

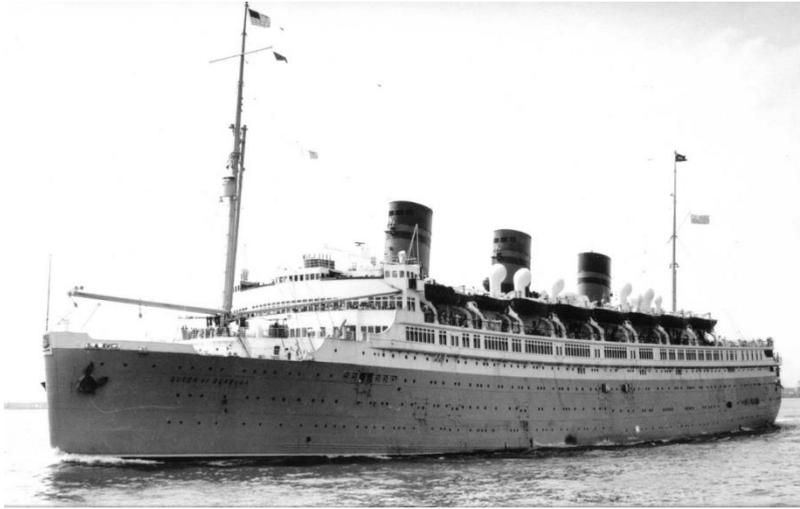
**Excerpt from “Memories of a Sawston Boy” written by Ken Frost,
edited by his daughter, Lesley Lambourne**

To set the scene for this section, Ken had volunteered for the RAF. After various radar postings in England, and attending specialised radar courses, he was sent to Chigwell, which had never been in any way connected with radar postings. After a few weeks of preparations for what they assumed from the inoculations was to be a posting in the Far East, the group were put on a train to an undisclosed destination. They had no idea where they were really heading.

Voyage on the Queen of Bermuda, December 1945

When we finally arrived at our destination it turned out to be Liverpool Docks. It was about seven o'clock and very dark. Alighting from the train we formed up in an orderly manner and walked along the quay. On our right was the front of the quayside buildings, on our left the grey, riveted side of a large ship. The super-structure of the vessel was hidden by the roof of the quayside buildings.

Ahead of us, in a pool of light was a ramp leading up to the lower decks of the ship; this was where we boarded the ship. Members of the ship's crew were there to guide us through the maze of passageways to the mess-decks which had been reserved for us



The Queen of Bermuda was a cruise ship that was converted to be used as a troopship during the war. It originally had three funnels.



The rear funnel was removed to allow guns to be mounted on the stern.

The ship was refitted after the war and returned to service as a cruise ship in 1947.

To describe our mess deck as austere is a gross understatement of our impression. It was very cramped; it didn't seem possible that we could all exist in such conditions for the duration of the voyage which we reckoned to be a month. The only furniture was long wooden tables and benches, all screwed to the floor. In the ceiling above the tables were hooks for our hammocks that were stacked in a corner. There was no storage room for our kit, except for our topees (pith helmets). These apparently were highly prized pieces of equipment. For these there was a special storage room equipped with elaborate, numbered racks. We split ourselves into groups to have something to eat and drink; the groups each had the same number in them and it was one group to a table. It always amazed me that under these circumstances, leaders for the groups always emerged and the chosen man, although he had no

official authority, always had the backing of the group. Mind you most decisions were arrived at by consultation.

The decks were very crowded, because there weren't enough sleeping places; people had to sleep on the tables and in the passage ways. We thought that this could be a temporary arrangement which would be put right in due course.

In the morning we found the ship was still in harbour. Having tidied things up, after breakfast we looked round the ship. Before the war it had been a luxury cruise liner in the West Indies; it was a vessel of about 25,000 tons named the "Queen of Bermuda". The evidence of luxury was still there, the ballroom, the cinema and alas the empty swimming pool now used as a store of some sort. The ship's crew were very busy taking on fuel and stores. The young ship's officer gave the impression of being in total command of proceedings; he not only gave the orders, he set an example by working with the crew.

There was a surprise during the morning, a group of 500 WAAFs came aboard. We discovered that they were the first female volunteers for service overseas; they were bound for Ceylon. Incidentally I think that their arrival was the reason for our cramped conditions. They were given much better accommodation than us, which we thought appropriate.

Sometime in the middle of the day the fuel tenders left the ship, the loading ramp was pulled up, the massive ropes holding the ship tight to the quayside were taken inboard and after a lot of shouting and hand signals the "Queen" moved very smoothly away from the quay, slowly through the lock gates, into the open sea. We knew we were on our way to India.

It was the beginning of December; the skies were grey, it was stormy and the sea was very rough. It was very difficult to judge our direction but from the time it took to reach Gibraltar we came to the conclusion that we sailed well out into the Atlantic before turning south. Our destroyer escort met us soon after we left Liverpool to take us down to Gibraltar. At this stage of the war no escort was needed in the Mediterranean. In any case the "Queen" had a very high cruising speed which would have made her a difficult target for the U-boats.

Our first night at sea was awful. Lots of people were very sea-sick, the smell was terrible. Fortunately I wasn't affected in any way but I was pleased to get up on deck to get away from the very clammy, smelly atmosphere. The seas were tremendous our little destroyers disappeared from view occasionally, with their decks constantly awash. Fortunately the weather improved as we journeyed south.

