

The Royal Navy Experience of Robert Gillies Abercrombie¹

16th November 1942 – 17th August 1946

The starting date of the Second World War is generally held to be September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland and subsequent declarations of war on Germany by the United Kingdom, France and the British Dominions.

Robert Gillies Abercrombie joined the Royal Navy and entered under the [National Service Act 1939](#) on 16th November 1942 at the age of 18 years and 9 months. At this time Bobby had recently moved with his parents and two younger brothers to 22 Farmeloan Road in Rutherglen, where his father worked as a plumber.

Bobby had been born at 243 Hospital Street, Gorbals, Glasgow on 24th February 1924 and prior to naval service he had been an apprentice grocer. On joining the Royal Navy he was recorded as being 5ft 9³/₄in with a 36¹/₂in chest measurement, fair hair, brown eyes and a fresh complexion. It was also noted that he had a scar on his left eyebrow.



His first posting at the substantive rating of [Ordinary Seaman](#) on Monday 16th November 1942 was to [HMS Ganges](#), Royal Navy shore establishment in Shotley, 10 miles south-east of Ipswich, in Suffolk. This post was administered within the Port Division of Chatham. HMS Ganges had been a boys' training centre but on the outbreak of the [Second World War](#) had its use temporarily changed to a centre for 'Hostilities Only New Entry Training'. By the end of the war 60,968 ratings had passed through Ganges and it was returned to its original use as a boys' training centre.

So it was on Ganges that he obtained his first training in seamanship. One of the early requirements, as might be expected, was to obtain a swimming qualification, which he did on 19th November 1942.

Bobby's stay at HMS Ganges for the early part of his training was fairly short-lived and he left this establishment on Thursday 7th January 1943. It is unlikely that he would have been able to return home for Christmas. His record shows that after just 6 weeks his character was rated on 31st December as "Very Good" and it would remain as that throughout the duration of his service.

¹ The personal information on which this account is based is taken from the main record of service, which is the form S-459 – the Certificate of Service - which records name, next of kin, postings, rating, etc. and is a potted account of each member's entire service. The original document was handed over to the member on discharge and is the sole record in existence.

However, before leaving HMS Ganges, he participated (3rd from right, 2nd front row) in a group photograph with his fellow trainees.



HMS Ganges circa January 1943

Bobby's next posting commenced on Friday, 8th January 1943 and was to HMS Victory, which as every schoolchild knows was Lord Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar. Victory had been in dry dock in [Portsmouth Royal Naval Dockyard](#) since 1922. Those in naval barracks and at the dockyard at Portsmouth were nominally posted to HMS Victory.

Bobby's posting to HMS Victory lasted just 2 weeks and on Friday 22nd January 1943 he was posted to another shore establishment - HMS Europa, under the administration of Port Division of Lowestoft.

Europa was the name of the Central Depot for the Royal Naval Patrol Service in Lowestoft from early in the Second World War until she was decommissioned in 1946. Prior to being named Europa, she was named Sparrows Nest, and Pembroke X. With this posting, Bobby's future in the Royal Navy and his role during the Second World War was settled. He would remain in the Royal Naval Patrol Service for the duration of his service.

The [Royal Naval Patrol Service](#) (RNPS) had its origins in the trawlermen and fisherman who belonged to the [Royal Naval Reserve](#) Trawler Section in the period leading up to the war. When the Royal Naval Reserves were mobilised in August 1939, [HMS Europa](#), usually known as [Sparrow's Nest](#), became the Central Depot of the RNPS. It was located at [Lowestoft](#), the most easterly point of [Great Britain](#), and was then the closest British military establishment to the enemy.

The RNPS fought in all theatres of the war, from the Arctic to the Mediterranean from the Atlantic to the Far East, involved in convoy duty, minesweeping and anti-submarine work. Most particularly they kept the British Coast clear of the mines that were wreaking havoc with merchant ships.

