



## **Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity**

The Friends of Gibraltar Oral History Project (1930 to 1970)

### **Fred Davenport – interviewed by Mary Ingoldby 10<sup>th</sup> April 2013**

#### **Track 1**

##### Introduction

Born in Peckham 1921, moved to Essex when he was four, spent young life and teenage years in Ilford. Joined Royal Navy at outbreak of war.

FD was an accounts clerk in The Royal Navy; he took passed the exam and joined in 1941; 7 years for The Fleet and 5 years for the Reserve; after the war it was difficult to get work so he took Offices exams, stayed in the Royal Navy for 30 years rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

FD speaks about naval ranks – and progression for Warrant Officers to The Ward Room

*MI: What was you trade?*

In those days the exam for accountancy branch of The Navy was held in all the port divisions, FD took the exam in Portsmouth, a two day exam, they passed about fifty from one thousand entries. FD passed. Anecdote about writing on both sides of the exam paper and thinking he would be disqualified.

FD Describes his mother receiving the papers to say that he had passed, just before Christmas 1940 – ***my mother said that they envelope stared at me all day, she knew that I was leaving home.***

In January FD began training in Chatham, then seamanship training and then professional training, it took about 6 months. FD came down to Portsmouth and within a few days joined The Eagle out of Freetown in July 1941.

*MI: Were you very pleased*

***I was, I wasn't quite 18 when the war started...*** FD speaks about being too young to join the Royal Artillery.

MI: Had you done any travelling?

FD: **No never been out of the country before.**

MI: Did you know anything about your ship?

FD: **Not at the time, just an aircraft carrier to me, it was one of the oldest aircraft carriers in the Navy in fact one of the first. We came home in 1941 to Liverpool for refit then left early 1942 to go to Gibraltar to join a force that was operating between Gibraltar and Malta; The Ark Royal had been sunk so we replaced it. Didn't realise the ship was so old.**

FD speaks about his parents not knowing where he was, and the differences today when families in touch every day.

MI: What is your job on the ship?

FD: **When I joined – I joined in the pay office second hand to a Chief Writer, because you kept all the pay accounts, paid the sailors, then after we went to Gibraltar I passed for Leading Hand which meant I became a Leading Writer and was transferred into the Captains Office and became assistant to the Captains Secretary, that's the job I was doing when the ship was sunk.**

MI: Were all the sailors paid in cash?

FD: **We always had money on board, that went down with the ship – sailors in those days were paid in paper rate, as the chap come up you called his name, you ticked him off, called out how much he had and put the money on his cap, or The Officer put the money on his cap.**

**You were popular but if there were occasions when chap's pay had to be docked you weren't very popular.**

MI: Working for Captains Secretary?

FD: **You did all the correspondence, the signals, punishment warrants, looking after all the ships companies service certificates all their history during their career**

MI: Where about in the ship were you working?

FD: **The Pay Office was down aft in the area where one of the torpedoes hit**

MI: How many sailors on board a ship that size?

FD: **Just over one thousand – we lost about one hundred and eighty of us**

MI: Did you work office hours?

FD: **You did sometimes but if there was more work to do you just worked until you were finished – if there was work to be done. Sometimes- no calculators in those days – times when you were trying to prove your ledgers particularly at the end of each quarter, and it would take hours and there were times when you were working well into the night, you had to do it and at the end of each quarter all those ledgers were sent off to the Admiralty and that is how they compiled all their records.**

MI: Did you get to go on deck, all over the ship?

FD: **Oh yes, you went on deck, sometimes you read a book and sat sometimes a group of us used to do a bit of boxing,, on the upper deck the flight deck you used to play deck hockey**

MI: Were there periods of boredom?

FD: **Some people did but I don't get bored, even as a young man I never got bored, I always found something to occupy my mind, some people do get bored.**

MI: The Ship's Company?

FD: **I didn't know anyone on 'The Eagle' when I joined – one of my chums was killed when the ship went down, **Bill Maurey (SP?)**, he was in the Pay Office when I first joined; he and I became chums. There were people you knew you were friendly with, didn't have any other close chums.**

MI: A Feeling of belonging to a ship – emotional attachment?

FD: **It does, when the ship went down we were all only too glad that we had survived and afterwards we used to meet up, the majority of the people on The Eagle probably just joined for the war.**

FD left the Navy in 1971 and then worked for a firm of chartered accounts in Portsmouth; when he retired in 1985/6 he was interviewed for the local paper and Navy News, other Eagle survivors read his story and got in touch and they began to organise annual reunions.

***The first one there was about 140 of us, the last time only about 3 of us .....We go to the war memorial on the day nearest the sinking, lay a few flowers have a little ceremony and go for a couple of drinks afterwards.***

FD speaks about nature of reunions, and how they only happen when you are older and time has gone by.

