

## ALAN HOLMES' STORY

By Margaret Paxton-Love

In the spring of 1941, 18-year-old Alan Holmes was one of thousands of young men who knew that their call-up papers would soon arrive.

Alan's decision to volunteer for the Royal Navy was based on two simple facts. He didn't want to be in the PBI (Poor Bloody Infantry) and there was an eight month delay for the air force, so he left Hackney for Romford, where his World War II Navy career began as a stoker.

“Within a fortnight of joining up I was at Malvern, square-bashing, then rapidly recruited to train in R.D.F (Radio Direction Finding) at ‘Pompey’ Signal School. After a very short time I was on a Destroyer in the North Sea: I didn't know the front from the back!”

Alan first served on Cottesmore and Holderness on convoy escorts to the colliers, as they carried fuel from Newcastle to the London power stations under constant threat from German E-Boats.

“All the crews at that time were still regular Navy people, as yet no call-ups, just HO's (Hostilities Only) like me. So, in order to comply with an AFO (Admiralty Fleet Order) I was given the rank of Leading Seaman. Well, they didn't want bloody ordinary seamen up on their bridge, did they? Regular Navy people had to wait years for that sort of promotion, so they weren't too happy about it!

I'd been in the Navy such a short time and there I was, a teenager on the bridge of one of His Majesty's Destroyers, conversing with the Captain! “  
In October 1941, Alan joined Mauritius: a Fiji Class, 8,2525-ton, RN Cruiser, fitted with the latest radar sets. She had only just been commissioned and was at Plymouth. “We'd been a crew for a very short time; but were considered ready to tackle our next duty on this beautiful new ship.”

The first voyage on Mauritius was in convoy to Cape Town.

It took almost a month to get there because at the time it was necessary to go round to the American Coast, then on to Freetown to avoid submarine areas.

“Aboard Mauritius we took the last big convoy into Singapore in late 1941. It was the only first-class, Far East naval base, 6,000 miles from Pearl Harbour.

Whilst there, we were tied up alongside Prince of Wales (as a picture in the book, ‘Last of the Battleships’ shows) but due to boiler trouble we were unable to leave for Pearl Harbour with the rest of the fleet. That fleet included poor Repulse. She was an old battleship, her anti-aircraft crew had no protection, no shield or anything around them, just open gun platforms. Prince of Wales and Repulse were both bombarded and sunk by the Japanese.”

The son of Prince of Wales Captain, John Catterall Leach, was a Midshipman on Mauritius. His father, Captain Leach, was one of over 800 men who perished in that attack.

“I've got a big beef about that because they had the same surface warning set on

Prince of Wales as we had on Mauritius. I knew blokes on that ship, and before they were sunk they had reportedly picked up two Japanese cruisers about twenty miles away.

It seemed that Admiral Phillips didn't believe in this radar business. Absolute disaster! Those men didn't stand a chance.

Our repairs were done and we were sent on to Trincomalee (where Mauritius survived a bomb attack) then we continued to Bombay.

Mauritius was back in Plymouth in February that year, then for the rest of '42 and early '43, she escorted convoys as part of the Eastern and Mediterranean Fleets to Cape Town, the Middle East, Bombay, Mauritius Island several times, and the Maldives, all of which were re-fuelling places.

We'd been away for over two years by this time without any leave and the buzz was that we were going to Liverpool for a refit. Sod the war-what about our leave?"

From the Fleet Base of Mombasa, to Durban for dry-docking, Mauritius proceeded to Trufig on the Suez Canal, where Alan remembers several engineering officers boarded Mauritius. They paid particular attention to the steam-operated catapults she had fitted amidships to boost the short take-off space available for aeroplanes, but which were of no use in the Mediterranean.

"Gangs of squaddies boarded with blowlamps, and a mobile crane came alongside to remove the catapults. They fitted Mauritius with about 48 anti-aircraft Oerlikons and continued to work on her day and night as we travelled through the Suez.

Our crew was mainly unaware that we were now on our way to Pantelleria, to join in the bombarding, but this didn't go to plan because our captain and navigating officer ran us aground right outside Alex Harbour!

It was quite serious at the time because the German 190's were doing low level bombing, and a huge oil-tanker had run aground about a mile offshore. She'd hit a mine and was alight. “

HMS Mauritius was about 100 yards short of the burning tanker and her mess decks full of shells.

“Mauritius was grossly overweight so we had to wait for the tide to turn and be towed off by tugs, with the ships' company dancing about on the quarterdeck to the band as they played on Y turret! The Captain went for court-martial. The result was a reprimand for putting her aground then congratulations for getting her off! So, we missed out on Pantelleria but were present in Malta during the last big air raid when every ship's gun pointed to the sky. It was like a wall of metal going up and even more dangerous as it came back down! The best bit was my Uncle Tom, an RE Sargeant there (the Sargeants Mess at Malta was the hub of everything that went on) anything that was going went through the RE Mess. It was an absolute penance for most going ashore at night, because there was nothing there at the end of the siege, no drink, no food, no nothing! I was all right though because Uncle Tom picked me up at the jetty and took me back to the Mess for a few drinks...”