The officers and seamen were mainly ex-fishermen who had manned the trawlers, fishing in all weathers off Iceland, and were some of the best seamen in the world although they did not take too kindly to Naval discipline. These men also took very high casualties in the early part of the war, so their numbers were made up by "hostilities only" men like Bobby who had had very little or no connection with the sea before the war.

When Bobby commenced his 10-week posting to HMS Europa, his substantive rating was now Stoker, 2nd Class. For this he would be paid the sum of 2s 6d per diem.

On April 6th, 1943, Bobby was posted to HMS Midge, which was another shore establishment just a few miles up the coast at Great Yarmouth. This was one of the major coastal force bases on the East Coast and several flotillas of [Motor Torpedo Boats](#) (MTBs) were based there.

This posting lasted just 6 weeks and on 16th May, 1943, Bobby returned to the RNPS Central Depot, HMS Europa, at Lowestoft and remained there until 27th July 1943, at which time he was posted to HMS St Christopher in Scotland.

[HMS St Christopher](#) was a Coastal Forces Training Base of the Royal Navy and was located in and around Fort William, Scotland.

Commissioned in October 1940, HMS St Christopher was in service for a total of four years, until being decommissioned in December 1944. The base existed to train the crews of a variety of different inshore patrol craft. To enable this, an Admiralty Floating Dock was moored at Corpach in Loch Linnhe for some of the time. Most of the courses lasted a number of weeks and involved such activities as firing torpedoes from Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB). A Westland Lysander or a Blackburn Skua would occasionally fly over the base to allow practices on anti-aircraft guns. Over its time in service, the base is estimated to have trained around 55,000 personnel from a number of different allied countries.

The base had a staff of several hundred, billeted in hotels around the town, with extra space being provided by Nissen huts. Most of engineering and mechanical works were based at Corpach, and consisted of a number of sheds and slipways. The base was defended by a number of anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, which were also used to defend the town of Fort William herself.

By April 1942 there were around 80 to 90 boats at the training base, comprising a number of different flotillas. They consisted of nine motor torpedo boats, thirty-seven motor gun boats, fourteen high speed motor anti-submarine boats, and a number of motor launches. Several harbour defence motor launches were also attached to defend the base. A number of different boats were attached at different times to serve as depot ships, training vessels and accommodation ships.

The record suggests that Bobby spent most of his time training aboard HDL 1373, which is likely to have been a [Harbour Defence Launch](#). It is likely that, as a Stoker, a large part of his training would be concerned with the operation and

maintenance of the propulsion and other mechanical machinery on board, as well with battle and emergency procedures.

Reproduced below are some photographs of friends showing the annotations on the reverse.



The reference to ML1373 suggests that Ping was a fellow trainee at HMS St Christopher at Fort William. As the photos have the same studio backdrop, Lew would likely have trained there too.

On 21st December 1943, over a year since Bobby had joined the Navy, his training appeared to have come to an end. His posting to HMS St Christopher terminated and he was posted back to HMS Europa, the RNPS Central Depot. It would be comforting to think that he was allowed to spend Christmas and New Year at home in Rutherglen, as he would surely have passed very close to there on his way back to Lowestoft. Whether Bobby knew it cannot be clear, but he was about to be given his first overseas posting.

This commenced on 14th January 1944 when he was posted to the eastern Mediterranean to the shore establishment HMS Nile and its tender HMS Mosquito. Mosquito was a Royal Navy coastal forces base at [Alexandria](#), Egypt, operational from 1942 to 1945 as a repair centre and base for coastal forces boats.

