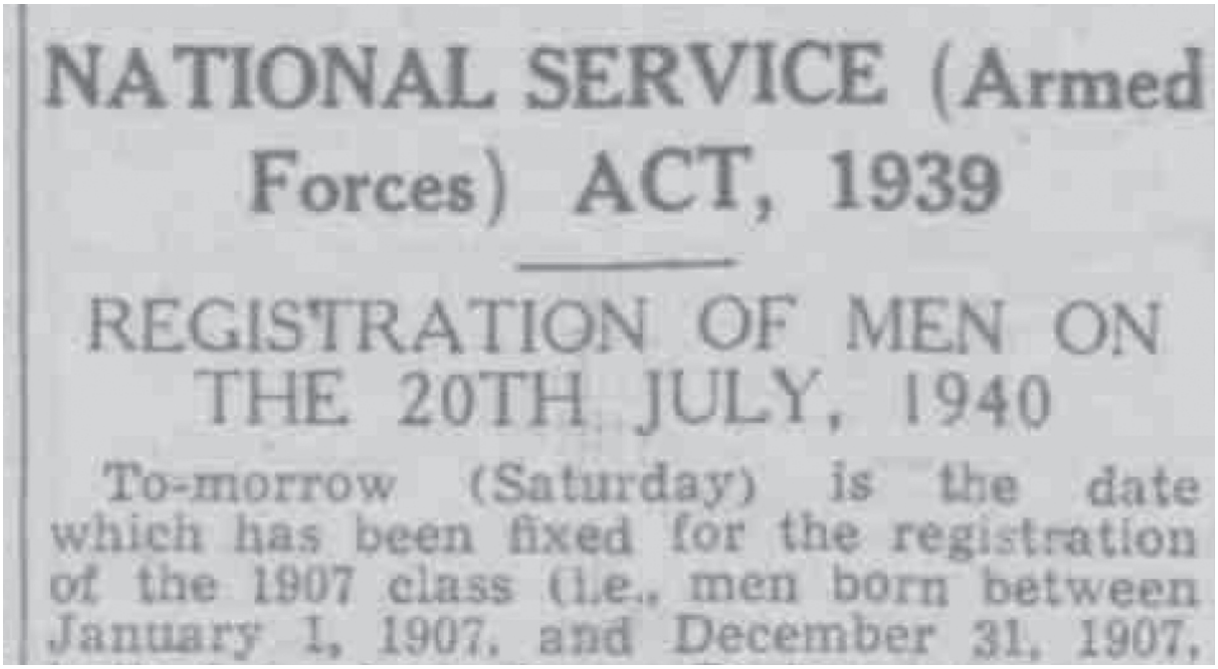
Had my dad volunteered, the record would contain a term of engagement (for example, a number of years or 'Hostilities Only' service). Instead, being taken in under the NS Act 1939 meant he was legally obligated to serve for the duration of the war emergency, as were all of the millions drafted by that act.

This was how most men entered the war. In June 1939 the armed forces and auxiliary services numbered 480,000. By the time peace was declared in Europe, that figure had risen nearly tenfold to 4,653,000 – of whom 3,179,900, like my dad, had been conscripted under the National Service Acts.

The first step towards conscription had started before war began, on Saturday, 27 May 1939, when the press reported the statement made by Mr Ernest Brown (Minister of Labour) that men aged 20 and 21 were required to register at a local office of the Ministry of Labour on 3 June. They weren't being 'conscripted' but were required to undergo six months of full-time military training. Afterwards, they would be transferred to the Militia Reserve, where they could be recalled periodically for short training periods and annual camps. The concept of conscription was deeply unpopular after WW1, so these men were called 'militiamen' to avoid calling them 'conscripts'.

Once war was declared, this soon changed and the niceties of language were abandoned. Details of the conscription process are in the essay 'War is declared – what next?'

On Saturday, 20 July 1940 the newspapers carried the notice that signalled the start of my dad's war. His age group had been called up to fight – those born in 1907.



NATIONAL SERVICE (Armed Forces) ACT, 1939

REGISTRATION OF MEN ON THE 20TH JULY, 1940

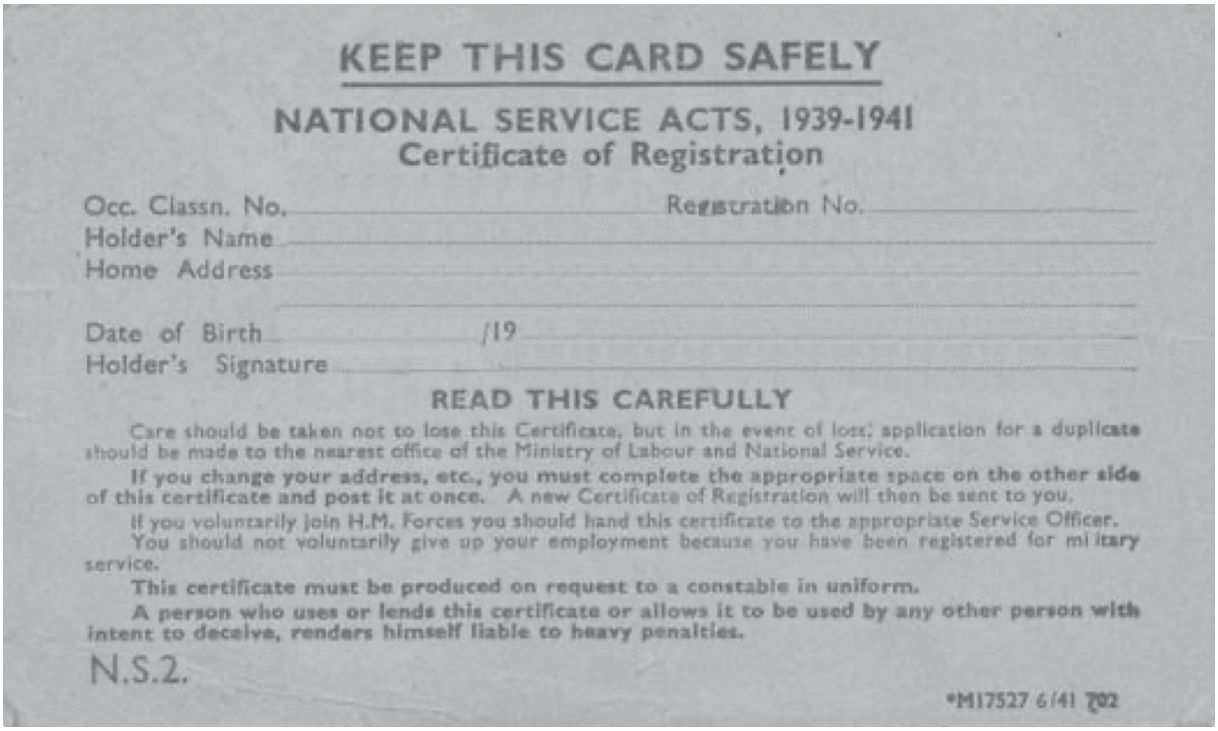
To-morrow (Saturday) is the date which has been fixed for the registration of the 1907 class (i.e., men born between January 1, 1907, and December 31, 1907,

The article went on to say that he should attend the local Ministry of Labour and National Service Office. This was a grandiose name for the Labour Exchange, the place where the unemployed accessed benefits and looked for employment vacancies.