## **Track 2**

The Sinking of HMS Eagle

***FD: We were part of the Pedestal Convoy, at the time we didn't realise the significance of it, to us it was just another convoy, we didn't know that Malta was desperate so they cobbled this convoy together, it was essential that at least some of the ships got through to Malta. There were 14 merchant ships protected by 50 war ships and the outcome was that 9 of the merchant ships were sunk, we lost an Aircraft Carrier two Cruisers an aircraft carrier damaged – about 500 men lost getting the convoys through.***

***Afterwards when you read about it, it was successful, it got supplies through to Malta which kept it going so Germany didn't have a free run to North Africa and El Alamein couldn't have taken place.***

***We had been down to Malta on several runs because The Eagle flew aircraft off to Malta – and so did the Argos and an American carrier The Wasp; they used to be transported out from UK put onboard the Carriers and then the young pilots would fly them off to Malta – these young RAF chaps probably never landed on a Carrier;***

***Lots of problems – lots of defects sold then they were transported out in crates and assembled on the dock, put on to The Eagle and then flown off.***

***We had done that several times so I knew that most of the times we would be at Action Stations, at the beginning of the convoy about the 11<sup>th</sup> August, I said to Bill Maurey, I used to sit and play***

*drafts or chess with him some lunchtimes I said well I'm going to the bathroom to do my dobbing – that's washing and having a shower - because we will be closed up at Action Stations for ages – in fact we had just secured from Action Stations to Defence Stations so I went down there, in fact one of the things that annoys me is that I'd finished my dobbie – a nice pile of clean laundry, when the torpedoes hit. And I was just having a shower then so everything went black, there was one blow and then there were three others and I came out of the bathroom and it was pitch black and there were people going along and I got to hatchway that was heeled right over and as I got to the hatchway somebody hoisted me up and immediately I turned round and did exactly the same, and after a couple of decks I managed to get up to the Waste and there was everybody on the Waste nobody was in the water and I know I've said this before but there was no panic, no panic at all. But it became pretty obvious that the ship couldn't be saved so it was every man for himself and I leapt in. I don't know how many feet I dropped in, I didn't have stitch of clothing on, and I jumped in, I wasn't a very strong swimmer, and one of my recollections was that I was going down and I was swimming and it was so black I thought I wonder whether I was swimming the right way up or going down; and eventually I broke surface and there was lots of rubbish and that and I managed to cling on to a roll float and then of course I went across to one of the destroyers I think it was either the Lightning or the Lafore, and as I was getting nearer I saw the screws and I thought I'm not gong to there so I just floated around and you could understand the skippers on the small ships not wanting to stop because there was a submarine down there, there were one or two of them going round dropping depth chargers whilst we were in the water which was a bit uncomfortable. It was after three or four hours I was eventually picked up by an ocean going tug called the Jaunty, and we were absolutely covered with oil and I tried to get onto the gunnels and I kept slipping outboard. And I can always remember a young canteen assistant Mano Borg I think he was, when he saw me struggling, he had a pair of socks on his feet, and he said Scribe, because that was what writers were called, he said, hang on to my socks so I hung on to his socks and I was able to get onboard.*

*And when we got onboard there they opened the rum tub, and some chaps had swallowed so much oil that they were pouring rum down to make them sick, some of them didn't survive. And then the Jaunty got so crowded I was then transferred to an old destroyer called The Malcolm. And then we went on for a while with the convoy, and then after that in the middle of the night the Wolverine struck a submarine and we were detailed to escort the*

**Wolverine back to Gibraltar. And it was during that day that we heard over the radio that they had announced that The Eagle had been sunk, they never did that during the war, they waiting until all the next of kin had been informed and so there we were, and my mother heard it as well. In fact one of my neighbours...mother was out cleaning her doorstep and this chap came along and shouted to her oh I see they've got the Eagle Mrs Dav. – and my mum said...and they didn't know for quite a while, I didn't know how long it was, we were allowed to send telegrams when we got back to Gibraltar – and my mother was a devout catholic she used to go to mass every morning and she had gone round to church and she told me afterwards that the telegram had been delivered to my brother and my brother had the telegram and my mum said all she could see was nothing, just a big telegram and she thought oh god, and she looked at my brother and he was smiling and she knew that I was ok, until then they didn't know.**

**And then when we got back to Gibraltar we were all kitted out and I was on the depot ship Maidstone, Captains Secretary and the Captain were busy there was an awful lot to do, reports to make and casualty list to prepare, and eventually when all that was finished I was sent home on the battle ship The Nelson, and we came into Greenock and I came back to Portsmouth after that.**

### **Track 3**

FD speaks about fate, and where he was on the ship at the time of the sinking.

