

My cousin - RAYMOND ALEC NORTH
1925 - 2011

son of ALEC NORTH & DOROTHY PYLE
living at Richmond Road, Cambridge

Educated Cambs High School, Hills Road to 1943
At Queen's College, Cambridge 1943 (for 6 months)
called up 1943, joined 1943, demobbed 1947

Worked at John Dickinson of Apsley, Herts
- paper makers.
for many years.

Wrote popular description of Aircrew Training

CRUISE/FLY HOLIDAYS – 1944 STYLE

PART 1

After a sixteen week stay in the prestigious holiday camp "Aircrew Despatch Centre", Heaton Park, Manchester, we receive an irresistible invitation

DAY 1

We leave by overnight train, rucksacks crammed with Tropical Gear and disembark early on Day 2 at a secret location (Glasgow) whence we are taken to be put on the 17,000 ton "NEA HELLAS" officially denominated "HIS MAJESTY'S TROOPING BOAT NO: 17". At the top of the gangplank we meet our own personal steward (shared with 150 other aircrew cadets) who courteously conducts down three flights of stairs to a troop deck. Invited to remove kit, we seat ourselves at rows of fixed dining tables. On enquiring the location of our bedrooms we are told to uplift our eyes and behold lines of hammocks suspended from the ceiling. Suddenly we appear to be moving and everyone dashes upstairs. Please note that Nautical phrases such as "aloft" or "D Deck – No Ventilation" are not used – to preserve the illusion of our being honoured guests in a five star hotel.

DAY 2

Terminates with a cruise past "the bonny banks O'Clyde" on a gloriously sunny evening. Overcome with genuine emotion we join in a soulful rendition of "There's an Old Mill by the Stream, Nellie Dean" but no tears of sadness are allowed to form in the eyes of cadets already hardened to the realities of service life.

..... *but 1944 travel does have advantages:* no tickets to buy, no passports needed. Excellent food and accommodation provided. We are being paid 7/6d a day and at present have nothing to spend it on. No need to worry about where we sleep (near a porthole – there aren't any below the waterline) or near the gangway. We rest (eventually) snugly tucked up in our hammocks. Someone's head resting on our feet. Our feet on someone's head. Side by side and head to toe with everyone else. Yes, we're all in the same boat and as a titter runs round the room it soon changes into hysterical laughter. We are as near Hell and "NEA HELLAS" can offer, but who cares? We're on our way, hopefully to Heaven (on Earth please!) for at last we are going to REALLY LEARN TO FLY!

DAYS 2 – 35

At sea. Yes, all at sea. In convoy first westwards then south then east and after 12 days we pass quickly through the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Med. Such a deep blue sea! Next stop (but we don't get off the boat) is Suez, then the Bitter Lakes then the Red Sea. We have picked up thousands of South African Troops going home from the Western Desert. Deck space at a premium. Sleeping down below is impossible in this heat so we decide to form a non-stop Deck Pontoon School. Otherwise if you stand up you will lose your space. Now we enjoy the incredible experience of sleeping on teak boards, looking up to see the masthead making lazy circles in the starry sky. Dolphins and flying fishes play. We pop into Mombassa and out again. We've had grey monsoon skies with the busy destroyers shipping it green.

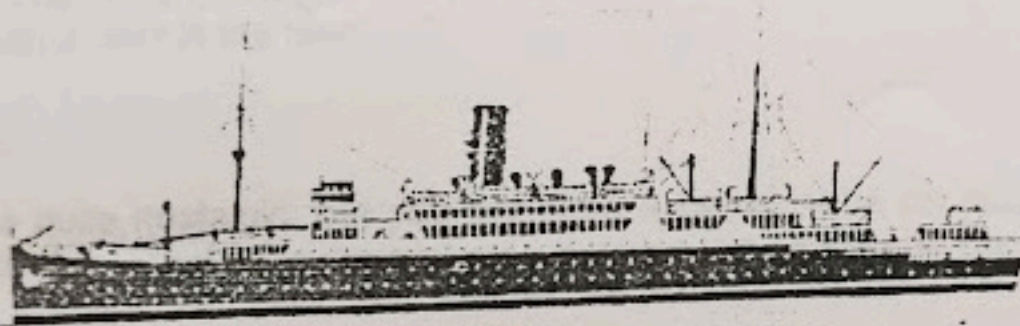
DAY 35

Lucky to be alive. Diet of boiled sausages and brilliant white bread went down a treat. Sea water washing and shaving (sea water soap useless) has given us a caking of salt to hide the