Registration times depended on the starting letter of the surname; in my dad's case, he attended at 4pm. This would have been at the Labour Exchange in the Barking Road, E6, about a 45-minute walk from where he was living. I learnt much of what happened next from a website listed in the Sources, containing a detailed explanation of how the system worked.

This registration process couldn't have taken long, given that the only information collected was personal details, including age, address, occupation and current employer. He was allowed to express an interest in serving in the Navy or Air Force, rather than the Army, but no guarantees could be given that his preferences would be met. On leaving school, he had considered joining the Navy, so that would have been his choice.

Once registered, he would have received a Certificate of Registration (Form NS2).



KEEP THIS CARD SAFELY

NATIONAL SERVICE ACTS, 1939-1941
Certificate of Registration

Occ. Classn. No. Registration No.
Holder's Name
Home Address

Date of Birth /19
Holder's Signature

READ THIS CAREFULLY

Care should be taken not to lose this Certificate, but in the event of loss, application for a duplicate should be made to the nearest office of the Ministry of Labour and National Service.

If you change your address, etc., you must complete the appropriate space on the other side of this certificate and post it at once. A new Certificate of Registration will then be sent to you.

If you voluntarily join H.M. Forces you should hand this certificate to the appropriate Service Officer.

You should not voluntarily give up your employment because you have been registered for military service.

This certificate must be produced on request to a constable in uniform.

A person who uses or lends this certificate or allows it to be used by any other person with intent to deceive, renders himself liable to heavy penalties.

N.S.2.

*M17527 6/41 702

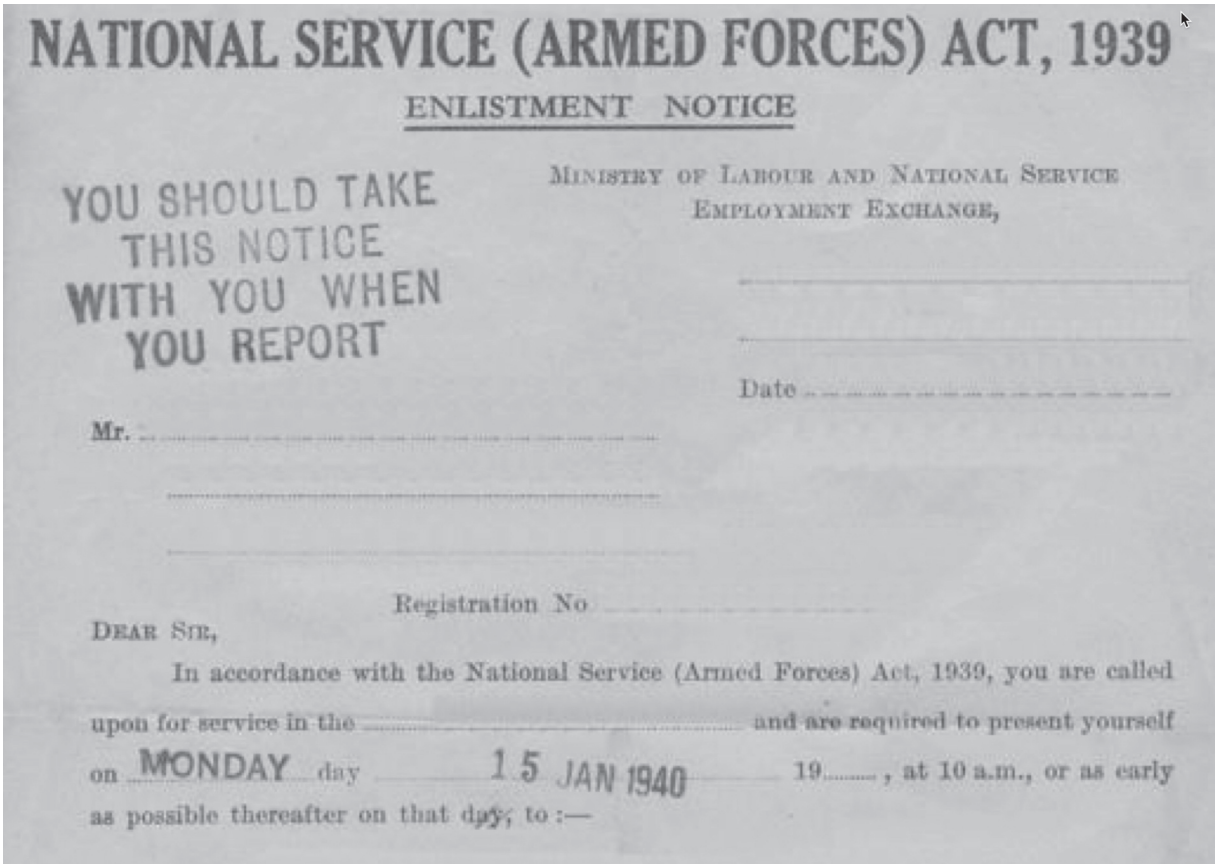
The next step was being summoned to attend a medical. Medical Boards were attached to each Allocation Local Office; they might well have been at the same address as the Employment Exchange. Men were assessed and graded by fitness. Those in grades I, II and III were deemed suitable for the armed services. I have the faintest of memories that my dad received a grade I medical, much to his surprise.

In the case of extreme hardship, it was then possible to apply for the postponement of the liability to serve. This didn't apply to my dad, so the next step was an interview with the naval recruiting officer.

At that point, he was registered to fight. All his details, the medical assessments and results of the interview were sent to a Divisional Office of the Ministry of Labour, which maintained a register of men available for posting.

Each armed service would submit a list of its manpower requirements to the Ministry, which then allocated a quota to the divisional offices, where, supported by the recruiting officers, they were matched with the men on their register.

How long it took before your name came up varied considerably. When it did, you received in the mail an Enlistment Notice (NS12) advising when and where to present yourself for service.



NATIONAL SERVICE (ARMED FORCES) ACT, 1939

ENLISTMENT NOTICE

YOU SHOULD TAKE THIS NOTICE WITH YOU WHEN YOU REPORT

MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND NATIONAL SERVICE
EMPLOYMENT EXCHANGE,

Date

Mr.