*MI: Is that human reaction or naval training?*

**FD: I think you just had to go, it was pitch black, couldn't hunt around to find things**

*MI: Were you cold?*

**FD: No it was in the Med - it would have been a different story in the Atlantic.....They had blow up life jackets but no time to blow it up, just carried it and leapt over the side...I just floated around**

*MI: Why couldn't you blow it up?*

**FD: Because I was so spitting out oil and water and fortunately I was able to clamber on to this floater net which was undone so I**

***just hung on to that, not necessary for anything else – you pushed it around and other people hung on to it as well***

MI: *Did you see the ship go down?*

FD: ***Yes I was quite a while from the.....you saw people still on there who were obviously afraid to jump in, they just went down with the ship.....Up here there are probably people who couldn't swim or who perhaps weren't strong swimmers and who were just terrified to jump into the water, and that's it, that's all you can say, and they hang on and hang on hoping, you don't know you don't know what's up there, hoping perhaps it won't sink, but it was impossible for it survive.....the further away you were the better, I was quite a good distance away when it happen***

MI: *Oil and debris in the water?*

FD: ***I think looking back its difficult to...recall what you were actually thinking, I think the fact that you were still alive was paramount and you just hoped eventually you would be picked up and of course there were three or four of us on the net.....you were only too glad that you were still alive, hoping that eventually you would be picked up but as I said before, you didn't get in panic or get too apprehensive about things I think you were philosophical about it and assumed that oh eventually you would be picked up, you didn't think you were going to be stuck there for the whole of the war.***

***The thing is if before that happened someone had said in half an hours time you will be down below you will have 6 minutes to get up you would have thought Gordon Bennett but the thing is that if you don't know then you adapt but if you did know what you were going to do there would be all sorts of things that you would want to do which were unnecessary, so the whole thing is that it is a question of survival. I can't think how some people say that if you knew in three or four minutes what was going to happen to you, you wouldn't be able to cope would you.***

MI: *Being picked up by The Jaunty?*

FD: ***A Fleet Tug - I can remember one destroyer that passed it that said all it could see was this one little tug all covered in bodies. They transferred us all to other ships in the convoy***

MI: *Were you then taken down to a sickbay and looked after?*

**FD: Oh no no no nothing like that I had nothing on and a couple of stokers on board, one gave me an old set of overalls that I put on, I had nothing on my feet, there were some old dishcloths that I managed to make something to wrap around my feet, because the steel decks quite hot, we slept on those at night, no space down below because of the ships company.....I can't remember what we had – hard tack biscuits and things like that – at the time we were only too happy that we were still alive, we were still there**

*MI: When did you realise your friend hadn't made it?*

**FD: When we got to Gibraltar everyone was accounted for and marked off, it was assumed they'd perished..... As the survivors came in, nobody had seen him. The other thing was, my cousin, we were brought up as boys together before the war, he was about a year 18 months younger than me, he joined The Navy and he was on The Manchester which was also sunk. I remember one night I had been working late it was one or two in the morning, and whenever some Manchester survivors came on board I asked them if anyone knew bogey Knight, Knights are always called bogeys I don't know why, they said no but a lot of them were interned in North Africa – on this particular night I got to the deck where the police officer was and the pipe came over 'stand by for some Manchester survivors' and I looked up and I saw Tom coming down the ladder and I shouted out Tom and we were dancing around the deck there everyone thought I was barmy - that was the only time I ever met him during the war**

*MI: Was that torpedoed as well?*

**FD: Either that or some of the E boats had sunk her**

*MI: Difficult doing the lists?*

**FD: Looking back I suppose now it was just another job, it was happening to people all over The Army, Navy, Air force, it was happening all the time, people come back missing – I think you had to get used to it to carry on.**

FD speaks about fate and the way life leads us.

**Track 4**



MI: *Sailing into Gibraltar?*

FD: ***I don't think I went ashore – it was so busy, we were all waiting to go home, we wanted to get home.***

MI: *Would they have sent you home because of what had happened?*

FD: ***Yes because there was nowhere for you to go, where do you put them, no accommodation on Gibraltar obviously thing to do is send them home and then they are re allocated to other ships***

FD tells anecdote about telling his granddaughter interviewing him about WWII, and she said – what happened after the ship was sunk gramps did you have counselling?

MI: *Tell me about coming home after that?*

FD: ***It was quite emotional, I came home on leave and I had survivors leave – there wasn't a lot of fuss they were glad to see me, and my cousin came over – I remember Tom and I were very embarrassed and we went to mass on the Sunday morning and father smith said we now have two young lads who had lost their ships – Tom and I were so embarrassed that we wanted to get under the pew.***

MI: *Two different worlds?*

Discussion about how media treats events now.

