

Memories from the first commission of the earlier HMS Defender 1953-4



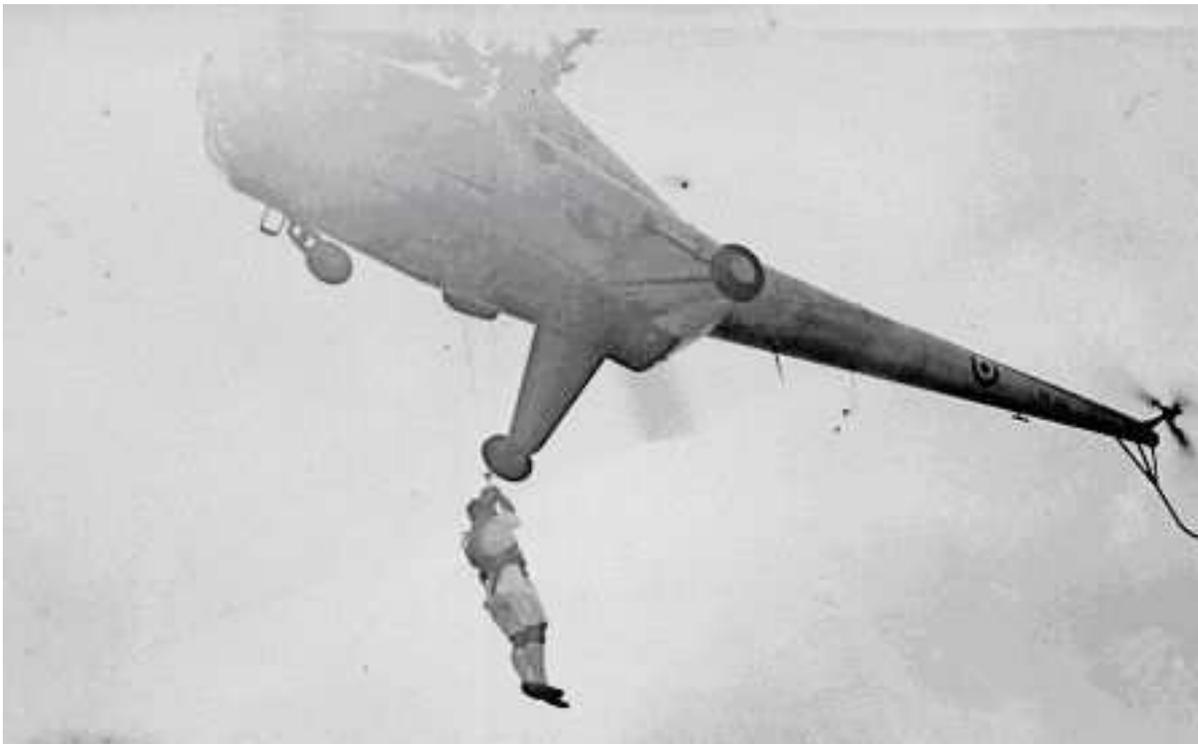
By Captain MRH Page PhD FIMechE MIET Royal Navy

I joined HMS Defender in January 1953 from the Ordnance Engineering specialist course at HMS Thunderer, the Royal Naval Engineering College Manadon, including time at HMS Vernon and HMS Excellent (Whale Island). I was a “steam plumber” with purple between my stripes. The ship had completed her acceptance trials, and on commissioning from Alexander Stephen & Son's yard on the Clyde, was about to start work up at Portland. The Commanding Officer was Captain “Fred” Stannard and my boss was Commander (E) Dick Hart.

The Work Up was unusual because we were preparing to deploy to the Far East for the Korean war but at the same time knew that we would be taking part in the Coronation Review of the Fleet at Spithead. This created a very clear conflict of interest so we were going to action stations in the forenoon and painting ship after noon. In the event we took part in the review and sailed the next morning for the Far East. It was an interesting passage!

As the Ordnance Engineer Officer, I was responsible for the guns torpedoes and associated equipment. While the torpedo tubes were of a well established design the turrets and the guns themselves were both new. We had problems! We would go to action stations at first light and fire the guns but the breech blocks would seize and our efforts to free them failed. Not good when going to war. Signals ahead brought help at Gibraltar Malta and Singapore but it was not until Hong Kong that it was sorted. There, repairs were completed and we sailed into the operational zone for a short time before the armistice was signed.