Registration No

DEAR SIR,

In accordance with the National Service (Armed Forces) Act, 1939, you are called upon for service in the and are required to present yourself on MONDAY day 15 JAN 1940 19....., at 10 a.m., or as early as possible thereafter on that day, to :—

The form went on to say:

> A Travelling Warrant for your journey is enclosed. Before starting your journey you must exchange the warrant for a ticket at the booking office named on the warrant. If possible, this should be done a day or two before you are due to travel.
>
> A Postal Order for 4s, in respect of advance of service pay, is also enclosed. Uniform and personal kit will be issued to you after joining H.M. Forces. Any kit that you take with you should not exceed an overcoat, change of clothes, stout pair of boots, and personal kit, such as razor, hair brush, tooth brush, soap and towel.
>
> Immediately on receipt of this notice, you should inform your employer of the date upon which you are required to report for service.

I've answered my initial questions and gained some insight into the steps that millions of men took before joining the war. Yet I'm still left wondering why, after attending the Employment Exchange on 20 June 1940, it was another ten months before my dad received his Enlistment Notice.

Thanks to the wonderfully detailed statistics published about WW2 (see Sources), I can make an educated guess at the answer.

From the declaration of war through until the end of March 1941, two months before he started his training, the intake to the armed forces increased by an astonishing 2 million

people, a mix of conscripts and volunteers. All these people had to be processed, trained and assigned to their war duties. During the same period, the Royal Navy doubled in size.

Every three months from the start of the war until my dad started his training, the size of the Navy increased by 30,000 men.

I wondered how the UK's military today compares with its size during WW2. On 1 April 2025 the total size of the full-time UK armed forces (trained and untrained) was around 147,300 personnel; in 1941 it was 3,602,000. The size of the Navy today is 37,600; when my dad joined, it was 395,000. It's almost unbelievable to me how tiny today's armed forces seem when set against the vast scale of the WW2 mobilisation.

There is strong evidence that the sheer scale and speed of intake created serious problems and delays, with bottlenecks in administration and training, and shortages of both accommodation and equipment.

The Cambridge History of the Second World War talks about perennial problems that all the Allied countries experienced in managing their military manpower:

> No country found a permanent solution to manpower problems, not least because those problems were dynamic. Strategy, tactics and diplomacy played their roles, as did timing, politics and the needs of industry. It was difficult to predict, first of all, what forces (air, land or sea) would be needed several months in the future, let alone several years, and, second, how they would need to be equipped. The insurance needed to prevent such errors and cover more eventualities was larger forces.

A constant tension existed between industry and the armed forces over skilled workers. Balancing the military's demand for the right mix of manpower with the need for industry to retool and reskill for war was a formidable challenge. At the same time, older men and women had to be substituted for those leaving to fight.

Using my dad's employer as an example, at the beginning of the war only 4% of those working on the railways were women. By 1945, it had increased to 15%. What amazed me was that from 1939 to 1941 the number of men working on the railways only decreased by 16,000, out of a workforce of nearly 600,000.

Knowing this background, I suspect there were two factors that caused the delay in being called for training. The primary reason must have been the difficulty the authorities faced in absorbing such a large influx of new recruits into the armed forces. In addition, his employment on the railways probably played a role, since many railway jobs were classed as protected occupations and exempted from conscription.

The fateful day came, however, and he journeyed to Havant in Hampshire to join thousands of other recruits at HMS Collingwood.

TEN WEEKS TO MAKE YOU A SAILOR

The mood must have been sombre when he arrived at the training establishment. A few days before, the British battlecruiser HMS Hood had been sunk by the German battleship

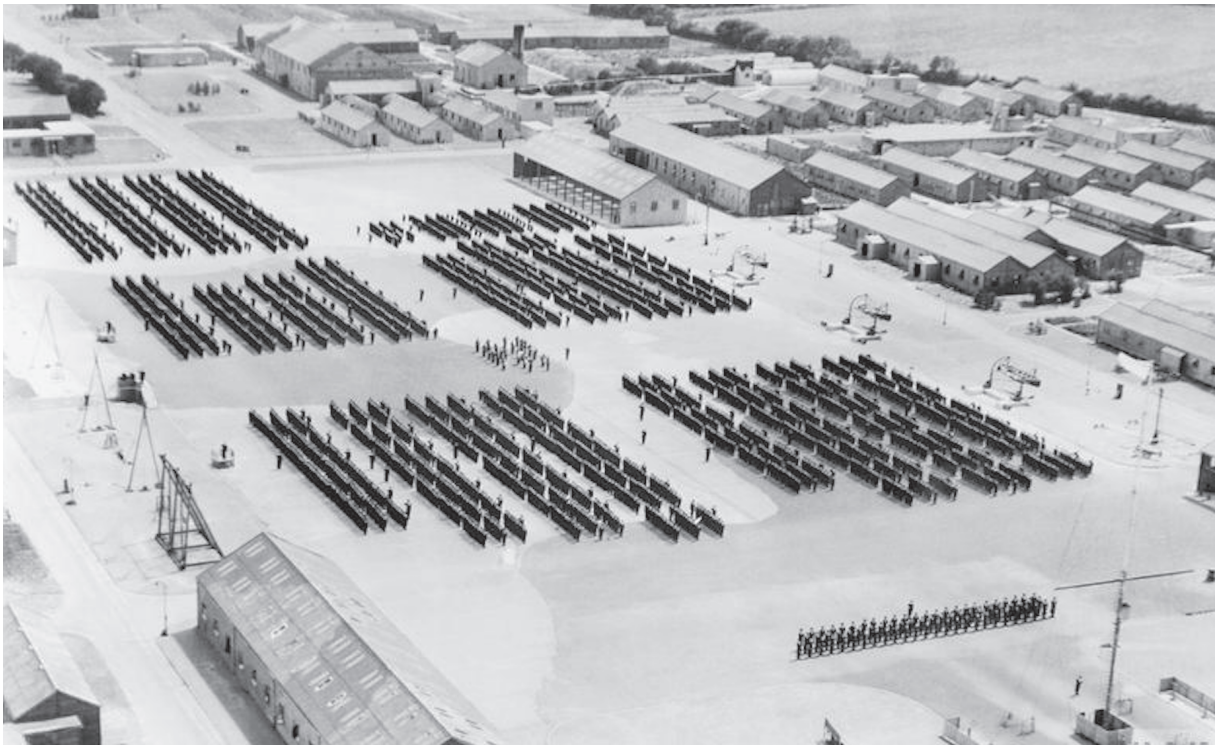
Bismarck, killing 1,415 crew members. Just three sailors survived. This tragedy was the single largest loss of life on a Royal Navy vessel during the war.

