

12. Dolabella

This page describes Stan's account of his voyages on the ship. There is a history of **Dolabella** with photographs on the Benjdog website [HERE](#).

COMNO (Combined Merchant Navy Operations)

*When my pal Ron Wood and myself had decided to go to Glasgow to look for a job on a deep sea ship in December 1943 we were asked by the shipping master at Tilbury Pool office if we would volunteer for 'Special Duties'- no details were given. We both agreed and a large V was marked on the cover of our ID Cards and embossed. Arriving at Glasgow we signed on **Neritina** and made a voyage, paying off on 1st May 1944 at Liverpool.*

As we were paying off, the crew were asked by a Royal Navy officer for volunteers for 'Special Duties'. Some crew members volunteered and them, Ron and I were told to report to our local shipping office as soon as our leave had expired.

During my leave I saw scores of strange types of ships and craft all heavily armed at anchor in the Thames, and Tilbury Docks was full of ships loading army equipment. So I knew that soon there would be a big operation.

Following our leave and reporting to Tilbury Pool we went to Sheerness and had an intensive gunnery course of four days and were then given travel vouchers for Glasgow and told to report to the COMNO office there - we were now on 'V' Articles.

Voyages on Dolabella

*From COMNO office we were sent to Greenock to join the tanker **Dolabella**. We served on this ship on Combined Operations from 20th May to 24 Aug. 1944.*

Boarding the ship we found she had been extensively adapted for a special service. Many portable pumps were on the decks, and many extra pipelines and lengths of hoses were around. Much more armaments had also been installed. We the crew had no idea what it was for at the time as everything was in secrecy.

The cargo tanks had been thoroughly cleaned and now had 12,000 tons of fresh water in them. In the crew list it has 20 DEMS gunners signed on as Deckhands but I cannot remember where they were all accommodated. About ten of the ships crew including Ron and I had Merchant Navy gunnery certificates for which we were paid sixpence per day. From the time of joining ship our shore leave was stopped and we were told it was because we would sail any time without notice. Four days later we did sail, and Arnold Hague reports us as sailing unescorted for the Bristol Channel but I am sure we were in a convoy. Arriving we saw an amazing sight of scores of ships and many were flying the US ensign. We anchored among them off Weston super Mare.

Convoy EBC3

A few days later we sailed in convoy EBC3 with many escorts and our course took us around Lands End and into the Channel. We had sailed from the Bristol Channel during the early hours of 6th June and so this was D-Day the beginning of the Liberation of Europe.

*Our Captain told us that thousands of Allied airborne troops were dropping into Normandy and that was our destination - France. Operation Overlord - the naval part of which was Operation Neptune. He also informed us that if the Germans polluted the water supply in France it would be our duty to supply water to the invasion forces. A war cannot be fought without water. Three other large tankers were also on similar duties off the beach heads - **British Princess**, **British Statesman** and **Gold Shell**.*

Our convoy arrived off Omaha beach head early on 7th June - Day -2 and we anchored about two miles off the shore. Arnold Hague records us as arriving on 9th - official records have 7th.

D-Day and after

*There was much activity and action by heavy units of the US navy. Shore targets were being bombarded by the battleships **Arkansas**, **Nevada** and **Texas** and cruisers **Tuscaloosa** and **Quincy**. Destroyers were steaming at full speed parallel to the shore line and firing at land targets, and at same time beating off attacks by enemy aircraft on the mass of anchored ships. The destroyer **Meredith** was bombed and sunk and the destroyer **Glennon** was damaged by a mine and grounded and German tanks then proceeded to destroy her with gunfire. Countless landing craft were shuttling between anchored troopships and the beaches and aircraft were in combat in the skies.*

***Susan B. Anthony** a US troopship ex Santa Clara struck a mine just after passing us at anchor and she went on fire but all 2,200 troops and crew were rescued by landing craft before she sank. Old ships began arriving and were scuttled to form breakwaters during the construction of the two Mulberry Harbours - they were code named Corncocks. One of them I saw arrive was the old **Winha** in which I had sailed on an eventful short trip at end of 1942. Another was an old Dutch cruiser **Sumatra**. I later found that my stepbrother Harry who was in the Royal Navy was on **Sumatra** and set the explosive charges to scuttle her.*

*Also many huge concrete caissons known as Phoenix, and large steel floating tanks - bombardons - were arriving in tow of tugs. They would form part of the Mulberry Harbours. The battleship **Rodney** was nearing Sword beach when she rammed the landing craft **LCT 427** which sank with the loss of all hands.*

