

SID BERRY

Rob Forsyth



Sid proudly wearing the white beret of the Arctic Convoy Association

Sid was born on 28 April 1920 in a small cottage in Hudson Street, Deddington and lived in the village all his life except for his five years in the Royal Navy during WWII. He started his working life as an apprentice to a baker - of which there were at least eight in the village - so it was no surprise that he was made a cook on volunteering for the Royal Navy in September 1940. Nothing in his life to date could have prepared him for the four years of near constant warfare at sea that followed.

His first experience of this was on board *HMS Mashona* which took part in the Lofoten Raid in March 1941. In May of the same year *Mashona* was ordered to join the hunt for the *Bismarck* in the Atlantic. He recalls seeing shells from *HMS Rodney* destined for the *Bismarck* passing overhead. Shortly after this *Bismarck* was sunk and *Mashona* was ordered back to Plymouth. While en route she was attacked and sunk by German Focke-Wulf aircraft. Sid told the story that when he came to the surface after jumping overboard, he thought he had gone blind but in fact his cork lifejacket had ridden up over his head! He was not rescued until after dark and then spent six weeks in hospital with an injured leg.

He then served on *HMS Ashanti* which, throughout the rest of 1941 and the first half of 1942, carried out escort duties for numerous Arctic Convoys bound for Russia. He had many memories of the atrociously cold, bad weather and the frequent attacks by aircraft; on one occasion off Bear Island they withstood an attack from 50 Heinkel 111s which carried two torpedoes each. On another occasion Sid volunteered to man an ASDIC (submarine detection) set. The submarine was successfully sunk by another ship but Sid felt he should have had the credit for finding it in the first place. East-bound convoys arrived in Archangel which had little to offer by way of recreation except joining their Russian hosts in heavy drinking competitions. He still had a Soviet Navy rating's hat won as a prize.

In August 1942 *Ashanti* was sent to the warmer - but no less dangerous - waters of the Mediterranean to take part in Operation Pedestal. This was an attempt to run

some 50 merchant and naval ships past a gauntlet of German and Italian aircraft, E-boats, minefields and submarines in an attempt to bring much needed relief to besieged Malta. It has gone down in military history as one of the most important British strategic victories of WWII. However, it was achieved at a cost of more than 400 lives and the loss of nine (of the original 14) merchantmen, one aircraft carrier (*HMS Eagle*), two cruisers (*HMS Manchester* and *HMS Cairo*), and a destroyer (*HMS Foresight*) but it saved Malta. It was on this same operation that Lt Robert (Buster) Churchill died in action (see p.58). *Ashanti* was constantly in the thick of it and became Convoy Commodore for the merchant ships when the previous ship was sunk. Sid recalled that at Action Stations, when there was no cooking to be done, he helped out with ammunition supply to an anti-aircraft gun in a very exposed position on the upper deck; from here he could clearly see the pilot of a dive-bombing Stuka as it made its attack - which fortunately missed - in its near vertical dive.

Malta was under near constant air attack so there was no run ashore in Malta and it was back to UK waters for further convoy screening work. The war diary of the ship refers to constant submarine and air attacks and taking a badly damaged sister ship, *HMS Somali*, in tow. One can hardly imagine the tension there must have been on board *Ashanti*, crowded with survivors, dragging *Somali* at about 5 knots towards home, concerned as to how easy a target they both must be. In the end, after some 400 miles, the tow parted in bad weather, *Somali* sank and they could proceed at a safer speed.

In November 1942 they were back in the Mediterranean as part of the support group for the Allied Force's North African landings known as Operation Torch. They were then pretty much constantly involved in hostile activities in the western Mediterranean until the ship returned to the UK for a much-needed refit in June 1943. In November they were back at sea on escort duties which included escorting the battleship *HMS King George V* on passage from Gibraltar to UK with Prime Minister Winston Churchill embarked.

His captain on *Ashanti* was Captain Richard Onslow who, Sid believed, was a relative of Dr Jones of Deddington. This local connection may account for why the Captain once advanced him some pay from his own pocket against his next pay packet.

In early 1944, Sid volunteered for the submarine service thinking this might be safer! In May he joined *HMS Selene* in the Far East where she sank five Japanese sailing vessels and three coasters, and damaged another sailing vessel by ramming it and a coaster. He transferred to *HMS Vivid* in July 1945 to return to the UK and left her to be released from the Navy in March 1946. He was still on the Fleet Reserve list for training in 1956.

In 2004, sitting at home in his favourite (and audibly squeaky) armchair, Sid made some audio recordings of his naval experiences and recollections of village life. These recordings can be down-loaded from the Deddington OnLine website (www.deddington.org.uk).

He took part in every Remembrance Day march past through the Market Place until 2005. He died in December 2006.