Next, in Sicily, Mauritius took part in Operation Husky as a unit of Support East Force, when surface warning sets were utilised to plot the position of targets on land within a yard or so. FOO's (Forward Observation Officers) then went ashore with the troops to plan firing.

“We blew the living daylights out of Taormina, poor little place! Monitors were used there, flat ships that came out of the ark really, but they were very shallow draught with 15” guns on a turret and could go in at about six or seven foot of water, where we couldn't.”

Alan's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, August 14, 1943, was spent in Augusta Harbour.

“In action, you didn't get your grog at midday, as had been the custom since Nelson's day, instead 'up spirits' came after dark. Naturally, to comply with tradition, I had a sip from everyone else's rum (fifteen or more in our mess) plus my own tot, and I was very soon a little bit hors de combat, so they hid me under one of the aircraft warning sets!”

The set designated to Alan's pal, Jack Gassen, was out of action because the German 'planes were low, so Alan's surface set was the only one that could catch them.

“In the morning, I went up on deck and wondered what the hell had happened! Half a dozen convoys had been hit, two were alight and expected to blow up at any minute because they were ammo ships. Jack got the DSM and I never even got a mention in despatches!

We had a spell at Taranto then they pitched us into Salerno where the Germans allowed us ashore before letting all hell loose on us! They were perfecting their wireless-controlled glider bomb, and we were target practice.”

Orion and the U.S Savannah were hit.

“It was here that three of our own ‘planes were shot down. The pilots were told not to fly below 2000 feet above the Fleet; but some did. Unlike the crew of Prince of Wales, who’d only been together about three months, we’d been an efficient fighting team for three years...”

Leave was expected but Mauritius was sent to Algiers. Here she joined KGV as an escort. Winston Churchill was aboard KGV, suffering ill health, on his way back to England.

“We docked in Plymouth where we were given 48 hours leave prior to an expected refit but when we reported back, instead of the promised leave, we were sent back to Gibraltar instead!”

In spite of Captain Davis’ representations to Admiralty, leave was not granted.

This was a real blow to morale that resulted in mutiny by the stokers.

Captain Davis went right down, through the hole, to the stoker mess deck to talk them out of it. His gentle reasoning worked and the men carried on. (Captain Davis later became Admiral of the Fleet).

“We had WREN Cipher Officers on board, for some sort of secret job, but the weather was so rough you couldn’t go up on the upper deck, and the guns of ‘A’ turret were awash so couldn’t be depressed. The sea came right over and swept the Man O’ War anchors off: chains and all! Those poor WRENS were violently ill.”

In January ’44 Mauritius returned to the Mediterranean for the Anzio landings.

“We lost a British LST 305; Spartan, a brand new 5.25-inch cruiser was sunk by a glider-bomb; and Penelope was torpedoed by a ‘fish’ allegedly meant for us. We picked her radar bloke up: he must have been a good swimmer because he still had his square-bashing boots on.”

When Mauritius later entered Chatham for a refit her crew saw Belfast leave with King George aboard - the last big review of the Fleet before Normandy.

Admiral Somerville boarded Mauritius on this and several other occasions which was ‘a real feather in our cap’ remembers Alan.

“She was a top ship.”

In the month before D-Day, Mauritius was recalled to Scapa Flow to do working up trials with the Fleets; but, when the worst Channel weather in 25 years was recorded, the Allied landings were delayed until 6th June.

Mauritius was part of Operation Neptune, Force D, off Sword Beach.

“At night we went across to the Bay of Biscay and lay offshore: the Germans were

trying to get to their troops who were stuck in Le Havre, so as soon as they got out from the coastline, I'd pick them up on the radar and we'd sink them. Every now and then though we got too close and they fired back at us."

On one occasion when Alan picked their shells up on the radar, he said:

"They're firing back at us, Sir!"

"I know effing well they are! You want to be up here!" Replied Captain Davis.

"The airborne attack: what a sight that was! A sight never to be seen again-skyline to skyline-thousands of aeroplanes.

Cooley, my Able Seaman, and I couldn't achieve much then because there were so many transmissions going on most of the sets were deemed useless. We were edging forward with the landing craft so decided to go up on deck and have a look, though our action station was closed up, inside, so we shouldn't have been there. When we went back to the cabin there was a bloody owl in there!

He looked at us and we looked at him-he flew back out! Incredible."

Mauritius remained off Sword beach until D24 to fulfil her role in the operation and continued to take part in offensive patrols with destroyers, resulting in Sperrbrecher 157 and five Vorpostenboote being sunk in August '44.

"She was a lucky ship and it was a sad day when I watched her leave without me in



October 44.”

From February 1945 to March 1946, Alan trained on HMS Dryad at Fareham as a Flight Control Officer in preparation for service on anti-aircraft carriers destined for Japan, and as Acting Petty Officer, spent time in training new crews at Chatham and Shotley.

“I left the Royal Navy in May 1946, glad to be alive, and grateful for the opportunities

I’d had. When people asked me why was I always laughing, I’d tell them, because I’m always winning.”