*In **Dolabella**, with the confirmation the water supply had not been contaminated ashore, we received orders to remain at anchor and to supply water to the naval craft operating off the beach heads. A huge W was painted on the face of the ships bridge denoting water and at times we had four or five vessels alongside and taking in water - minesweepers, tugs, landing craft and many Thames lighters motorised and converted to various uses.*

Basic Data: Dolab

Type: Tanker

Registered owners, m operators:

Anglo-Saxon
London

Builders: Hawthorne L

Yard: Hebburn

Country: UK

Yard number: 622

Registry: London

Official number: 1673

Signal letters: N/K

Call sign: GBZZ

Classification society:

Gross tonnage: 8,142

Net tonnage: N/K

Deadweight: N/K

Length: 141.8 metres

Breadth: 18.1 metres

Depth: 33.8 Ft

Draught: 26.6 Fr

Engines: Oil engine 4 5
with 25 9/16" bore and 1

Engine builders: Hawt

Works: Hebburn, Newc

Country: UK

Boilers: N/A

Power: 502 NHP

Propulsion: Single scr

Speed: 12 knots

Cargo capacity: N/K

Crew: 80 when Stan M:
(see below)

Attacks were made on the shipping by aircraft during daytime and I found myself having more times on guns than in doing my duties in supplying water to the naval vessels. Each day was 18 hours of action stations and work. When I volunteered for this service, one of the agreements was to receive £1 per week 'Consolidated Rate' which in effect meant receiving £1 per week in lieu of overtime, so I was doing 10 hours overtime each day - 70 hours each week for £1. Of course, the times I had at action stations could not be regarded as overtime as it was for the 'Safety of ship', a clause in the ships Agreement which means a seaman can be ordered to work outside his normal hours if there is any danger to the ship.

Obviously there were no complaints about the payment or hours worked by the crews as we were well aware that just a few miles from us were many brave soldiers in combat. Many aircraft were destroyed during the first days and some ships became casualties of bombing, mines, E boats and Chariots -one-man submarines.

During the first week of the invasion there were always 16 convoys at sea to or from the beach heads - incredible sights to see so many ships on the move day and night. We had occasionally seen bodies in the sea with the coming of each dawn but they were quickly retrieved by naval craft and possibly taken to a hospital ship.

During the first day of the landings at Omaha beach more than 2,000 brave American soldiers were killed. An error in the planned landing site had put them ashore two miles away and they found themselves on a short beach and facing a sheer cliff face. They were literally slaughtered by German machine gunners at the top of the cliffs.

Convoy FCM 8

We remained at anchor off Omaha until our tanks were emptied and we then sailed in convoy FCM 8 for Southampton on 18th June 1944.

At this great and busy port we witnessed more incredible scenes in seeing the tremendous amount of activity of thousands of Allied troops constantly on the move and arriving and sailing at all hours. Another memory was the severe shortage of beer glasses in pubs and often our beer was served in jam jars or milk bottles.

Southampton was a restricted port and special passes were required if one wanted to enter or leave the area. I also remember we were angered by the lack of mail we received during these hectic times especially as London and the South East were now under attack by flying bombs so causing us concern for our families.

We berthed at Ocean Terminal and loaded another 12,000 tons of water and then went to anchor off Cowes for a few days. I think it was because of the chaos and confusion on the beach heads which were suffering the worst storms for 40 years. The storms lasted from 19th to 22nd June and caused disruption to convoys and prevented unloading of ships. Mulberry Harbour A was so much damaged that it was abandoned. The storm left 800 landing craft wrecked on the beaches. The coaster **Wallace Rose** lost both anchors but her master skilfully kept her under way off the coast for three days until the gale abated.

Convoy ETC 19

On 27th June we sailed and later joined convoy ETC19. The ETC convoys started from the Thames and ships from Southampton later joined in for the few hours crossing to Normandy. Our previous service of 11 days off Omaha had been eventful and this time we would operate for 14 days off Gold and Juno beach heads -British and Canadian sectors.

Small tankers of 300 and 400 tons - **Ben Robinson**, **Empire Alderney**, **Empire Coast**, **Empire Gypsy**, **Empire Homestead** and many CHANT tankers were also taking water from us.

This time also I had a pleasant surprise while there. I was working on deck when **Fort Reliance** passed close by and I heard voices shouting "Chick! Chick!" - that was my nickname in those days. I looked and saw two pals from Grays waving to me - [Fred Knaggs](#) and Percy Choppen.