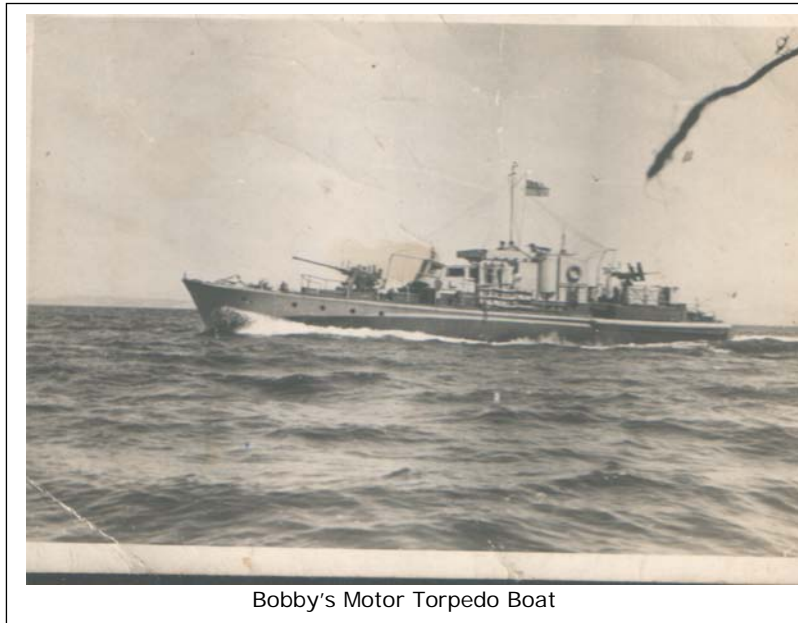
Mosquito was commissioned at Mahroussa Jetty on 15 February 1942. The base and slipways were situated alongside King Farouk's palace. The accounts were centralised at HMS Nile and Mosquito was established as an independent command. She had a nominated



depot ship, the 16 foot Dinghy No. 1955. The base was in operation until being paid off to Care and Maintenance on 1st December 1945.

By this time, Bobby's substantive rating was Stoker (P.S) – the P.S. was probably an abbreviation for Patrol Service. A Stoker was responsible to the senior engineer on board for the operation, smooth running and maintenance of the propulsion and other mechanical machinery on board, including the generation of electricity, as well as fuelling, watering, structural maintenance and repair, damage control and fire-fighting when required.

Although posted to a shore base, Bobby would nevertheless have spent considerable amount of his time at sea and on patrol. The small boats as used by the Royal Naval Patrol Service were not ideally suited to long periods at sea and it is likely that Bobby would have slept most nights on dry land at his shore base.



Bobby's Motor Torpedo Boat

This was by far the longest continuous posting that Bobby experienced during the war and was to last over 16 months until 24th May 1945. Fortunately, the battle for the Mediterranean was substantially over by the time Bobby was posted there.

The [Battle of the Mediterranean](#) was the name given to the naval campaign fought in the Mediterranean Sea during World War II. For the most part, the campaign was fought between the forces of the Italian Royal Navy (Regia Marina), supported by other Axis naval forces, and the forces of the British Royal Navy, supported by other Allied naval forces.

Each side had three overall goals in this battle. The first was to attack the supply lines of the other side. The second was to keep open the supply lines to their own armies in North Africa. The third was to destroy the ability of the opposing navy to wage war at sea.

Outside of the Pacific, the Mediterranean saw the largest conventional naval warfare during the war. In particular, Allied forces struggled to supply and retain the key naval and air base of Malta.

The Mediterranean was a traditional focus of British maritime power and the Mediterranean Fleet was Britain's instrument of this maritime power. Out-numbered by the forces of Italian Royal Navy, the British plan was to hold the three decisive strategic points of Gibraltar, Malta, and the Suez Canal. By holding these points, the British held open vital supply routes. Malta was the lynch-pin of

the whole system. It provided a needed stop for Allied convoys and a base from which to attack the Axis supply routes.

Further, the German Navy (Kriegsmarine), by U-boat campaign, aimed at isolating Gibraltar, Malta, and the Suez Canal so as to break Britain's trade route. More than sixty U-boats were sent to disrupt shipping in the sea, though many were already attacked at the Strait of Gibraltar controlled by Britain (of which nine were sunk while attempting passage and ten more were damaged).