We saw action, bombarding a North Korean railway and being frightened by a MIG . All the systems worked. Later I lost all my kit and the only mementos of that commission are these two pictures.



This shows me joining HMS Ocean for an RPC to lunch with my chum. The helicopter came to collect me and I was transferred swinging like a pendulum. Still dangling, I was put down on the carrier deck and taken down below to the wardroom. Shortly afterwards the pilot came in grinning from ear to ear saying sorry about that! "The winch jammed and as we had no alternative helicopter to collect you had you fallen in the drink, we decided to leave it alone and get you safely to the carrier".

It's hardly surprising that I decided to go back by jackstay transfer shown here in the second picture saved from that commission.

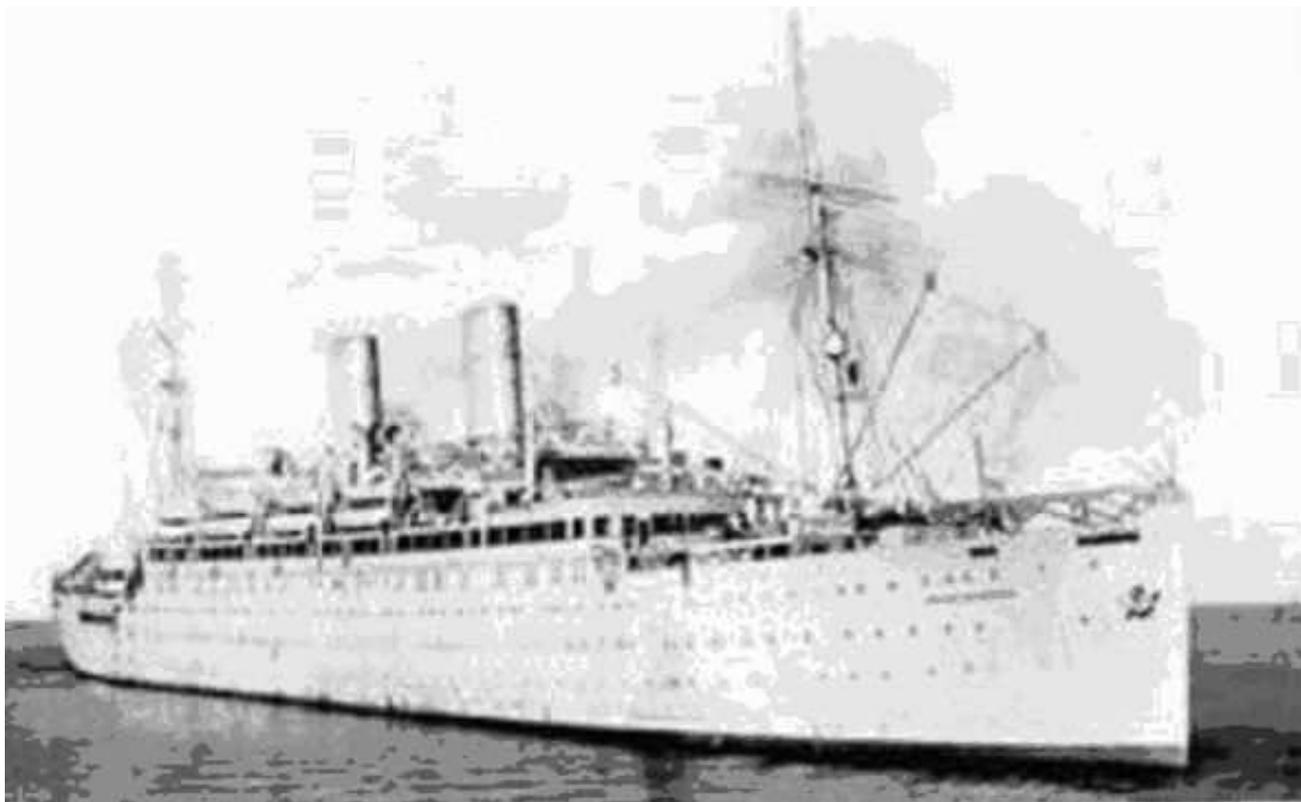


The other chap was a Surgeon Lieutenant joining us for a few weeks.

