

## Chapter seven

### *First class boys*

As soon as Godfrey Gifford was drafted on to HMS Fiji his rank was elevated to Boy First Class. With his new status came a pay rise from five and three pence (27p) a week to eight and nine pence a week (43p), although he still only received one shilling (5p) in his hand. From the moment Godfrey stepped on to the Fiji he was put to work and there was hardly a moment's rest for the young seaman from that point onwards.

Godfrey and the other Boy Sailors were given all the most menial of tasks on board ship. Most were set to work as pot scrubbers and potato peelers. One of Godfrey's jobs was to act as hammock boy to Midshipman Robin Owen. The senior sailor gave Godfrey sixpence a week (2p) extra to unfurl his hammock at night-time and carefully stow it away in the hammock nettings each morning.

The first operations that Godfrey took part in with the Fiji were in the Bay of Biscay. Godfrey later recalled that the Fiji was given the task of tempting out the two German battlecruisers the Gneisenau and the Scharnhorst, known to the British Navy as the 'Ugly Sisters'. Around two hundred miles west of the Fiji, the battlecruiser HMS Hood lay in wait.

Should the Ugly Sisters take the bait, the Hood was ready to attack. When the Fiji entered the Bay of Biscay Godfrey was immediately stricken with seasickness, as the ship rocked almost out of control in the rough seas. His mal de mer was cured once and for all during that horrendous fortnight, however. Godfrey soon learned that in the Navy, no matter how ill you felt, you just had to get on with the job. He realised that there was no excuse that would let you off work, as his superiors continued to bark orders at him regardless of how much he was suffering physically.

To Godfrey's relief the ship then sailed further south in the Atlantic where the waters were calmer and they ended up off the coast of Gibraltar. They were in the harbour for only twenty-four hours, but Godfrey was not allowed to go ashore due to his rank and the fact that it was the middle of the week. It was the beginning of March and Godfrey had not been on dry land for over a month. Stanley was on the battlecruiser HMS Renown at the time, which was serendipitously in port at Gibraltar at the same time. Stan knew that Godfrey was stuck on the Fiji, so he took a small boat out to where the ship was moored, climbed aboard and made sure that his younger brother was all right.

It was on 1 April that, the younger Gifford brother later recalled, the Fiji and the Renown sailed to Malta as part of a large convoy carrying reinforcements. Their job was to reinforce Malta with aircraft, fuel and ammunition. The convoy suffered a fair bit of bombing en route but all the ships managed to return to safer waters relatively unscathed. After that the Fiji was transferred and joined the eastern Mediterranean fleet, which was in the seas around Alexandria at the time. The Renown, with Stanley on board, turned back and sailed to Gibraltar again.

In the middle of April 1941 the Fiji sailed from Alexandria to the Greek islands. Allied forces had occupied the island of Crete after the

Italians invaded Greece in 1940, and the island proved a useful base for the Royal Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The British built airfields on the island, which became a target for the German military. These airfields put the oil fields of Eastern Europe, required for the impending German attack on Russia, within allied bombing range, so Hitler set his sights on taking Crete. Securing Crete would amount to driving Britain and her allies out of the Eastern Mediterranean and would be a great leap forward for Hitler.

Senior Luftwaffe commanders proposed the idea of capturing the island by an audacious airborne assault. Hitler agreed to the plan and ordered the invasion, which was planned for May 1941. The Germans' plan was code named 'Merkur', after the Roman god Mercury, and their troops were made ready.

The Battle of Crete began on 20 May 1941 with the airborne invasion. The Germans intended to use paratroopers to capture key points on the island, including airfields, so that supplies and reinforcements could be brought in. The island was defended on land by a combination of local troops and soldiers from the Commonwealth.

The fighting on the ground was fierce, with troops suffering exhaustion in boiling hot temperatures. While the troops on land were embroiled in the raging battle, at sea the fighting was no less deadly, and it was the third day of the Battle of Crete that was to have the biggest impact on the Royal Navy and on young Godfrey Gifford.

Admiral Andrew Cunningham was Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet, and he was determined to stop any seaborne invasion of Crete. On the Fiji, sixteen-year-old Godfrey witnessed the battle raging around him for two days. The Fiji was in a group along with HMS Gloucester, HMS Kandahar and HMS Kingston. After each

day's fighting, Godfrey later recalled, the Fiji would withdraw at night-time to the north of Crete to avoid getting dive-bombed by the Germans. According to Godfrey's account, at about eight o'clock at night the ship would dash off at a rate of thirty-three knots and try to catch the kayaks filled with German troops that were attempting to land on the island.