MI: *Before home leave did you go into the port of Gibraltar?*

FD: ***Yes nowhere else to go, all the ships went back to Gib and their survivors were put onto the accommodation ships waiting to go home***

MI: *What did it look like?*

FD: ***Filled with war ships, that was a base then, when you went ashore you just went out through the dockyard and up the main street, had a couple of beers and after a couple of hours went back on board again....You see the rock, perhaps if you had weekends you were allowed to go ashore then you went around the north front and went swimming – life was simple, went ashore had a swim had a couple of beers and then went back onboard. Huge amount of sailors, if you were a Gibraltarian you must had thought.... and then when the Americans came out – there were Army as well, but mainly sailors.***

FD mentions Main Street and the bars, fighting between Americans and British sailors.

*MI: Were you there with the Americans?*

**FD: Yes we sailed down to Malta on one occasions with the American aircraft carrier the Wasp – much bigger than us – the Argos and the Eagle were the old ladies of the fleet, they were past their sell by date, constantly breaking down**

Anecdote about signals between The Wasp and The Eagle..One of the signals, could we speed up a bit but the reply went back the captain said he had the galleys fastened to the engines and that was as much as he could make

*MI: Strategic importance of Malta and Gibraltar?*

**FD: Malta was very important because Malta was on its own in the middle and the axis of the Germans up until 1942 we really had our backs to the wall, the battle of the Atlantic was on, ships being sunk, the Nazis had pushed the armies out of Europe, Italy had come in to the war and nothing was going right. Everything was, the battle of Britain, the Blitz September 1940 to May 1941 people every night being bombed, strangely enough we never thought we were going to loose, it never entered into our heads that we were going to loose the war. And yet at the time the Mediterranean, in between Gib and Malta and it was essential that Malta kept going so Gib became very important because together with Alexandria and Egypt it was the only place that the convoys could come to supply Malta – had Gib gone I don't know what would have happened.....Gib was very very important.. Its strategic importance can't be under estimated**

*MI: Did you go back?*

**FD: I was there after D Day we went around to cover the landings on the South of France, operated from a short spell from Gib, and then once the South of France landings had finished Sirius was sent off to Italy, Greece and Palestine. And the next time I went to Gib was in 1959 on another carrier the Centaur but I was a Naval Officer then and only there for three or four days, had some friends there who lived in married quarters so I went to see them – so didn't go into the town**

## Track 5

### Reunions of HMS Eagle

FD speaks about the reunions, organising the ceremony, laying a wreath of anchor and flowers; the different versions of events;

*MI: How many survivors?*

160 lost nearly a thousand were saved – FD/MI looking at the book

***FD: The actual time it went down was 6 minutes***

FD Speaks about the account online – FD speaks about George Ames (one of the reunion group) who got in touch with the man on German sub who fired the torpedo. Not appropriate to mention at the reunions, when it was a lot of men turned their backs.

***For us it was a tragedy and for the U-boat it was a triumph.***

*MI: Do you think it was the sinking of the Eagle was a lesson to the British, were they surprised?*

***FD: No not really the point about it was that we had our backs to the wall the Med between Gib and Malta was not in the control of the Germans or the Italians but it was essential that Malta survived but Malta was the most bombed place, the devastation was appalling – the convoy the Pedestal Convoy they cobbled together to relieve Malta was because they had a message from Malta that unless they had more supplies they could not hold out any longer – and if Malta had fallen then the whole area would have been very different – the convoy was got together to force a way through, it succeeded and they got enough supplies through to enable Malta to carry on***

***Could it have been avoided - no because it was part of the war***

*MI: Is there a memorial in Malta?*

***FD: Yes a big Maltese bell, they call it the George cross island but the Maltese call the Pedestal Convoy the Santa Maria Convoy because it arrived on the 15<sup>th</sup> august which is the feast of Our Lady's Assumption and they believe that it was their prayers to Our Lady that got it through and you can't dismiss this so they call it the Santa Maria convoy.***

***They said - you were heroes and I said no we weren't heroes you were heroes when you think of what they suffered during the war day after day, it's hard to imagine.***

*MI: When you think back to it now, what is the image/memory of the sinking of the Eagle?*

***FD: The abiding memory I think is that there was no panic and also which I suppose was down to naval training and discipline and how I was helped up to a hatch and I automatically did it to the next bloke coming.***

***And when I got up the top on The Waste one of my abiding memories is that to me it was beautiful sunny day and I thought to myself it looks like a beach, everyone on the beach and all the ships in the distance that's all I thought of at the time when I got up there, I never thought I was in the middle of a battle, it came to you beautiful sunshine everybody walking up and down waiting to be told to go in the water, all the ships criss crossing because they were all over the place, it just looked like a sunny afternoon on a beach anywhere, that's fantasy.....and the fact that it happened at the time I don't think occurred to me because at that age you don't die only the old people die and when you think of the Battle of Britain pilots in the aircraft - I don't die somebody else dies - we are all the same when we are that age.***

*Compiled: December 2013  
Copyright Reserved FOGHS*