[Malta](#)'s position between [Sicily](#) and North Africa was perfect to interdict Axis supply convoys destined for North Africa. It could thus influence the campaign in North Africa and support Allied actions against Italy. The Axis recognised this and made great efforts to neutralise it as a British base, either by air attacks or by starving it of its own supplies.

For a time during the Siege of Malta it looked as if Malta would be starved into submission by the use of Axis aircraft and warships based in Sicily, Sardinia, Crete and North Africa. A number of Allied convoys were decimated. The turning point in the siege came in August 1942, when the British sent a very heavily defended convoy codenamed Pedestal. Malta's air defence was repeatedly reinforced by Hurricane and Spitfire fighters flown off to the island by Allied aircraft carriers. The situation eased as Axis forces were forced away from their North African bases and eventually Malta could be resupplied and become an offensive base again.

The British re-established a credible air garrison and offensive naval base on the island. Malta's garrison was able to disrupt Axis supplies to North Africa immediately before the Second Battle of El Alamein. For the fortitude and courage of the Maltese during the siege, Malta was awarded the George Cross.

Following the battle of Crete in the summer of 1941, the Royal Navy regained its ascendancy in the central Mediterranean in a series of successful convoy attacks, until the events surrounding the First Battle of Sirte and the Raid on Alexandria in December swung the balance of power in the Axis favour.

The Italian Navy's most successful attack was when divers planted mines on British battleships during the raid on Alexandria harbour (19th December 1941). HMS Queen Elizabeth and Valiant were sunk but later raised and returned to active service.

A series of hard fought convoy battles ensured Malta's survival, until the Allies regained the advantage in November 1942.

In September 1943 with the Italian collapse and the surrender of the Italian fleet, naval actions in Mediterranean became restricted to actions against German U-boats and by small craft in the Adriatic and Aegean seas, although the Allies claimed victory in this campaign by May 1944. German forces surrendered in Europe on 7th May 1945 shortly after Hitler had committed suicide.

Under these circumstances, when Bobby was posted to HMS Mosquito in January 1944, life in the Royal Naval Patrol Service in the Eastern Mediterranean probably wasn't too arduous. In the absence of danger of a hostile nature and in the company of comrades of his own age, it is quite likely that the experience would have been quite an adventure for Bobby and his shipmates. It would have been a time when new friendships were forged and new destinations explored.

Certainly, the weather would have been preferable to that experienced back home and there would have been opportunities during short periods of leave to soak in the local culture. Nevertheless, the ratings would still have been subject to navy discipline.

Shown on the right are 'the Chief and the Coxswain.' From the garb worn by the locals in the background, this photograph was clearly taken in Egypt – probably Alexandria or Port Said.



On 24th May 1945 Bobby commenced a new posting to HMS Saunders, a landing craft base at Kabret on the shores of the [Bitter Lakes](#), which form part of the [Suez Canal](#) system. This was pretty well in the desert and the accommodation was likely to have been under canvas.

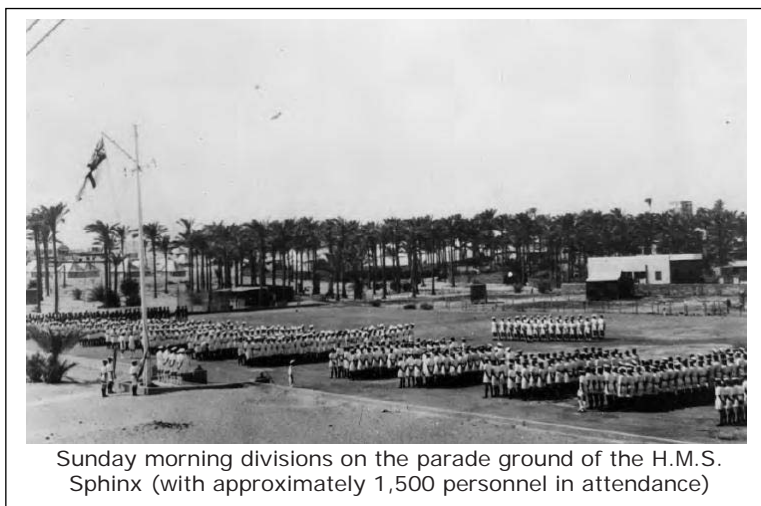
It seems obvious to ask what would have been the purpose of his continued posting there when the hostilities had terminated. It would have been somewhat chaotic to demobilise all personnel at the same time and 'normal service' back home would take a long time to be re-established. The Armed Forces developed a demobilisation plan that would release operational personnel based on a system that favoured length and certain types of service. As there would have been many others who had been in service for over 3 years longer than Bobby, he would have to wait his turn.

