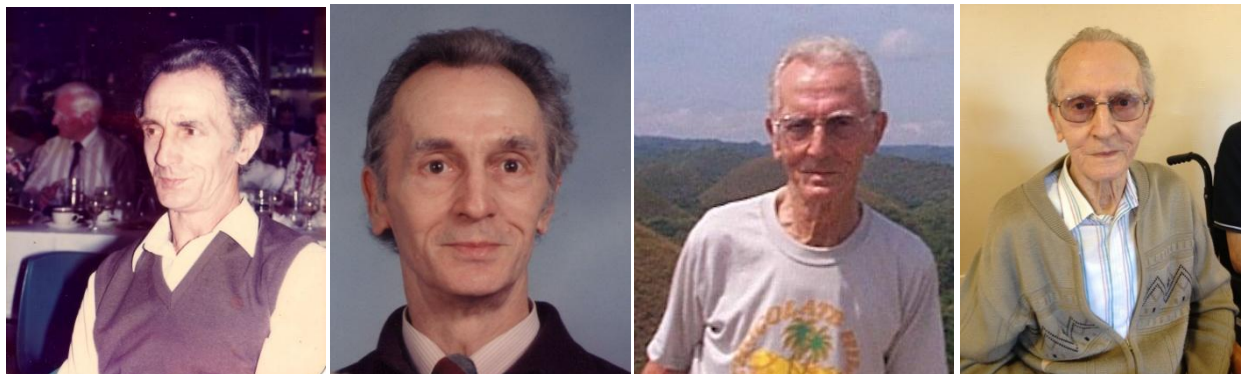


## LEONARD MORRISON MOBBS

6<sup>th</sup> March 1923 – 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2014

Written on 22<sup>nd</sup> August for the Leicester Mercury



## Humble Beginnings

Leonard Mobbs was born on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1923. At this time his parents were living on Hawkesbury Road between Saffron Lane and Aylestone Road, Leicester. His father Fred had served in the Royal Navy during the first World War as a Leading Seaman so although Leon was born as far from the ocean as is possible in this country, seawater was already running through his veins. He was a tall strong and handsome fellow following his Dads love of sport and exercise.

Prior to the outbreak of World War 2 Leon had a brief venture as a commercial artist at age 16 with a company called Lowe & Carr of Belvoir Street and his talents would continue to provide a welcome distraction for years to come.



## Welcome to His Majesty's Royal Navy

He joined the Royal Navy at the age of 19 and spent 4 months at the naval training establishments HMS Ganges and HMS Pembroke. On April 28<sup>th</sup> 1942 he joined his first commission the Corvette HMS Honeysuckle while it was undergoing its 2<sup>nd</sup> refit in Cardiff.

Corvettes would probably not be the first choice of ship for a novice cadet on his first foray into the war. They were described as the Shepherds of the Sea, protecting the Merchant fleet from submarine and air attack as best they could using light artillery and depth charges, but they were small, cramped, often disorganised and full of characters. Leon describes his arrival on board:

*"I had no idea what a corvette was as I left Chatham barracks, but I was soon to find out. I arrived in Cardiff at 11.00 all very excited, until I saw what I thought was a pile of scrap iron with a funnel stuck on the top. Further investigation revealed that it was afloat and it had a name, the one I was looking for. I presented myself to the Quartermaster who directed me to the forward mess deck where I was to hand over my papers. I came across two ratings, an AB (Able Seaman) and a Steward, (a Scot and a Geordie) who were knocking seven bells out of each other rolling around on the deck amongst the depth charges. As I stepped over them I thought 'What have I joined?'. I went forward and stowed my hammock and kit. I was told that it was 'Tot time' but not for me, under age, but the Radar operator gave me a sip of his pure Jamaican rum, neat, the best. Then these two characters who had been fighting appeared with their arms around each other all very pally. I was told it was a regular occurrence with these two."*

Memories of the camaraderie of the crew would stick with Leon for the rest of his life.

## A Harsh Initiation

Leon's first run out was with Convoy PQ16 which set sail from Reykjavik, Iceland on a heading for Murmansk, North Russia. This was the largest convoy of the war so far and was to suffer heavy bombardment from German Junkers JU88 Dive bombers and Submarines. Honeysuckle joined the convoy on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1942 and was soon entering the fray. Leon's Diary says:

*“May 24<sup>th</sup> – Thick fog. I was keeping watch on the forecastle. At 16.30, the destroyer Volunteer dropped 3 depth charges. An hour later we were called to ‘Action Stations’ but nothing came of it and we secured after half an hour. We lost 12 ships in the fog.”*

On the following day they spotted a Fokkewulf reconnaissance aircraft circling the convoy just out of range of their guns. Leon writes:

*“After a while a signal was sent to this aircraft from one of the escorts to ‘Please fly around the opposite way, you’re making us dizzy!’ The German pilot duly obliged.”*

The plane followed for 5 days after which it was accompanied by Heinkel He111 Torpedo bombers and JU88’s: *“At 16.00 we were attacked by JU88’s, I counted 12 of them. The attack went on for 2 hours and the AA barrage was terrific. Honeysuckle had near misses. There were a lot of near misses on the convoy too and the Cam Ship launched her Hurricane”. LM*

On one occasion during this convoy the attacks were so intense and with ships sinking and their crews needing to be rescued the convoy had slowed to a crawl:

