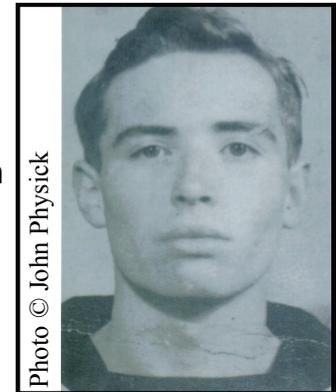


Three years without a day's leave !

WWII memories of John Physick

I was a 15 year old grammar schoolboy when war broke out in 1939 and at 16 years of age I joined the Home Guard. I then volunteered for the Royal Navy by adding a year to my age (they didn't check then) and was accepted as 'Hostilities Only' an open ended commitment of unlimited duration.

Some time later after they realised my true age, I was sent to HMS Royal Arthur at the Butlins Holiday camp at Skegness in April 1942 for basic training where I was told that I would be in the Fleet Air Arm as an Ordinary Seaman (Met). From June to August I was at HMS Daedalus, Lee-on-the-Solent for general duties before being drafted to HMS Jackdaw (RNAS Crail) in Fife for meteorological training.



With training completed by late September I was off south again, this time to HMS Heron (RNAS Yeovilton) to take my place watch-keeping in the Met Office. However this did not last long as after a couple of weeks I was off back up to Scotland again.

My orders were to report to Instructor Commander E R Trendell a WW1 pilot now a Met. Officer, and the following day we travelled to Greenock to join the destroyer HMS Achates, where I met two more OS(Met) the same age as me. We were officially known as Naval Party 601 of NCXF (Naval Command Expeditionary Force) and set sail for destination unknown. After several days we arrived at Gibraltar and were accommodated in HMS Cormorant an ancient sloop. As at that time we had no charts, pens or other meteorological equipment we found space at the Met. Office at RAF North Front. We received WT signals from the Admiralty including synoptic reports from Europe and North Africa, as this material was considered secret we had no idea about what was to happen.

In November 'Operation Torch' became the invasion of Morocco and Algeria.



Shortly afterwards Cdr Trendell (the Fleet Meteorological Officer) and us three Met. ratings took passage in the cruiser HMS Charybdis to Algiers.

We, along with other ratings and Royal Marines were accommodated on a damaged merchant liner, the Scythia. We commandeered a table in the First Class saloon of the Ville d'Oran, a Mediterranean luxury ferry, moored adjacent to the HQ ship HMS Bulolo, as the Met. Office.

Early in 1943 AFHQ (Allied Forces Headquarters) was established in the Hotel St. George, west of Algiers. Ratings and Royal Marines were housed in a secondary school, the Lycée Bugeaud on the edge of the Casbar at Bab-el-Oeud a couple of miles from AFHQ.

At first the Met. Office comprised of a table outside the door of the War Room, later offices were built and again the Met. Office was just outside the War Room.

The collection of data was quite hectic, one rating would arrive at AFHQ at 2000 and stay to 0800 the next day, the relieved rating returning to the Lycée. The third rating would spend the night at the seaplane base at the docks, and at about 0500 would collect any WT signals, and then go to the 12th American Air Force HQ in the town to collect teleprinter material and race up to AFHQ so that the chart would be ready for the FMetO by the time the Admiral arrived. Later we had a teleprinter of our own that made life a little easier.



One memorial event was the inspection by King George VI, on Sunday 19th June 1943 at Algiers

Photo: Royal Navy Crown Copyright

A few months later in the summer of 1943, we three Met. ratings and Cdr. Trendell took passage in the destroyer HMS Brecon to Bizerta in Tunisia and transferred there to the HQ ship HMS Largs, during the invasion of southern Italy after Mussolini had been arrested and the Royal Italian Navy had surrendered. Then when it was all over we returned to AFHQ in Algeria and back to the usual Met. Office routine.

Up to now we had not received any maps, charts, ink, pens or stationary since leaving Scotland many months ago (we had to scrounge everything from the RAF), until one day a soldier came and asked us whether we knew that there was a crate or two addressed to the Fleet Meteorological Officer in a hut in the gardens of the Palais d'Été, at that time the home of General de Gaulle. There at last was all our missing equipment, no-one ever explained how it got there or why the FMetO had not been informed.