boils and other afflictions of the flesh. We cannot recall having been bothered by orderly officers. No welfare or counselling offered or needed. No books, no newspapers. Where did I buy my cigarettes? Somewhere we "crossed the line" but Neptune was otherwise engaged, probably at war in the Pacific.

DAY 36

We dock in Durban, are taken to IFTC at Clairwood and are lucky enough to be chosen for guard duty from 2am to 4am in the teeth-chattering chill of a South African winter night. Tomorrow to Pretoria and the High Veldt by train, destined for an Air School. Heaven gets nearer!



Prior to 1939, the "NEA HELLAS" was owned by the ANCHOR LINE and was named "Tuscania". Built by Fairfield in 1922. 16,800 gross registered tons. Overall length 578ft. Six turbines, twin screw, oil fuel. 17 knots. Designed for 1,600 passengers and 350 crew.

PART II

The story so far:

In 1944 the Troopship 'Nea Hellas' took a draft of Aircrew Cadets from Scotland to Durban, South Africa.

We boarded on 3rd May and disembarked on 6th June. I told what I remembered of that voyage and had intended to take the reader on our journey to the Transvaal and to the flying courses that followed. But something has cropped up!

'Nea Hellas' shipmates have given me their own 'memoirs'. These now form a much more factual account – with a twist in the tale!

Bill J. (u/t Navigator)

"I found your article quite nostalgic, but you did have a better suite on board. Mine was, I believe, on 'F' Deck. A few inches lower and we would have been under the ship!"

Tony P. (u/t Pilot)

(Bored and frustrated by delays in Rhodesia he volunteered for an Air Gunner's course and then progressed rapidly to his brevet and squadron service.)

"The entire 1943 (Summer) intakes of Oxford, Cambridge and other University Air Squadrons formed part of the 'Nea Hellas' draft. Built in 1922 and named the 'Tuscania' she had sailed until 1939 on passenger services to and from America and India. She was sold to a Greek shipping line in 1939, only to be commandeered by Britain on the outbreak of World War II and converted to a troopship. She served as such throughout the entire war."

Tony continues:

"We were part of a large convoy which assembled in the Clyde over several days with some sixteen vessels including 'Strathmore', 'Orion', 'Empress of Australia' and 'Sterling Castle'. There were six escorting frigates and an 'escort' carrier which was of no great help to us, its decks being crammed with Beaufighter II's, Barracudas and sundry oddments, all firmly lashed down!"

On the high seas he recalls paravanes being put out, depth charges being dropped in large numbers and a rumour that 'we' had sunk a U-Boat. Passing Gibraltar, "plenty of air cover, wave-skimming Mosquitoes plus Libs, Cats and (later in the Med.) Spitfires and even Airocobras".

When shadowed by a Heinkel III at 20,000 feet, black flags were raised and all ships made a smokescreen at dusk. In the Bitter Lakes section of the Suez Canal we boldly anchored within spitting distance of two Italian Cavour class battleships and the cruiser 'Luigia di Savoia'. Fortunately, Italy was now on our side!"

Bruce B (was educated at Eton College and was therefore accustomed to hard living!)