Alvar Liddel the BBC war correspondent was reporting the war news from **Fort Reliance** at this time. **Fort Reliance** anchored and discharged her Army vehicles into landing craft and sailed same night on return to Tilbury. On arriving home they visited my parents and told them where I was. They only knew I had left home on 19th May to go to Glasgow to join an unknown ship.

While at anchor off the beach heads we often heard of ships being sunk by U boats or E boats before they got to the beaches.

Another incredible sight I witnessed was early July. Working on deck the sky was suddenly filled by 1,000 Lancaster bombers flying low above us and within moments their bombs were being dropped on Caen which was only 10 miles from our anchored position. We could hear the deafening thunder of exploding bombs and see smoke and fire rising hundreds of feet into the air - Caen was obliterated.

Apart from Allied aircraft patrolling and others on their way to bomb inland targets it was a quiet time in the air this time.

Convoy FTC 3

We left the beach heads for Southampton in convoy FTC 3 on 10th July and arrived and anchored off Cowes the same night. Then a couple days alongside to load water and then go to anchor to await orders.

Convoy ECC 53

A week later on 31st July we sailed and later joined convoy ETC 53 for Gold and Juno beach head. A number of ships had been sunk during the days we were away. Destroyer **Boadicea** was sunk by aerial torpedo; **Glenroy** of Glen Line suffered heavy damage from an acoustic mine; Canadian ship

Albert C. Field was sunk by aerial torpedo; **Samneva** was sunk by U 309; **Samwake** was sunk by an E boat; destroyer **Isis** and cargo ship **Norfolk** were sunk by mines; also more than 20 coasters were sunk or damaged. Some U boats were also sunk in that area..

So **Dolabella** was now beginning her third period of service at Normandy. Although there was very little activity in the skies giving us crew more leisure time between watches - the losses of ships continued.

During the night of 7th August the hospital ship **Amsterdam** was leaving the beach heads when she was sunk by a mine. At dawn we saw many bodies in the sea - patients, nursing staff and crew.

Convoy FTC 66

With small tankers loading water from us and taking it to small liberated ports our tanks were soon emptied so we returned to Southampton in convoy FTC 66 - leaving the beach heads on 13th August and anchoring off Cowes a few hours later.

Compassionate Leave

Rumours were that we were to be withdrawn from COMNO operations and to return to commercial service. Days passed and I then received a letter from home to tell me a bomb had exploded near our home and that my father had been injured. On showing the letter to the Chief Officer he told me I could visit my home in Grays but I must report back on the next day early afternoon. He gave me a special pass to leave and return to the area and a travel voucher.

I arrived home to find my father had a minor injury fortunately. I left home next morning to return to Southampton and at Waterloo, due to disruption, the train was more than five hours late in leaving. I obtained a note from the station master to verify this. Arriving at Southampton I was amazed to find that the ship had began loading water an hour after I had left the previous day and had sailed about two hours before I got back.

I expected to be in trouble when I reported to the COMNO office, but on producing the special pass from the Chief Officer, and the note from the station master, I was told that no action would be taken. I had been granted compassionate leave. The dates were 23rd and 24th August 1944. I was given a travel voucher to Grays and told to report to Tilbury shipping office to receive my Account of Wages and pay.

I found later that **Dolabella** had returned to the beach heads for one more time and was then taken off COMNO service.

Another seaman on **Dolabella** during my time was Cliff Maw of Leicester. He was Deckboy on **Viking Star** with me when we were sunk by **U 130** in South Atlantic on 25th August 1942 - we were both in a lifeboat for six days.

Unforgettable memories of the Normandy Landings

Unforgettable memories of Normandy were:

- To see American battleships and cruisers firing broadsides at shore targets from six miles out to sea and to hear the screams of shells as they passed over our heads
- To see aircraft in combat and their destruction when shot down
- To see bodies floating in the sea
- To see 1,000 Lancaster bombers obliterate Caen
- To see so many ships sunk in such a small area
- To see many old ships arrive to be scuttled to form a breakwater
- To see the wonderful construction of the Mulberry Harbours

In building the "Corncocks" to protect the Mulberries, 79 ships were scuttled and 28 were of UK Registry: **Alynbank, Becheville, Bendoran, Bosworth, Dover Hill, Elswick Park, Empire Bittern, Empire Bunting, Empire Defiance, Empire Flamingo, Empire Moorhen, Empire Tamar, Empire Tana, Empire Waterhen, Flowergate, Forbin, Ingman, Innerton, Mariposa, Manchester Spinner, Maycrest, Njegos, Panos, Saltersgate, Stanwell, Vinlake, Vera Radcliffe, and Winha** in which I had sailed

Involved in Operation Neptune Normandy were --

- 138 Bombarding ships
- 221 Escort vessels
- 287 Minesweepers
- 4,000 Landing craft of all types
- 423 Ancillary ships
- 1260 Merchant ships - cargo, tankers and coasters.