During June 1944 at about the time of the D Day landings, Rome had been liberated and AFHQ moved to Italy. My progress there is recorded in a series of signals.

From: RAF Movements

To: HMS Hannibal (Algiers)

For FAA/JX357703 AB Physick.

You are instructed to travel by air to Naples on 27.6.44. Meteorological Seaman urgently required at Naples to ease serious staff shortage and on arrival report to OC Unit.

From: C in C Med.

To: HMS Hannibal (Algiers), NOIC Naples

Arrangements have been made for H Hill A.B. Met FAA/JX357709 and J F Physick A.B. Met FAA/JX357703 on the staff of C in C to take air passage to Naples by RAF aircraft leaving Maison Blanche aerodrome at 1240 Thursday June 29th. Request ratings be transported to Maison Blanche and discharged to Naples.

From C in C Med.

To: FOWIT (Flag Officer Western Italy and Tyrrhenian Sea)

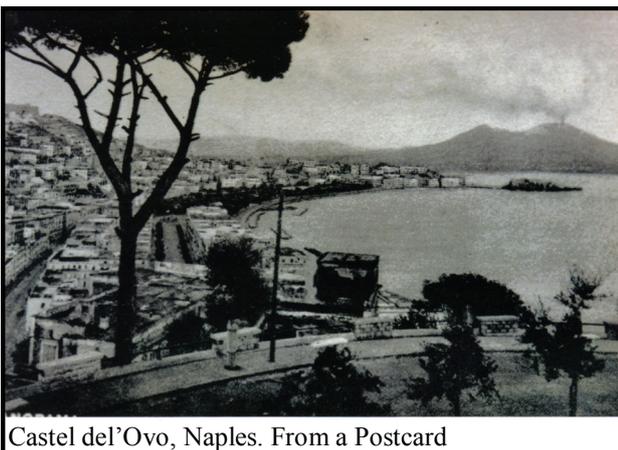
For Fleet Meteorological Officer

A.B. Physick and A.B. Hill expected to arrive Naples P.M. Tomorrow 29th June.

From this we learnt two things, first that we had been made up to Able Seaman and that A.B. Gordon (the third member of our team) was to be left behind to transport kitbags, hammocks etc. by sea.

On arrival at Navy House on Via Partenope we found that the Met. Office was in the front of the building on the top floor, looking out towards Capri.

Lt. Cdr. Boxford RNVR was the new Met. Officer, Cdr Trendell having returned to the U.K.



Castel del'Ovo, Naples. From a Postcard

All Navy House ratings were accommodated in a medieval fortress, the Castel del'Ovo on an island accessed by a causeway one hundred yards from Navy House. The messdecks were somewhat primitive, almost prisonlike with thick stone walls and a couple of small windows.

In July 1944 King George VI came to Naples, visiting ships in the bay and Navy House.



UNESCO World Heritage Site, Source: Wikipedia

Shortly afterwards the new AFHQ at Caserta, an enormous 18th century palace of the King of Naples was ready, one of the thousand rooms was converted to offices, and we shared one with RAF meteorologists. All Navy officers and ratings were accommodated in an Italian barracks a short distance from the palace.

We carried out our normal office routine until August when we were off again, taking passage on a cruiser. In spite of the rush to get everything together, the cruiser was on the move when we reached it. We got our kit aboard but the mercury barometer was a problem, despite being securely stowed in its box, I had to clamber up a rope ladder of a moving ship, trying to prevent it from swinging wildly or even turning over.

The next day we arrived at Ajaccio on the west coast of Corsica and transferred to HMS Largs again. For some unknown reason we three had to double up, two on watch at a time. Winston Churchill came aboard and then went off for a day on a destroyer to observe Operation Anvil, the landings that were taking place along the south of France.



HMS Largs © Old Navy Photos

Two or three weeks later we returned to Caserta, and were sent to Ischia for a few days to recover. We were quartered in a private house and were surprised when the lady of the house presented us with a bill for our stay. We only just had enough lire as we had not been paid for several weeks.

After this episode we were sent to Taranto by road to set up the Fleet Met. Office in Navy House, the former Fascist Headquarters.