On 21 May Godfrey's ship, and all the others, were under attack from dawn till dusk. The fighting was so intense that the following day the Fiji only had about a third of her ammunition left, according to Godfrey's account of the events. It was a beautiful spring day. The sky was blue and the glistening water reflected its colour while the sun's rays bounced off it, but the good weather was a disguised harbinger of disaster. One of the Royal Navy destroyers, HMS Greyhound, became stuck on the north side of the island, Godfrey remembered. So the two cruisers, the Fiji and the Gloucester, were detached from the fleet just south of Crete and sent round to try to rescue the ailing ship. This was a decision that was to prove fatal. From the moment that both ships reached the western end of Crete, the bombing started. The Stukas kept coming and attacked relentlessly and without mercy from nine o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon. During this time the Fiji's ammunition was gradually depleted until it eventually ran out completely. Godfrey recalled that the ship had to resort to firing practice shells at the aircraft. The Fiji was a sitting duck.

The captain, whose full name and title was Vice-Admiral Sir Peveril Barton Reiby William Wallop Powlett, had a duckboard on the bridge on which he would lie down with a pair of binoculars in his hand. As the dive-bombers approached he would wait for them to drop the bombs and then he would shout, "Hard to port!" Because the ship had a square stern, when it was doing thirty-three knots it was able to swing right over and the bombs would bounce off its side causing the least amount of damage.

Godfrey was in a gun turret with five other boys as shrapnel rained down all over the ship from the exploding bombs. It was Godfrey's job to pass the ammunition to the men manning the guns, but a lot of the people in the turrets were killed or injured by the shrapnel and extra men from the shell rooms had to be found to load the guns, replacing the men and boys who were already lost.

As Godfrey later recalled events, it was at three o'clock in the afternoon that the Stukas got right round to the north side of Crete and settled on the Gloucester, which had by that time also run out of ammunition entirely. They hit her a number of times, and it became obvious to all who could see her that she was fatally wounded. In an attempt at rescue the Fiji circled the Gloucester at high speed and got as close as she could without being hit by the bombers that blackened the skies. Then the men on board the Fiji released almost all of their ship's Carley floats<sup>1</sup>. These lightweight rafts made of copper tubing, cork and canvas were dispatched as a last resort and were designed to save the lives of sailors who found themselves in the water. By this time the Gloucester was on fire. Godfrey watched in horror as the flames danced from the Fiji's sister ship and desperate men threw themselves into the sea, hoping to reach one of the floats and sit tight until they were rescued. The ship itself was beyond repair and gradually sank into the waters off Crete. There had been over eight hundred men on board. Many who survived the sinking were captured by the Germans and sent to prisoner of war camps. Only a handful of men from the Gloucester lived to see their families again.

Now the Stukas turned their attention to Godfrey's ship. By this time Godfrey was in a turret on the quarterdeck on the stern half of the ship. The young lad held on to whatever he could as the ship was struck by two bombs, which fell on either side and exploded. The power of the blasts

lifted the stern right up. Damaged, but not fatally, the ship sailed down to the western end of Crete.

By about quarter past four (Godfrey remembered the details) she had travelled around fifty or sixty miles from where the Gloucester had gone down, and the sailors had a brief respite from the fighting. The men were told to fall out from action stations and they had about a quarter of an hour in the mess where the cooks dished up some food, which the men hungrily ate before they went back to action stations.

The skies had clouded over but the air was still warm as Godfrey dashed back up to his position in the turret. He watched in terror as a German bomber flew out of the clouds and took a low dive towards the Fiji. It dropped two bombs that hit the ship's side as it was turning starboard and rolling over. These bombs inflicted an enormous gash in the side of the ship below the waterline, a wound that was to prove fatal. The bombs had broken down all the watertight doors on the side of the ship and she immediately began to list at about ten degrees. The Fiji cut its speed at once but, although everyone on board did what they could, the inundation could not be halted.

The ship was in chaos by then. Godfrey heard the commander shout out to take cover and he was now outside the relative safety of the turret, so he sheltered under the lip of the turret and looked up to see an aircraft shedding its payload. Godfrey was immobile with fear as he watched two tiny specks fall from the plane and get closer and closer to the boat before he felt the impact as they hit the ship's side in the same place as the original bombs. Then the listing became dramatic.

By this time the ship was full of men dreadfully injured with shrapnel wounds. Godfrey could do nothing but watch the horrific scene unfold as he hung on to the guard rail. As the young boy clung on without orders he

saw two men arrive on the quarterdeck carrying the gunnery officer who was wearing a life jacket. A young doctor followed them. Godfrey watched as they lay the wounded man down on his stomach. The gunnery officer was groaning a little, and when they opened up the life jacket and lifted his shirt Godfrey saw a tiny mark, no bigger than a thumbnail, right in the middle of his back. It was seeping a little blood. Then they turned the man over and Godfrey saw the true extent of his injuries. He had been directing the guns at the enemy aircraft and had been hit with a piece of shrapnel when the bombs exploded. The whole of the man's stomach was hanging out. The shrapnel had cleanly gone through his back and then travelled round his insides destroying everything. The doctor turned his patient back on to his stomach at once and injected him with a massive dose of morphine in the leg. The awful moaning stopped right away.