During the first three days of the operations 38 convoys comprising 743 ships arrived off the beach heads, and by the tenth day in excess of 500,000 men and 77,000 tanks and vehicles had been landed on the beaches.

Dolabella had made a voyage to North Russia just before Normandy and returning to commercial service after Normandy she made two more trips in Russian convoys. **Dolabella** saw all her service with Anglo Saxon Pet.Co and without a change of name - she was broken up in Hong Kong in 1958.

Image 1

9	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	1/15/44	1/15/44	ab	70W
10	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	20/5/44	24/8/44	ab	Ops.
11	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	20/9/44	16/11/44	AB	Foreign
12	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	TILBURY	25-11-44	AB	Foreign

Image 2 shows Stan's wageslip from Dolabella for the period May to August 1944. Note that the heading shows this is a form issued by the Department of War Transport and is headed "Liberation of Europe".

Image 2

Form approved by the Ministry of War Transport under paragraphs 6 and 7 of Regulation 47ADA of the Defence (General) Regulations, 1939.

LIBERATION OF EUROPE. ACCOUNT OF WAGES.

Name and initials of Seaman: **MAYES, S G**
 Dis. A. Number: **R197835** Rank or Rating: **AB**

EARNINGS.		£	s.
Wages at £ 20 5 44	per week	58	4
Risk Money and Consolidated Rate for ease of Wages and promotion by £ 3	per week	46	3
Leave due 6 6 weeks	per week		
Subsistence Allowance 6	per day	3	18
TOTAL		108	17

DEDUCTIONS.		£	s.
Payments to relative 14		14	0
Income Tax (Code SI) 13	per week	13	0
Health and Pensions Insurance for 13	per week	13	0
Unemployment Insurance for 10	per week	10	0
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS		96	17
FINAL BALANCE		12	0

RELEASE.
 I, the undersigned, having been during the above-mentioned period a member of the crew of ships to which Regulation 47ADA of the Defence (General) Regulations, 1939, was applied or of the Mercantile Navy Reserve Pool whilst kept for employment on such ships, do hereby release all such ships and the masters and owners thereof as well as the Minister of War Transport and the Shipping Federation Limited from all claims and demands accruing during that period in respect of any voyage, engagement or employment, except as regards the claims or demands which are set out on the back hereof.

Date: **29/8/44** Signature: **S.G. Mayes**
 And I, a Mercantile Marine Superintendent, do hereby release the said **S.G. MAYES** from all claims and demands accruing during the said period in respect of any voyage, engagement or employment.

Date: **29/8/44** Signature: **[Signature]**

Images 3 and 4 show Stan's pay sheet showing rates of pay and payments to dependents from 20 May 1944. Note that this is also headed "Liberation of Europe" and the breakdown of the weekly rates - Basic wages are £4-4-0, War Risk money is an extra £2-6-8 and a Consolidated rate of £1 per week (in lieu of overtime - see above).

Image 3

Ops. 10

LIBERATION OF EUROPE PAY SHEET

MINISTRY OF WAR TRANSPORT.

Pay as below commences on **20 5 44**

Basic wages per week	£ 4	4	0
War Risk Money per week	£ 2	6	8
Consolidated Rate per week	£ 1	0	0
Total earnings per week £ 7 10 8			
of which:-			
Allocated to dependant per week	£ 2	0	0
Income tax deduction per week	£ 19	9	0
Officers' Pension Fund per week	£ 0	0	0
N.U.S. contribution per week	£ 0	0	0
Health & Pensions Insurance per week	£ 1	0	0
Unemployment Insurance per week	£ 0	10	0
Total deduction per week £ 4 17			
NET WAGES per week £ 3 9 1			

equals £ 9 s. 11 d. per day.

Signature of Seaman: **S.G. Mayes**
 Signature of Superintendent: **[Signature]**

SEA SERVICE ENQUIRY

Thank you for your letter, dated 7.5.2002 concerning your sea service.

I can confirm that we did hold a record of your sea service and also proof of your service on the ship **Dolabella** between 17.12.1943 to 24.8.1944. Our records show that you were on Special Operations whilst serving on this vessel.

I hope that this information will be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Staples
Records Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Staples', is written over a long, thin, curved line that serves as a signature separator.

Image 8