He wrote to me:

"You are constantly looking through rose-tinted spectacles at our cruise! Don't you remember Morgan who had the peculiar affliction of being unable to sweat? In the Red Sea heat he had to be packed in ice to stay alive. The ice was taken from the food store. The fish it was meant to freeze went bad. I was one of our Mess Orderlies the day it was cooked

and having smelt it in the Galley I decided not to eat my portion. The rest of you lot were (as ever) so hungry that you ate it first and tasted it later. Everybody, except the Mess Orderlies, developed food poisoning and to say that there was a run on the quite inadequate number of loos is to put it as politely as possible. We blessed orderlies now had more than enough to eat. I think the Ship's Doctor advised the Captain to put into Mombassa for fresh food and to exchange poor Morgan for a large quantity of ice!"

"The transit camp at Durban was naturally air-conditioned, being built on cattle market lines – the roof held up by pillars and only low walls all round. I remember how lucky we air cadets were as we slept in our flying kit whilst others shivered in whatever bed clothes they could find".

Bruce eventually got his wings. After 'demob' he returned to Cambridge University and rejoined the Air Squadron.

And now (would you believe it?) the twist in the tale:

Some time after the War there came to light a copy of the Captain's routine voyage report to his UK headquarters and I quote:

"Voyage Feeding

A report received at Durban indicated that the Air Cadets were dissatisfied with the method of cooking the fish and sausages served on the voyage. This matter received attention and the OC troops submitted a reply indicating that the complaints were quite unwarranted".

So now you know! However we, as passengers were really very fortunate and should have been aware of the skill and bravery of our Captain and crew.

We were only a small part of their war. Come to think of it, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan which involved getting cadets to and from Canada, Rhodesia and South Africa would never have 'got off the ground' had it not been for the Royal Navy and the British Merchant Navy.

Just look at some of the ships named in this brief account. Did you set sail in one of them - or perhaps in the 'Louis Pasteur', 'Empress of Canada' or 'Reina del Pacifico'?

In your memory there may be a troopship story trying to get out.

I see the Editor has had a number of letters suggesting that more humour should be included in INTERCOM. So let's be having you!

Humour is a funny business when you try to put it on paper! Now I must get back to writing the 'FLY' part of my story of "CRUISE/FLY HOLIDAYS 1944 STYLE".

Don't go away

PART III

Our 35 day cruise on the "Nea Hellas" took us from Scotland to South Africa.

From the docks at Durban it was a short train ride to Clairwood Transit Camp and on the next day a very special train was laid on for us. We boarded in the sidings at Clairwood into comparative luxury. Travelling Second Class, six to a compartment, meals were served by waiters in the dining cars. Delightful panoramic views were provided from the observation platforms at the end of each carriage as we ascended through a series of U and S bends around the mountains of Natal. If you were afraid of heights it wasn't advisable to look down as we crossed many bridges and places where the railway track was attached to the steep mountainside by invisible Velcro, or so it now seems.

This was (and, I hope, still is) one of the great Train Journeys of the World. We go through Pietermaritzberg and many places with strange sounding names. On through the night to Veldt country, we change trains at Pretoria for Kloofzicht and No. 75 Air School at Lyttleton.

Only it's not an air school!

We are in another time-jam and have to do the ITW exams again. Same old questions about the Internal Combustion Engine Otto Cycle. The only difference is in Meteorology where if you stand with your back to the wind in South Africa, the centre of low pressure is on your Right Hand side.

As this is the third time we've done this course it is no surprise that we all pass. Eventually we start flying training at Potchefstroom (Tiger Moths) and thence to Vereeniging (Harvards). Our wings are pinned on by Brigadier General Klopper (Ex-Tobruk) on 5th May 1945, three days before VE Day. We are flown home by South African Air Force Dakotas to be in Harrogate in time for VJ Day.

After 2 years and 2 months in training, some of us will never fly again.



Lt Rich of the South African Air Force enjoys the fresh air over the Transvaal on 20th February 1945. His pupil concentrates on "No. 28 Formation Flying Advanced 1. 2. 3."

*Ray North.
for Christopher
Tongue.
10/11/2002*



First solo on Vengeance
as Flight Lieutenant, Officer commanding No 22 AACU. RAF Karachi, India. Feb 1947.

Vultee Vengeance. 1700 H.P. Wright Cyclone

1810 fly again!