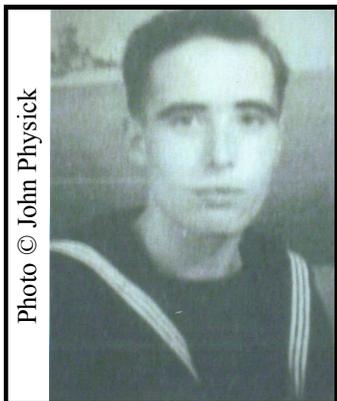


Photo © John Physick

21st Birthday at Taranto
31/12/44

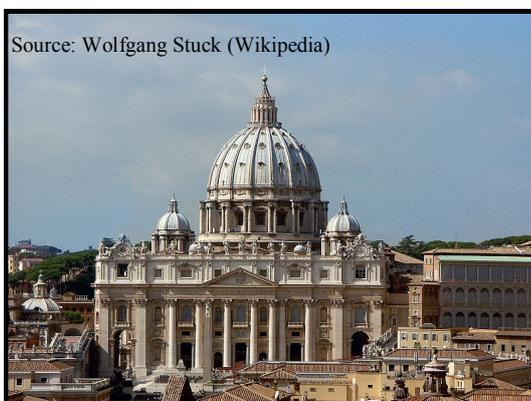
On 31st December 1944 I celebrated my 21st birthday. Well primed by my mess-mates with sippers and gulpers, I collapsed into my dinner and was put to bed, at about 1800 I fell out of my top bunk, that sobered me up a little and we decided to go ashore for New Years Eve. I remember little of this except at one point we were sitting in the snow eating ice cream.

When I returned to Caserta with some documents I discovered that we had been promoted to Leading Seamen (Met), at no time had we been officially notified. Back in Taranto A.B. Gordon had returned to the U.K. as his mother had died, and his replacement was a very young O.S. (Met) Fyfe.

When an aircraft carrier (I think it was HMS Unicorn) arrived for a few days we borrowed their A.B. (Met) to take on a little unexpected watch-keeping with us. We also had a new Fleet Met. Officer, a Lt. H Rentell, as Lt. Cdr. Boxford had gone to Malta.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945 we returned to Naples and then back to Caserta.

In August 1945 I had my first leave for three years, a week in Rome accompanied by a Leading Seaman and a Royal Marine, transport being arranged for us by another new Fleet Met. Officer, Sub-Lt. David Clee RNVR. Rome was spent sightseeing, the Vatican, St Peter's and a performance of Aida with a live elephant.



Wandering round St Peter's huge basilica I found a door leading to the roof, past a Vatican shop and up through one of the internal galleries to the uppermost gallery. Through yet another doorway I found a vertical ladder that I climbed (nobody stopped me) and found myself inside the golden ball at the top of the dome under its cross.

Whilst we were in Rome, the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan and the war was finally over. Back at Caserta, I volunteered to transfer to the Met. Office in Malta, but it was not to be, within a very short time I found myself on a ship from Naples to Toulon in southern France.

After a few days we were on a train heading homewards, via Narbonne, Carcassone, Limoges and around Paris to arrive at Dieppe a couple of days later. I caught a ferry to Newhaven and after a night in Portsmouth barracks went back to HMS Daedulus from where I was sent home on several weeks leave.

With leave over it was back to HMS Daedulus where I learnt that I had been promoted to Petty Officer (Met) on the 1st August 1945 (even before I left Italy), and was drafted to HMS Hornbill, RNAS Culham near Oxford. There I stayed until I was demobbed on 13th May 1946.

I subsequently joined the RNVR also at Culham, as a Petty Officer (Met) in 1832 Air Squadron, finishing up as a Chief Petty Officer (Met) in 1957 when the RNVR Fleet Air Arm was disbanded.



Photo © John Physick

Whilst in the RNVR I spent the required annual fortnight's training on HMS Implacable and HMS Theseus, at HMS Seahawk, HMS Harrier, St Merryn and Kete among others. Like most other 1832 Air Squadron ratings I spent about three weekends a month at Culham, where I always relieved the duty Met. rating from a twelve hour Saturday night watch.



Photo © John Physick

Dr. John Frederick Physick CBE, RCA, FSA.
Deputy Director Victoria and Albert Museum 1983
Pictured in 2010

*Edited by Peter Squibb from information supplied by John Physick
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