An interesting incident after the armistice had been declared happened when we were alongside in Sasebo (perhaps it was Kure) in Japan for a maintenance period. Captain Stannard was asked if a released p.o.w. could be brought on board, to sit in the Wardroom during working hours to help him to readjust to being back in friendly hands. The Fleet Air Arm officer had been taken prisoner by the North Koreans and his treatment had been appalling. He had attempted to escape and his plan was to make for the coast to steal a fishing boat and sail to a friendly country. Having reached the sea he found it frozen. He knew that if he was captured he would face summary execution so made his way back to the prison camp! He suffered terrible privations and only his extraordinary courage enabled him survive. On arrival back at the camp he was tortured and kept in solitary confinement until the armistice. Lieut. Dennis Lankford RNVR (for that was his name) hardly spoke during his visits and after a few days we sailed on our next deployment. Later I discovered that a book was written describing his ordeal called "I Defy!"

I was expecting to leave the ship after less than a year to return to Greenwich for the Ordnance Engineering dagger course but I enjoyed life so much that I asked Captain Stannard to see if I could stay on a bit longer. As a result, I was able to stay until 1954.

I was then relieved in the Far East and caught a troopship, the Empire Windrush, for the passage home to England.



There were some 1200 service personnel and families plus a ships company of about 300.

It was a very slow trip and we had a number of interruptions because of problems with the main engines.

In particular we broke down in Port Said because the cylinder head bolts were stretching. A temporary repair was effected by using baulks of timber shored against the deckhead. We sailed eventually on passage for Gibraltar and home.

On the last weekend of the voyage the New Zealand Shipping Company offered a gala evening. It was great fun and everybody drank much too much and went to bed in the early hours of Sunday only to be awoken just before six o'clock in the morning by either an explosion or the tannoy announcing emergency stations.

I was given a shake by my Commander (E) Dick Hart from HMS Defender who was also on board as a passenger. He said that he had heard a very ominous noise and was sure that things were not right and I should get dressed.

On getting to the upper deck I saw that the ship was on fire and paint was peeling off the funnels.



We abandoned ship.

Women and children were lowered to the waterline in lifeboats.

Many of the young soldiers jumped into the warm Mediterranean and skylarked until help arrived.

Everyone has heard of the Titanic. Very few know this story which is just as remarkable.

Although four watchkeepers were killed in the engine room explosion, all 1500 passengers and crew escaped to safety.

Fortunately, the sea was calm, the sun was shining and ships were soon seen on the horizon responding to distress calls.

“AWAY SEABOATS CREW AND LOWERERS!”



I took charge of this lifeboat which was one of the last to be launched.

It contained mostly officers from all three services.

Many ships were arriving and I chose the P&O freighter the Socotra who took us to Algiers where the French were most hospitable.

In the photo, we are waiting to reach the ships ladder where one of the Socotra's seaboats is unloading survivors picked up out of the water.

An assistant Purser had, like many of the passengers, jumped into the sea with a satchel full of ledgers and pound notes. These all spilled out when he hit the sea. The young soldiers thought this was great!

He was seen, swimming furiously and shouting "give it back, give it back! It's company money"

Needless to say it was a case of finders keepers.

Survivors were picked up by ships which answered the distress call and here they are resting on deck in the morning sun, hanging clothes out to dry on board the Socotra.



We were all taken to Algiers where the French military took us to barracks and issued clothing, money and fed us.

We then had a night on the town before embarking in HMS Triumph, a light fleet carrier, serving as the cadet training ship.

The Commander (E) of HMS Defender, Dick Hart, was also a passenger and here he is on the deck of the Socotra with two other survivors.



After he gave me a shake and I got dressed, I collected my camera and films so was able to take some interesting pictures recording the drama.

They were even of interest to Life magazine but never got published there.

All 1500 of us spent one night on board the Triumph before disembarking in Gibraltar. This picture of one family was taken in the Suez Canal.



And this shows them about to leave the Triumph

I had taken photos and a newspaper in Algiers developed them and bought four while we were there.

On arrival back in the UK I was sent on survivors leave during which time I managed to trace some of the photographs which had been pirated onto the network from Algiers. I went down Fleet Street looking in the windows of the various newspapers and in many of them there were pictures of the Empire Windrush in flames. I went in with the negatives. On enquiry, the pictures had no attribution and the editors were prepared to give me some additional cash in recompense.. This came in very useful in restocking a completely empty wardrobe and finding a bride!



In retrospect I think that those days in HMS Defender were among the happiest of my service career of 37 years .

My team of ordnance artificers in particular were the most skilled and cheerful bunch.

I learnt a tremendous amount from them in my first commission as a fully qualified member of the team.

I pray that the new Defender will be an equally happy and efficient ship.

Michael Page 12th April 2012