HMS Collingwood, along with other shore establishments, was referred to as a 'stone frigate'. Nothing could be further from the truth – the description was symbolic, not literal. A frigate is a small ship, whereas this site was enormous and built primarily of wood rather than stone. Admittedly, its foundations were concrete. A more detailed account of the site can be found on the Officers' Association website:

> It was built as a New Entry Training Establishment for 'hostilities only' ratings [the most junior class of seaman: men who had been conscripted] of the Seaman Branch [the core category of ratings (non-commissioned sailors)] on 197 acres of farming land. Locals claimed it was the best snipe marsh in the country. It was certainly wet and boggy and sea boots were compulsory wear for the person who strayed from the paths. The wooden accommodation huts were mounted on concrete plinths to prevent the ingress of water and visitation of vermin. A single-storied building required a concrete raft four times its floor area.
>
> The original Establishment was opened on 10th January 1940 and training began a week later. The establishment was well planned with buildings spread out to reduce the number of casualties in the event of an air raid, yet providing easy access throughout. The planners perhaps had a premonition that there would be a long-term requirement for the site. It was laid out in four identical self-contained training sections with a set of HQ buildings. They were named in the traditional manner for defining sections of capital ships; Forecastle, Foretop, Maintop and Quarterdeck, with the accommodation laid out uniformly around the main parade ground. Each section was designed to hold 2,500 men and the establishment absorbed a weekly intake of 1,000 men. The establishment thus housed a total of 10,000 men who were following a ten-week course.

When first constructed, the wooden huts were of single-skin design, which made them extremely inefficient to heat. In time, they were replaced with brick and concrete accommodation blocks. Strict limits on fuel, both during the war and in the austere post-war years, meant that many recruits chiefly remembered the bitter cold. Those who trained in the depths of winter must have been frozen, as accounts suggest the central heating pipes were seldom more than lukewarm.

My dad, however, was more fortunate: his training took place in June and July of 1941, when the temperature hovered at a mild 14–16°C. This photograph conveys some sense of the site's vast scale – it's little wonder the parade ground ranked among the largest in Europe.



I expect one of the first items my dad was issued with was an identity disc – what the Americans call a 'dog tag' – stamped with his service number and other personal details. Unlike the Army and RAF, the Navy issued a single red/brown one, made of vulcanised asbestos fibre (like the one in the image). The Army and RAF also issued a green tag that was removed if the person was killed. No doubt 'Rule 1' was that these identity discs always had to be worn.

This tag shows that my dad held the rank of Able Seaman (A.B.). When he first enlisted, it would probably have been marked 'O.D.' for Ordinary Seaman. The 'C.E.' indicates his religion. The letters preceding his personal number also carried meaning: the 'P' shows that the Portsmouth Division managed his records and administration. The 'J' identifies him as part of the Seaman Branch – the core of the Royal Navy's lower deck ratings – responsible for

fighting, navigating and handling the ship. Finally, the 'X' denotes that he served under the newer service engagement system.

Because so many men were trained at Collingwood, there are numerous accounts of the ten-week course. The Imperial War Museum holds many audio diaries describing these experiences (details are in the Sources section). From these accounts and other materials, I have patched together an outline of what was involved.

Recruits' first experience of naval life started with having their hair cut, medical checks (including dentistry), being vaccinated and then kitted out with uniform and gear. My dad would have received the Royal Navy uniform, including sailor's tunic, trousers, boots etc., and a kit bag containing basic supplies, including a hammock.

Life at HMS Collingwood would have been tightly controlled, designed to turn raw recruits into disciplined sailors. Days began early, often with a bugle or bosun's call, followed by physical exercise, drill and lectures stretching from morning to evening. Recruits lived in plain barrack huts and were organised into divisions or classes, sharing the same demanding schedule.

Repeated drills were a key part of the process. On Collingwood's vast parade ground, thousands of men marched in formation. They learnt rifle drill, saluting and precise manoeuvres. Kit inspections reinforced the importance of order, smartness and discipline.

Fitness was another priority. Each division had a gymnasium, complete with a large water tank. Every recruit had to flounder across it wearing an inflatable life-belt, gaining confidence in the water. Alongside this, obstacle courses, runs and physical training sessions built strength and stamina.

Seamanship skills formed the core of training. Recruits practised knots, rope splicing and handling heavy hawsers. They trained on a condemned whaler mounted ashore and on equipment such as a battleship's capstan and anchor chain set on the parade ground. A tall chain platform allowed them to practise 'swinging the lead' for depth sounding, simulating the tasks of a seaman on deck.

Basic navigation and signals were taught along with compass work, simple chart reading, Morse code with Aldis lamps, and semaphore flags, giving them enough skills to manage basic ship-to-ship communication. Specialists later studied these skills in greater depth, but everyone received a foundation.

Weapons training was compulsory. Using Lee-Enfield rifles, they were drilled in basic shooting and weapon handling. Lectures covered naval gunnery and anti-aircraft weapons, sometimes with practical turns on training pieces. Many of the recruits were destined for escort ships, so they were given some exposure to depth charges and naval guns too.

Classroom sessions introduced recruits to the Navy's organisation, ranks, customs and traditions. They learnt shipboard routine, watches and expectations of conduct. Daily duties like cleaning their huts, mess service and sentry duty reinforced teamwork and responsibility.

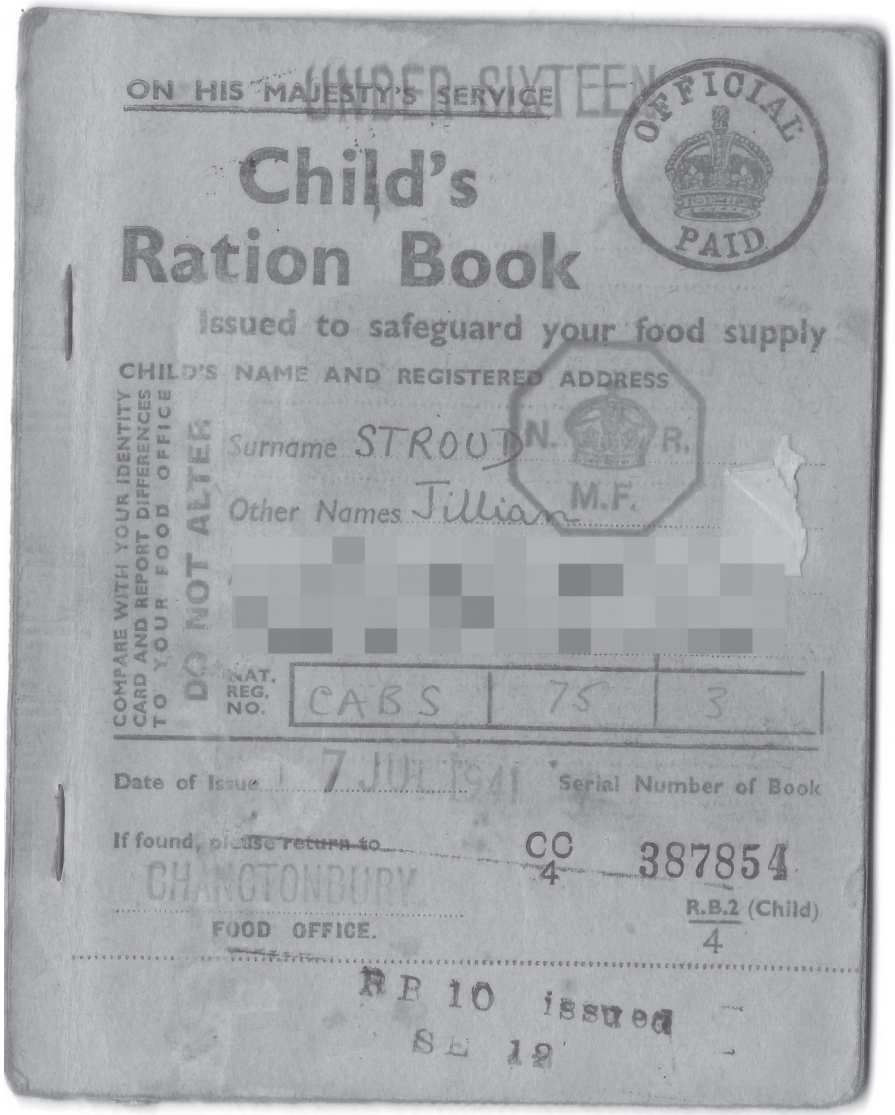
After ten weeks of training, a passing-out parade marked their formal entry into the Navy, rated as Ordinary Seamen and ready to fight in the war.