Meanwhile, it is likely that there would have been many 'clean up' tasks, such as minesweeping, vessel repairs, canal dredging, wreck clearing and raising that would keep Navy personnel busy while awaiting demobilisation.

Four months later, on 22nd September 1945, Bobby was posted to HMS Stag, a shore base at [Port Said](#), at the most northerly end of the Suez Canal. During his time here, on 16th November 1945, Bobby completed 3 years service with the Royal Navy and was granted a Good Conduct Badge.

On 11th December 1945, he commenced a brief posting to HMS Sphinx – another shore establishment - an accommodation camp at Alexandria, Egypt. This posting was for only a week and it is clear that he was preparing to be repatriated.

During the entire war years, HMS Sphinx fulfilled a most useful purpose as the main naval personnel distribution centre for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal area. Contingents of naval ratings and marines would arrive periodically from the United Kingdom – usually by troop transport around the



Sunday morning divisions on the parade ground of the H.M.S. Sphinx (with approximately 1,500 personnel in attendance)

Cape of Good Hope – and they would be accommodated temporarily in Sphinx

whilst waiting to be drafted to various ships in the fleet. The crews they replaced would be held in Sphinx until such time as suitable transport became available for taking them back to their home ports.

A lot of careful organization was required to handle this continual fluctuation of numbers. At times the camp would be almost empty, apart from the permanent staff, and then gradually build up to as many as fifteen hundred or more before we were able to move them on to their different destinations.

On 19th December 1945 Bobby was posted from Sphinx to HMS St. Angelo which was a shore establishment on the island of Malta. This represented a stopping off point on his way back to the United Kingdom.

In 1933 the Admiralty had changed the name of the shore establishment which was the main administration centre for Royal Naval activities in the Mediterranean to HMS St Angelo – the name of the fort in which the establishment was housed.

HMS St Angelo played a part in major events in both World Wars and throughout the 20th century until its closure in 1979.



Fort St Angelo, Malta

Just before the outbreak of World War two the Navy moved the Headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet to Alexandria, Egypt. The Admiralty felt that Malta's close proximity to Italy meant that the island was in serious threat of air strikes. The Royal Navy reduced Malta's naval presence to just 20 destroyers, eight sloops, minesweepers and a flotilla of submarines and its depot ship.

Predictions of the threat of Italian bombing strikes proved correct. Between March and May 1942 alone the area around Grand Harbour received hits from a total of 6,700 tons of bombs. The raids caused the sinking of 21 ships, four fleet destroyers and four submarines in the harbour or its approaches.

Bobby's posting to HMS St Angelo on Malta lasted a mere 5 days. On Christmas Day 1945 he commenced a posting back at HMS Europa in Lowestoft. He had served in the Mediterranean for just short of two years. Even then he was not ready to be demobbed. This posting lasted until 8th April 1946 when he was posted to HMS Victory III, which was an accounting base, basically an office that looked after the pay and paperwork for small ships. Just what Bobby's duties would have been is not at all clear. However, it is likely that there was a considerable amount of paperwork to be completed to support the demobilisation effort and perhaps he undertook some clerical duties.

Bobby's final posting was to HMS Pembroke II which was another accounting base at Chatham. This commenced on 30th May 1946.