We had a good view of "The Rock" and a little later the snow-capped peaks of the mountains of southern Spain, looking magnificent in the sunshine against the back-ground of a clear blue sky. Our escort left us at the Rock, because by December 1944 the Allies were established in Italy and North Africa was in Allied hands so there was little danger of attack. Our journey continued in spring-like sunshine. For a time we were in sight of the North African coastline. I remember admiring the white buildings of Algiers and later on the tiny island of Patellaria that lies in the channel between Tunisia and Sicily. The island had been liberated in June 1943 in Operation Corkscrew.

I haven't commented on our washing and showering facilities. As you would expect they were improvised. There was no fresh water available for washing, only sea-water. We were able to buy what was described as "salt water soap" but that seemed to make things more difficult. Combined with the salt water it

created a gluey mess and had few cleaning properties! Of course we each had just single towel that had to be dried on deck in the sun.

Getting your hair cut was another problem. There was always a queue at the barbers. My friend, Reg, jokingly offered to cut my hair for me. He was surprised when I accepted. The only scissors he had were a pair of nail scissors. It was the longest haircut of my life!

A day or two after passing Pantelleria our breakfast was interrupted by the shouts of some of friends on the promenade deck. They had spotted that we were about to enter Port Said to begin our journey through the Suez Canal. They wanted to draw our attention to the advertising hoardings on the dockside buildings, replicas of those that we were so used to seeing at home; in fact just like the posters on the bill boards on Hills Road bridge that I had walked by every day on my way to school some years previously!

We took a Pilot on board at Port Said to see us safely through the canal. On the south bank of the canal there were comfortable looking bungalows with well-kept gardens; these were, I believe, homes, for the employees of the Suez Canal Co.

On a ship as large as the "Queen" our view of things was from a height of some 30 feet. Looking down, the space between the ship's side and the bank of the canal was impossibly narrow. You may wonder why we needed a Pilot but they were needed to negotiate the Bitter Lakes, which are saltwater lakes that form part of the Suez Canal.

A road ran parallel to the Canal on the north bank. The traffic on the road seemed to be varied but light, ranging from Arabs mounted on camels or donkeys and donkey carts. Most of them shouted greetings of some sort as we

stood by the ship's rail. We had no idea what they were shouting but their gestures suggested their remarks were not complimentary.

The speed through the canal was strictly limited. The canal is about 100 miles long; the whole passage takes about two days. We were anchored in the Great Bitter Lake for some time; I think this was to allow the passage of ships travelling in the opposite direction. We were never kept informed of the ship's progress and we were most surprised when we dropped anchor in deep water opposite a place called Port Taufiq, where we were to stay here for about a week.

Without the breeze created by the forward motion of the ship it was intolerably hot on the deck. Now we decided was the appropriate time to change into our tropical gear. Much to our surprise, while we were at anchor, Arab trading boats were allowed to come alongside. They had a variety of things to sell - postcards, little leather wallets and fresh fruit. The catering department took advantage of our situation to buy lots of fresh fruit for us, including crates of oranges. They were delicious, uniform in size and quality.

It was a day or two before we discovered why we had stopped at Taufiq. Apparently we had buckled one or two plates by hitting the lock gates when we left Liverpool. We had stopped so that divers could estimate the damage. Five thousand people confined on board ship with limited deck space in a hot climate was an unpleasant situation; you were lucky to find a space on deck where you could sit down. We spent our time playing cards (not one of my favourite pastimes), reading and talking.

Food was always a subject under discussion. The food on board was foul; there were complaints to the Orderly Officer every day. There was one famous incident; it was all because of a cheeky answer by an Army Officer who referred to "steerage passengers" in reply to a complaint by a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). The reply was a plateful of greasy stew in the

Officer's face. We heard that the Officer was reprimanded and the NCO cautioned as to his future behaviour.

There was never any improvement in the food. Apparently the catering was done by a contractor and the Commanding Officer of the forces had no control over the catering staff so there was little point in making complaints to the Orderly Officer. There were several scams run by the canteen staff, one was early morning tea; this was served on a lower deck for sixpence a mug. There was always a long queue. We organised a duty roster for the job of standing in the queue, several of us went down to help him carry the tea.

The week we spent at Taufiq seemed never ending. In fact we spent Christmas Day there, but I don't remember any festivities. I must mention the huge blue jelly-fish which abounded in the water; they must have been about two feet across. There were sharks too and once we were on our way flying fish and porpoises appeared. The journey down the Red Sea was quite uneventful, but I must comment on the brilliance of the night sky. One of the soldiers was an amateur Astronomer; he was able to point out the changes in the star patterns as we neared the Equator, where we started looking for the Southern Cross

What could be called the third leg of our voyage would take us, via Aden, into the Arabian Sea. It was an uneventful and uncomfortable journey. Very rarely did we catch a glimpse of the coast-line, but when we did it looked bare and uninviting. I had heard a lot about Aden, principally about its minimal rainfall. From the sea Aden looked as I had always imagined it, a barren deserted rock scarcely able to support life. Another four or five days on the open sea and we had completed our passage to India.