AWAITING POSTING

Having completed his training, my dad awaited posting to a ship or a shore establishment. His first journey in the Navy was from Fareham to HMS Victory, another stone frigate, in Queen Street, Portsmouth, a journey of ten miles. This place acted as a central accounting base for thousands of sailors who were between postings, awaiting drafting orders to ships or overseas bases, and passing through for training, leave or medical reasons.

Victory comprised barracks and adjoining establishments that could accommodate thousands of ratings at any one time, although the number shown as being 'on Victory's books' was much larger.

During this waiting period, he probably got to see my mum and sister, who were living in Sussex, a short journey of a couple of hours by train. I know they left London in early June or July, because the shoebox of memories contains their ration cards marked with a Sussex address.


ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE

UNDER SIXTEEN

OFFICIAL PAID

Child's Ration Book

Issued to safeguard your food supply

CHILD'S NAME AND REGISTERED ADDRESS

Surname STROUD N. R.

Other Names Jillian M.F.

[redacted]

COMPARE WITH YOUR IDENTITY CARD AND REPORT DIFFERENCES TO YOUR FOOD OFFICE

DO NOT ALTER

NAT. REG. NO. CABS 75 3

Date of Issue 7 JUL 1941 Serial Number of Book

If found, please return to CHANCTONBURY FOOD OFFICE.

CC 4 387854

R.B.2 (Child) 4

RB 10 issued SE 12

I have faint memories of him talking about spending time at Whale Island, which was the centre for gunnery training. When he was eventually posted, he was part of the destroyer's gun crew.

His personnel record says he was assigned to HMS Victory between 7 August 1941 and his arrival at HMS Cormorant, the Navy's base in Gibraltar, on 12 September.

This part of his story relies on a large measure of guesswork. When a sailor's record changed from one ship or establishment to another, the date usually marked the official transfer onto that place's books, not necessarily the exact date of physical arrival there. Sometimes, the two dates were the same, but there could also be a short administrative lag. For instance, if he travelled with a draft, his record may have been pre-dated to the day he was scheduled to arrive. All I know for certain is that he set foot on Gibraltar around the second week in September.

Plane travel was not for naval ratings so his most likely journey was aboard one of the ships in a convoy bound for the island. The most likely convoy was designated OG-73 and sailed from Liverpool on 29 August, reaching Gibraltar around 13 September. These dates match pretty well with those on my dad's personnel record. This was his first journey outside the UK and his first on a boat. I have no memories of him recalling suffering from seasickness. This affliction is one I must have inherited from my mum.

On departing Liverpool, the convoy assembled with the other ships off Oban in Scotland for the journey south. This must have been a fantastic sight with over 20 merchantmen and as many Navy escort ships, a mix of corvettes and destroyers.

The convoy's route proceeded from the Western Approaches off Britain and Ireland, then southward through the Atlantic, roughly paralleling the coasts of Portugal and Spain before entering the Strait of Gibraltar. Along the way, some ships split off from OG-73 to go to neutral destinations: some vessels bound for Lisbon detached into Portuguese waters, others proceeded to Spanish ports. Most ships continued onward through the Gibraltar Straits.

My dad might have been on one of the merchant vessels or aboard the naval auxiliaries or escorts. Pushing the guesswork to its limits, he was most likely aboard the convoy's rescue ship, SS Copeland, which had dedicated accommodation for extra people and was directly tasked to go to Gibraltar with the convoy

Once he arrived, he would have lived either in the barracks at HMS Cormorant or in one of the requisitioned buildings; he might even have stayed on one of the ships in the harbour. Wherever it was, it would be home until 11 December 1941, almost three months. It's impossible to know how many people were physically located at Cormorant, but it's likely to be in the low thousands.

Daily routine would have included parade musters, kit inspections, training refreshers, physical exercise and naval discipline drills to keep men occupied. There are accounts of doing guard duty, ferrying stores or helping maintain the base's daily operations. It's possible he would have had gunnery and communications refresher courses, too. No doubt there were periods of shore leave in Gibraltar town, though tightly controlled given the fortress conditions and constant air raids in 1941.

I imagine it must have been something of an anti-climax after the intensive training at

Collingwood and the journey to Gibraltar. However, my dad's fighting war began when he joined HMS Sikh in mid-December.

TIME ON HMS SIKH

Life as a sailor on a fighting ship began for my dad on Thursday, 11 December 1941 when he boarded HMS Sikh. Before relating his experiences, a few words about the destroyer's history. For a more detailed account see the books listed in the Sources.

Sikh was built at Govan, Scotland, and launched at the end of 1937. She was a Tribal Class destroyer with heavier armament and greater size than her predecessors, costing £27 million (in today's pounds) with a complement of approximately 250 officers and men. Compared with today's equivalent, which cost ten times as much, she was a bargain.

At the outbreak of WW2, Sikh was patrolling in the Red Sea but returned to the UK for duty with the Home Fleet. Her first action took place during the evacuation of Allied troops from Norway in early May 1940. For the rest of that year, she operated in countermeasures to respond to a potential German invasion.

On 21 May, HMS Sikh sailed from the Clyde as part of a destroyer screen for an Atlantic troop convoy. When the German battleship Bismarck broke out into the Atlantic, Sikh was redirected to join in the pursuit and was present at the final battle, witnessing Bismarck's destruction on 27 May 1941*.

HMS Sikh was then transferred to the Mediterranean theatre as British naval focus shifted to keeping Malta supplied and disrupting Axis supplies to North Africa. This is where my dad's involvement began (11/Dec/1941).

I wonder what he thought as he walked aboard HMS Sikh for the first time. This photo is from an earlier time. When he joined the pennant designation (the number on the side) was G82.