On 17th August 1946, having served for 3 years and 9 months in the Royal Navy, Bobby was released under Class A which meant that he would be liable to recall to service only in an extreme emergency.

Bobby returned home to Rutherglen where his parents and younger brothers had moved to 11 Parkhill Drive and his father had now purchased the plumber's business where he had worked.

Bobby did not continue on his pre-war path in the grocery trade, but instead embarked on a plumbing apprenticeship, perhaps encouraged by his experience as a Stoker in the Royal Naval Patrol Service.



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Times of Malta

13th December 1945 Page 5

OVER 300 VICTIMS

"LITTLE SHIPS" SCORE IN MEDITERRANEAN

(From Our Naval Correspondent)>

Coastal Forces of the Mediterranean Fleet - young officers and men who fought in the small Motor Torpedo Boats, Motor Gunboats and Motor Launches - destroyed or captured no fewer than 308 enemy ships and 23 aircraft between January 1943 and the end of the war.

This total of losses inflicted on the enemy is made up as follows:

SUNK OR DESTROYED BY TORPEDO OR GUNFIRE 180 VESSELS (INCLUDING 25

MERCHANT VESSELS, 12 WARSHIPS) AND 16 AIRCRAFT:

PROBABLY SUNK OR DESTROYED: 28 VESSELS AND THREE AIRCRAFT:

DAMAGED: 64 VESSELS AND FOUR AIRCRAFT:

CAPTURED 36 VESSELS.

PLAYING THEIR PART

Most of the work of Coastal Forces being of an offensive nature, finished when the war ended: Captain of Coastal Forces, Mediterranean, in his final report, refers to the minesweeping Motor Launches which are continuing to play their part in the great mine clearance programme. They are being used extensively for clearance sweeps in shallow waters and ahead of the Fleet Sweepers and up-to-date Motor Launches alone have swept between them 600 mines. A few Motor Launches are also retained for general duties.

Many stories have been written of the gallant action fought by Coastal Forces in the days when they ventured far from their base to harass the enemy in his shipping lanes and of the swift night encounters with E-Boats. Coastal Forces were called upon to carry out tasks of all descriptions - they were engaged in harbour control, convoy, invasions surveying and, in the early days when things were not going well, evacuation.

WHEN EMPIRE STOOD ALONE:

The operations began with the Battle of Crete when the British Empire alone was fighting the enemy. Coastal Forces in the Mediterranean were then represented by a few small last-war boats, and all but two were lost at Crete. For the next six months there were only these two boats and a handful of Motor Launches operating. Up till late in 1942 they had a hard life due to enemy air superiority and there were many losses and casualties.

H.M.S. MOSQUITO at Alexandria was the first Coastal Forces Base and in the early days there were small advanced maintenance units at Cyprus and Tobruk. When Tobruk fell Motor Torpedo Boats played a valiant part in getting personnel away.

After the Battle of El Alamein by which time the number of vessels was steadily increasing, Coastal Forces advanced with the Eighth Army all along the African coast, as far as Benghazi, to Malta (where a base was set up from which to attack Sicily and Southern Italy) and Bone which was used for operations against Tunisia.

As the Armies advanced in Italy Coastal Forces bases sprung up in Sicily, at Maddalena in Sardinia, Bastia in Corsica, the island of Ischia off Naples, and then in ports on the West and East coasts of Italy and to Viz and Zara on the Yugoslavian coast.

6,000 OFFICERS AND MEN ENGAGED:

The Northern Adriatic, the Gulf of Genoa and the Aegean Sea offered ideal operational ground for the fast little ships and the enemy's sea traffic was constantly attacked in large numbers and successful actions, particularly as Radar improved.

A fitting conclusion to four years of Coastal Forces warfare came on the eve of the end of the German collapse when on May 2, nearly 30 German ships of various sorts surrendered at Tagliamento near Trieste, to a handful of Royal Navy Motor Torpedo Boats and Motor Launches