All around Godfrey there was panic as his fellow sailors, many just boys like Godfrey, came to the realisation that their ship was sinking. The commander stood on deck with a megaphone and ordered his men to abandon ship. "Every man for himself," he shouted, adding, "Good luck!" As the ship slowly turned, Godfrey desperately hung on to the starboard guard rail. Next to him was another crew man who kept muttering about his wife and children in an extremely agitated state. Godfrey felt that there was more to worry about than family and was concentrating on survival, but he gradually realised that he could cling on no longer and minutes later he found himself floating in the warm water of the Mediterranean. Navy-issue watches at that time were not waterproof and stopped as soon as they hit the water. The time was twenty-five past seven.

Later stories would be told of heroic rescues and of one man who could not swim and drank a whole bottle of rum as the ship was sinking to dull the sensation of drowning, which he knew was his fate. There was

another story of a sailor who managed to stay on the ship as it turned over and was picked up the following day by a Canadian destroyer as he calmly sat on the propeller. He had not even got his feet wet. The validity of these stories will never truly be known, but one thing that is certain is that almost all of the class of boys who were on the Fiji with Godfrey, and who he had trained with and grown up with, were killed. There were thirty-two Boy Sailors on board, according to Godfrey, but he was one of just six who survived. One of the dead was Lesley Bates from Leamington Spa, who Godfrey had first got to know at a recruiting centre in Derby prior to the war. The pair had spent all their time together since then and had become firm friends.

With barely any Carley floats left it was little wonder that the loss of life when the Fiji sank was so great. Godfrey said that there were only around three rafts left for the entire ship's company, and he watched as men piled on to one float to create an enormous human pyramid.

Godfrey was wearing his lifebelt when he hit the water. To find himself off the ship, although the future was uncertain, gave the young boy a sense of relief. As he floated in the water he was amazed at its clarity and marvelled at the sight of his own feet as he drifted in the turquoise waves. As men screamed in panic and moaned in pain around him, bombers still flew overhead and the ailing ship sank further and further into the deep, Godfrey made a decision. Slowly he swam away from everybody else and from the sinking ship. Although this could have proved a foolish thing to do, he felt safer away from the madness and hysteria that had befallen many of his fellow crew men.

From the relative calm of his isolated position Godfrey looked up to see a destroyer tearing through the water. He watched as a dive-bomber flew towards him. Its payload narrowly missed the ship but hit a lot of the



Fiji's men who were in the water. The destroyer then made an about turn and headed away from danger. But at about one o'clock in the morning it returned and began to rescue the survivors. Godfrey felt quiet and calm as he waited for rescue.

He was not cold and the water was tranquil. Still feeling relieved to be off the ship, Godfrey was confident that salvation was on its way. He would float in the sea and look up at the sky until then. Lying on his back, watching the bright full moon and stars come out, trivial thoughts popped in and out of Godfrey's head such as the fact that it was a Thursday and that it was half-day closing in the family shop. Rescue did not come until about quarter to eight the following morning, over twelve hours since the ship sank, when Godfrey was finally pulled out of the water.

Two destroyers, the Kingston and the Kandahar, had been rescuing men throughout the night. It was the Kingston that picked up Godfrey. When he finally reached the ship, the sailors that were taking part in the rescue threw scramble nets over the high sides of the ship. The sixteen-year-old tried to pull himself up, but by then he was too weak to climb the net. His stomach was full of salty water and all his energy had been spent trying to remain afloat and stay alive. Seeing Godfrey's predicament, a sailor climbed down the net and grabbed the collar of his overalls, before hauling him up the side and on to the ship. Godfrey tried to blink the seawater out of his eyes, as he was seeing double. It made no difference. The sailor told him to open his mouth, which he duly did, and Godfrey felt the man poke his finger into it and rub it around the insides of his cheeks. He was checking to see if Godfrey had imbibed any oil. Luckily for Godfrey he had not. Then he was told to sit up before being handed a mug of rum to drink. By then Godfrey was used to obeying orders, so down it went. The alcohol hit the salty water in Godfrey's stomach and the

whole lot came straight back up. After another mug of rum, which stayed down, Godfrey was utterly inebriated. In his drunken, exhausted state he crawled under a mess table and fell into a deep sleep from which he would not wake for twelve hours.

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