Little could he know that he would immediately be involved in one of Sikh's greatest successes and that his service would cover Sikh's final nine months, her entire combat history in the Mediterranean.

* The Bismarck was a formidable foe and posed a major threat to Atlantic convoys, and its sinking was a critical Royal Navy victory.

His first time on Sikh she was in the company of three other destroyers – Maori, Legion and the Dutch Isaac Sweers – sailing east from Gibraltar to reinforce the Mediterranean Fleet. Their passage soon became eventful. It was Sikh's first major fleet action in the Mediterranean, which became known as the Battle of Cape Bon.

This map shows the main locations mentioned in the remainder of the essay.

In the pre-dawn hours of 13 December 1941, the four destroyers intercepted an Italian squadron off Cape Bon, Tunisia. The Italians' ships, which included two light cruisers, were attempting to take aviation fuel and supplies to North Africa for German Field Marshal Rommel's army. The destroyers, led by Sikh, closed to point-blank range. In a short, violent night action, gunfire and torpedoes from the British and Dutch ships set both cruisers ablaze and sank them within minutes.

The action was a significant victory for the Allies and further tightened the supply crisis

facing Rommel, with 2,000 tons of fuel being lost. Sadly, more than 800 Italians were killed, a loss often rounded in official accounts to about 900.

After the action, Sikh proceeded to Malta, arriving by midday on 13 December to a celebratory welcome. Just six months had passed since my dad left his job on the railways, and he was now part of a victorious Royal Navy crew.

Two days later, Sikh was at sea again, joining Operation MF.1, a convoy mounted to bring urgently needed fuel and supplies into besieged Malta. On 15 December she sailed from Alexandria with her flotilla to escort four merchant ships, the most important one being the fast tanker Breconshire, loaded with aviation spirit.

On 17 December the convoy came under heavy Axis air attack and then encountered an Italian battle squadron in what became the First Battle of Sirte. The escort destroyers, including Sikh, laid smoke and initiated torpedo attacks to deter the Italians, gaining the time needed for the convoy to avoid significant losses.

The battle ended indecisively, but strategically it was a success: Breconshire and most of the convoy reached Malta on 18 December, though one merchant vessel was lost. Afterwards, the four destroyers remained with the fleet and arrived safely at Alexandria in the early hours of 19 December 1941.

In the context of these two encounters, this account describes the capabilities of Tribal Class destroyers and their crews, as depicted in *Tribal Class Destroyers: Some Battles of HMS Sikh:*

> Rate of fire was critical, however, it was more than just the rate of fire, it was the rate of fire combined with manoeuvrability of the Tribal Class vessels managed to provide the necessary cover, just as it had been theorised they would when they were conceived, for a torpedo attack to be pressed home strongly – aided of course by the cloak of surprise.
>
> This attack highlights the potency of an aggressively handled destroyer force; the Tribals, thanks to the confidence of their captains and the esprit de corps of crews, always epitomised this – if any crew could get the best out of their ship it would be a Tribal crew. They didn't believe they were the elite of the elite, they knew they were. As a result they expected conduct of themselves worthy of that.

After his first week on HMS Sikh, then, my dad had been involved in two significant battles. I am sure his Christmas in Alexandria wasn't exactly restful, but Sikh was not involved in any other sorties until 5 January 1942, when it departed with the cruisers HMS Naiad and HMS Euryalus, and destroyers including HMS Kipling, Kingston, Foxhound and Gurkha – their role, escorting the supply ship Glengyle bound for Malta.

Simultaneously, the tanker Breconshire, which was now in Malta, departed for Alexandria with a separate escort. Mid-voyage on 7 January, Sikh's group rendezvoused with this escort, and the operation essentially became an exchange: Breconshire joined Sikh's formation bound for Egypt, while Sikh and other destroyers joined the Malta-bound escort. Sikh arrived safely back in Valletta harbour in Malta on 8 January.

A week later, Sikh took part in another convoy mission. On 16 January 1942, two small convoys sailed from Alexandria for Malta; Sikh and sister Tribal Zulu were then at Malta and joined the covering force with a cruiser and three other destroyers.

This force put to sea on 17 January to meet the incoming convoys. During the ensuing transit, the convoy escorts faced fierce Axis air and submarine attacks. Despite losses, the remaining merchant ships arrived in Malta on 19 January 1942. After delivering the convoy, Sikh returned to Malta and then returned to Alexandria with other fleet units.

This whirlwind of sorties continued when on 23 January 1942, the Sikh, Zulu and other destroyers and a cruiser conducted an offensive sweep from Malta, attacking an enemy coastal convoy, then returning safely to port.

The crew of HMS was about to get a new captain. Commander Stokes left to become captain of the aircraft carrier HMS Colossus. For a couple of weeks, Lieutenant Cole-Hamilton served as 'Lieutenant in Command,' and then on 21 February 1942, Captain St John A. Micklethwait took over. I remember this man's name from my childhood as somebody my dad much admired. As I learnt in the essay 'HMS Sikh's last battle', so did the rest of the crew.

During this time, my dad's rank changed to Able Seaman (1/Feb/1942). This progression was extremely fast, even by wartime standards. He had been aboard Sikh for less than two months and out of Collingwood for less than half a year.

The following monthly summary reveals that life aboard the Sikh in 1942 carried on much as it had in the final months of 1941 – intensely busy and fraught with danger. When researching and writing this section, I kept reflecting on the slow pace of my life, with a few of its ups and downs, and the intensity experienced by sailors fighting the war in the Mediterranean.

This map shows the range of the Sikh's operations during the following months

February

By early 1942, the Royal Navy's Force K, once the offensive strike squadron at Malta, no longer existed in its original form. Its cruisers and destroyers had been devastated by mines off Tripoli on 19 December 1941. With Malta under relentless air attack, the island ceased to be a viable base for a permanent surface striking force.

In place of Force K, surface operations were reorganised around Admiral Philip Vian's cruiser squadron at Alexandria. For convoy battles, Vian divided his mixed forces of cruisers and destroyers into temporary task groupings (commonly labelled Forces A, B, C etc.). These were not permanent formations like Force K but ad hoc tactical groups assigned to protect convoys, lay smoke or make torpedo attacks.

During early February, Sikh, along with Maori and Zulu, was briefly back at Malta, forming the nucleus of the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla. Their mission was to act as a striking force against Axis supply convoys to North Africa and to cover the eastern approaches for Malta convoys.

On the night of 11/12 February, heavy German air raids struck the harbour, sinking HMS Maori and leaving Sikh and Zulu increasingly exposed. Malta was judged untenable as a base for destroyers.

The next day, Sikh, Zulu, the cruiser Penelope and destroyers Lively and Hero sailed from Malta escorting the tanker Breconshire and two merchant vessels that had discharged their cargos and were heading back toward Alexandria. They endured almost continuous air attack. The freighter Rowallan Castle was disabled and taken in tow by Zulu, but eventually scuttled to prevent capture.

On 14–15 February, Sikh and Zulu rendezvoused with Admiral Vian's incoming eastbound convoy and detached from the Malta escort and reinforced the covering force (Force B). This manoeuvre reflected the new reality: instead of operating as part of a fixed Malta-based 'Force K', Sikh was now part of the flexible escort groups run out of Alexandria.

By 16 February, Sikh had reached Alexandria, where she was formally designated leader of

the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla* under Captain Micklethwait.

March

By March 1942, Sikh was one of the few remaining large destroyers available in the eastern Mediterranean, and her work intensified – something that's hard to imagine. At the beginning of the month, she escorted the drifter Ocean Spray to Tobruk in company with Zulu and Kelvin, a reminder of the constant need to keep the port supplied and reinforced. On 11 March Sikh was again at sea with the escort forces when they came under heavy attack from German aircraft. In this raid the cruiser Naiad was struck and sunk, a sharp blow to the already thin British cruiser strength.

A few days later, on the night of 15–16 March, Sikh and Zulu carried out a bombardment of Rhodes, striking at Axis facilities on the island. It was a short, sharp operation, in line with the flotilla's practice of harassing enemy bases whenever possible.

The most demanding test came on 22 March, when Sikh sailed with Admiral Vian's escort group to cover Convoy MW10 on its passage to Malta. The convoy, with four heavily laden merchant vessels, soon faced interception by the Italian battlefleet. In the ensuing Second Battle of Sirte, Sikh, as flotilla leader, was in the forefront of the destroyer actions. She and Zulu repeatedly laid smoke screens across the convoy's course and made torpedo attacks to keep the Italians at arm's length. At one point Sikh was straddled by heavy shells, but she pressed on undamaged. By nightfall the Italians had broken off, unwilling to risk further engagement, leaving the convoy still afloat. Although two of the four merchant ships were later sunk by air attack, Vian's destroyers had prevented the convoy's annihilation by surface forces.

Sikh returned with the surviving escorts to Alexandria, having come through a month of near-constant action. Vian, in his official report, commended the destroyers' smoke-laying and torpedo attacks, which had been decisive in preventing the Italians from overwhelming the convoy.

April

By April 1942, Sikh continued to be employed on the routine of convoy escort and offensive sweeps along the North African coast. In the early part of the month she was again at work covering supply runs to Tobruk, often in company with Zulu and other destroyers of the flotilla in the area. On 8–9 April she was engaged on convoy protection duties along the coast, part of the steady stream of small but essential operations needed to sustain the garrison.

On 21 April Sikh and Zulu carried out a bombardment of Derna, striking at harbour facilities and supply areas used by Axis forces in Libya. The raid followed the pattern of earlier operations such as the bombardment of Rhodes in March – fast, sharp bombardments intended to disrupt enemy bases and coastal traffic.

A few days later, Sikh was shifted to a different sector of the war. On 24 April she and HMS Kipling sailed from Alexandria to cover a convoy from Port Said to the ports of

* The 22nd Destroyer Flotilla was a formal flotilla formation that acted as a striking force of destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean, especially against Axis supply convoys between Italy and North Africa and to provide reinforcement and close cover to Malta convoys.

Palestine and Syria. After reaching Haifa, they conducted anti-submarine sweeps, and on 28 April sortied again to hunt a reported U-boat, though the contact proved unconfirmed. By the end of the month they had escorted the convoy safely back into Port Said. These operations, though less dramatic than the Malta runs, were vital in safeguarding supply lines to Allied forces in Palestine and Syria, and indirectly to the forward bases supporting Tobruk.

At the same time, the land war was in a lull before the storm. The Eighth Army held the Gazala Line* while Rommel's forces built up west of it, both sides preparing for the major offensive that would erupt in May. In this period of relative stalemate, keeping Tobruk and the eastern bases supplied by sea was essential to sustaining the British position ashore.

Cyrenaica was the eastern coastal region of Libya, stretching from the Gulf of Sirte to the Egyptian border. During the desert war it was the main battleground between Rommel's Axis forces advancing from the west and the British Eighth Army defending from the east.

May

By May 1942 Sikh remained heavily engaged in the eastern Mediterranean. At the beginning of the month she returned to Alexandria from Port Said in company with the cruiser Coventry and destroyer Kipling, concluding escort work between Egypt and the ports of Palestine and Syria.

Soon after, Sikh took part in fleet exercises off Alexandria designed to rebuild the effectiveness of the Mediterranean Fleet, which had been badly weakened in recent months. On 4 May she exercised with four cruisers and a screen of destroyers, while the following day she and HMS Jackal carried out anti-submarine training with the submarine Otus and the escort destroyer HMS Airedale.

The pattern of the month was thus one of alternating escort duty and training drills. On 20, 27 and 30 May Sikh is recorded exercising again with cruisers, newly arrived escort destroyers and allied Greek ships. These exercises included radar and night-fighting practice, sharpening readiness for the next major convoy operation.

May was quieter for Sikh in terms of direct offensive action, but the month was costly for the fleet as a whole. Between 11 and 13 May, Kipling, Lively and Jackal were sunk by German aircraft off the Libyan coast. Sikh avoided that fate and by late May was one of the few veteran destroyers still operational in the eastern Mediterranean.

On land, this was the month Rommel launched his great offensive: on 26 May the Axis struck the Gazala Line. Against this backdrop, Sikh's constant escort and patrol work, together with the fleet's rebuilding efforts, was essential in maintaining the naval strength needed to keep Tobruk supplied.

June

By June 1942 Sikh was involved in one of the hardest-fought convoy battles of the Mediterranean war. On 13 June, she left Alexandria with Zulu and five other destroyers to reinforce the destroyer screen of Operation Vigorous, a last attempt to send a convoy from

* The Gazala Line was a series of defensive positions established by the British Eighth Army west of Tobruk in early 1942, running south from the coastal village of Gazala into the desert. It was designed to block Rommel's advance towards Egypt and to anchor the defence of Cyrenaica.

Egypt to Malta. Sikh's group included two specially fitted rescue ships and additional escorts to join Rear-Admiral Vian's covering force of seven cruisers and some 16 destroyers.

For three days, 14–16 June, the convoy pushed westward under near-continuous attack. On the 14th the freighter Bhutan was sunk and the tanker Potaro disabled by German bombers, while Sikh helped shield the rescue ships as they took survivors aboard. That night German motor torpedo boats broke into the formation: the cruiser Newcastle was hit forward, and HMS Hasty was struck fatally before being scuttled on 15 June. As the convoy pressed on, air attacks mounted in intensity. Dive-bombers pounded the escorts; the destroyer Airedale was bombed and scuttled, and the Australian destroyer Nestor was disabled beyond repair. Sikh and Zulu helped beat off wave after wave of attackers, but by the afternoon of 15 June the Italian battle fleet was closing fast and the British ships were running low on fuel and ammunition. The order came to abandon the attempt.

The withdrawal proved costly. In the early hours of 16 June the cruiser HMS Hermione was torpedoed and sank with heavy loss of life, though hundreds of her crew were saved by the escorts. Later that morning Nestor, still under tow, was scuttled. By the evening Sikh was back at Alexandria, one of the few destroyers to emerge undamaged from a desperate operation that ended in failure: none of the merchant ships reached Malta, and the Royal Navy had lost two destroyers and a cruiser, with several more ships crippled.

The month ended with a major reversal of the land battle. On 21 June Tobruk fell to Rommel after a rapid assault, and within days Axis armour was driving into Egypt. On 27 June Sikh was among the destroyers tasked with escorting the two remaining battleships out of Alexandria to safer ports, a precaution as the front closed on El Alamein. This marked the end of her service with the main Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria, bringing to a close a chapter of unrelenting convoy battles.

July

HMS Sikh was still part of the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla but the wider strategic situation had shifted. The loss of Tobruk on 21 June and Rommel's drive into Egypt forced the British to pull back to a defensive line at El Alamein, barely 60 miles from Alexandria. With the Eighth Army holding there and the front stabilised, large-scale convoy operations to Malta were suspended; the Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria had been reduced and was no longer in a position to conduct supply runs westward.

For Sikh, this meant a temporary lull in major actions after the battering of Operation Vigorous. During July she remained based at Alexandria, carrying out patrols, local escort work and readiness exercises while the fleet reorganised. On several occasions Sikh was involved in anti-submarine patrols and local convoy duties along the Egyptian coast, tasks essential to safeguarding the supply routes feeding the Eighth Army at El Alamein.

Meanwhile, on land, the First Battle of El Alamein was fought through most of July. The Eighth Army managed to halt Rommel's advance in a series of hard defensive battles, preventing the Axis from breaking through to the Nile Delta.

During what must have felt like a month's holiday for the crew of Sikh, my dad's personnel record showed that he had time to undertake a course on torpedo and anti-submarine warfare. This fits, as I have memories of him discussing the operation of depth charges. Hard to believe that 13 months before, he was a signwriter.

August

In August 1942 HMS Sikh remained in the eastern Mediterranean*, still part of the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla and based at Alexandria. After the heavy losses of June and the lull of July, the flotilla spent much of August engaged in patrols, training exercises and local escort work along the Egyptian coast. The fleet was in a period of recovery, its destroyer strength diminished, and Sikh was one of the few veteran Tribal Class ships still available for frontline service.

A major naval operation was launched to deliver supplies to Malta, which was one of the most critical supply convoys of the war (Operation Pedestal). The island was under constant Axis attack and was close to collapse. Its airfields were short of fuel, its people short of food. Malta's survival was crucial to the Allies as a base to strike at Rommel's supply lines to North Africa.

Code-named WS.21S, the convoy departed the Clyde on 3 August and passed through the Strait of Gibraltar on 10 August. What then unfolded was among the fiercest convoy actions of the war that took place over the western† and eastern Mediterranean.

As the convoy advanced eastward from 10 to 15 August, Axis aircraft, submarines and motor torpedo boats were constantly attacking. On 11 August, the carrier HMS Eagle was sunk by a German submarine with the loss of 131 men. Over the following days, the cruisers Cairo and Manchester and the destroyer Foresight were lost, while many merchant ships were hit or destroyed in the narrow waters between Sicily and Tunisia.

Out of 14 merchant ships that had set out, only five reached Malta. Most famous among them was the American tanker SS Ohio, which was repeatedly bombed and torpedoed but somehow kept afloat. She limped into Valletta's Grand Harbour on 15 August 1942, the Feast of the Assumption. The fuel she carried allowed Malta's aircraft to keep flying. Winston Churchill later called it 'the convoy that saved Malta'.

From Alexandria, Admiral Sir Henry Harwood ordered a diversion, Operation MG3, which was intended to mislead Axis reconnaissance into believing that another convoy was also heading westward towards Malta. The hope was that this deception would stretch enemy resources and confuse intelligence reports during the critical days when Pedestal was under attack.

Among the ships assigned to this feint were the destroyers Sikh and Zulu. Alongside the cruisers Cleopatra and Dido, they sailed from Alexandria on 10 August 1942, the same day the real Pedestal convoy entered the Sicilian Narrows. Their task was to steam westwards with merchant ships 'loaded as if bound for Malta', make enough wireless transmissions and flare signals to appear genuine, and then turn back under cover of darkness before daylight betrayed the ruse. It was an operation requiring precision and discipline rather than gunfire – as for its success, nobody knows.

When HMS Sikh returned to port a few days later, she resumed normal duties in the eastern Mediterranean. The diversion for Operation Pedestal was the final successful opera-

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* The eastern Mediterranean is the region including southern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Palestine.

† The western Mediterranean is the region including Spain, France, Italy (especially the western coast, plus islands like Sardinia and Sicily) and Malta.

tion she completed. I wonder if the Sikh's crew knew the terrible losses inflicted on the convoy: one aircraft carrier, two light cruisers, one destroyer and nine merchant vessels.

On land, the front remained locked at El Alamein after the July battles. Both sides were regrouping: Rommel's forces, weakened by supply shortages, prepared for another push, while the British Eighth Army awaited reinforcements and a new commander. In this tense pause, Sikh's role was to keep the seaward flank secure and stand ready for renewed operations.

For the men of HMS Sikh, 1942 had been a year of unrelenting stress. They had fought through the running battles of the Malta convoys, endured dive-bombers and torpedo boats, and watched their fellow warships vanish in flame and smoke. Sikh's sailors had become veterans of a destroyer force whittled down by attrition, their survival a mixture of endurance, skill and sheer luck.

By the end of the month plans were already being laid for a bold amphibious strike on Tobruk. Sikh's luck, if you can call it that, was about to run out. What happened next is related in the essay 'HMS Sikh's last battle'.

This brief account of HMS Sikh's service in the Mediterranean highlights just how remarkable the Tribal Class destroyers were. Only now do I begin to appreciate what it must have meant to serve as part of the crew of such a distinguished ship. As Alexander Clarke observes in *Tribals, Battles & Darings*, their contribution was central to the Royal Navy's fight in the Second World War:

> The Royal Navy won many successes in the Second World War, and the capital ships and carriers gained the glory, the cruisers being awarded much of what was left, but much of what they achieved was with the help and sacrifice of remarkable smaller ships, foremost amongst them being the 'Tribal' class destroyers. It was these 'back pocket cruisers', the first general-purpose destroyers to serve with the Royal Navy, and the forebears of the vessels plying their duties on the world's oceans today, that made such a difference.
>
> That difference is exemplified by the service of the sisters Cossack, Eskimo, Sikh and Nubian. These were the ships which fought the war, day in and day out, and they could do this because their design enabled them to adapt to every circumstance, a lesson which should not be forgotten by contemporary governments or naval architects.

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