*“The convoy was almost at a standstill, there were ships of all sizes hove to. Honeysuckle stopped to pick up survivors from one of the merchantmen, I’m not sure which one but she lay stopped in the water off our port side astern of us. Her stern faced us and we could see the skipper of this ship on a lowered stage used for embarking / disembarking. A sea boat was at his disposal, but he wouldn’t leave. He drifted away with his ship which was later bombed but was too far away then for us to help” LM.*

The aerial bombardment was incessant. *“One Ju88 picked us out for special attention and just before he pulled out of his dive he released four bombs. I was certain that this was my last day. I dived on the deck but I guess his aim was too good as the four bombs straddled us, two on either side. One bomb was really close as I was drenched with the spray as I lay awash on the deck. It was at this particular moment also that our Pom-Pom gun and bridge starboard Oerlikon both decided to jam.!” LM*

These encounters were to continue for the next several days before they reached the relative safety of Kola Inlet, Murmansk and the voyage had taken its toll of the crew: *“At midnight we dropped anchor in Vaenga Bay near Murmansk, a ships graveyard. The masts of bombed merchantmen sticking up through the surface of the water to mark their last resting place. It was an eerie sight, but we were too tired to bother much and just collapsed in our hammocks exhausted after the events of the last seven days”. LM* Certainly a baptism of fire for any 19 year old.



The risk from enemy action didn’t stop simply because they had reached their destination. North Russia was still well within the German hunting ground and you needed to choose your neighbours wisely:

*“On the 18<sup>th</sup> June (still in Murmansk), we had 16 merchantmen surrounding us and gladly shifted berth to a place that was less inviting as a target. The following day however, 15 German dive bombers selected us and 3 merchantmen as their targets as we were the only ones left in the harbour. The Germans had no opposition and we were alongside a tanker at the time but they failed to hit anything – Lucky!” LM*

That wasn't the only lucky break the crew of Honeysuckle received. On their return journey they passed the outward bound convoy PQ17. Leon relates the incident: *“We heard Lord Haw-Haw on the radio telling the German side of the war with his ‘Germany Calling, Germany Calling’ propaganda broadcasts. He said that the Germans knew where our convoy was and that we wouldn't get back to the UK. But we had thick fog and then the sea got rough which helped. We passed PQ17 in the heavy weather and I was told that our skipper had sent a signal to the Commodore of PQ17 requesting that we go with them back to Russia as escort, but he was refused.”*

A fortunate refusal as PQ17 suffered the worst casualty rate of all the allied convoys of the war with the loss of half the ships that sailed. Lord Haw Haw was nearly right but the Germans had concentrated their resources on the loaded outbound convoy rather than the empty returnees.

### [Blackpool it 'aint](#)

It wasn't all work and avoiding enemy shells though, Murmansk offered the finest in North Russian entertainment. There was a cinema made entirely of wood (except the projector obviously) and the Russians were particularly friendly, supplying the crews with cigarettes and 'edibles'. There were card games to be had, darts, and if one was feeling particularly energetic, a game of football could be arranged. These matches were not long, drawn-out affairs though, at temperatures nudging minus 50, games lasted around 10 minutes each way with no time for warm ups. One such game saw the Honeysuckle team outclass an Aircraft Carrier 11 by 1-0.



Leon observed *“On Friday 5<sup>th</sup> (June) I went ashore for the first time with some mates. The snow was deep and this was the middle of summer. In exchange for some cigarettes I had a go with a Russian soldiers rifle, a repeater, and shot at a target of a running man. I got ashore again the following Monday and went hunting for souvenirs, there wasn't much to be had so we returned and had a game of monopoly instead”*

### [Warm Climes But No Warm Welcome](#)

During a voyage to help the Sicilian landings Honeysuckle was escorting Convoy KMS18B, a flotilla of 26 ships. At 21.30 on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1943 they had just passed south of the island of Ibiza when U375 launched a torpedo attack on one of the British merchantmen - St Essylt. Carrying military stores, it was manned by a compliment of 401, 300 of which were men of the Canadian First Division. Fires started in the ammunition hold and petrol store and the ship was beginning to list. By the time Honeysuckle arrived there were already men in the water, hanging on to rafts and floats.

*"We lowered the port side seaboat as there were survivors in the water" says Leon "The sea was calm and smooth with a fair swell. I believe there were 5 of us crewing the seaboat, Lt. Dickie Dykes, Jonesy, myself and two others, I can't recall who. It was a dark night with no moon but plenty of stars. Honeysuckle left us to do business elsewhere and we soon found ourselves with survivors all round us which we started to pick up. Very soon we were overloaded so Jonesy and myself left the seaboat to allow a couple more spaces on board and swam about looking for stray souls. The water was warm, fortunately, with plenty of phosphorescence. We kept hearing voices around us and it was difficult to tell from which direction they came but we did our best to find them. One or two had lights on their life jackets which made them easier to find. We gathered them up near to the seaboat and after a while Honeysuckle returned and collected us all."*

### Some Convoys Are More Eventful Than Others

Convoy JW55B set sail from Loch Ewe in Scotland in December 1943 with an escort of hidden warships. This convoy was to act as bait for the mighty German Battleship Scharnhorst. Amongst the fleet was Honeysuckle doing its duty as always. The Scharnhorst was a destroyer of convoys and a massive threat to allied shipping. It was also one of the Royal Navy's top targets. The crew of the Honeysuckle had seen the tell tale gun flashes of a battle just over the horizon. When they were informed that the Scharnhorst was sighted just 30 miles from their position one of the crew lamented *"I could have lived not knowing that"* such was the fear that the Scharnhorst engendered. The Convoy, however, had done its job and the German Battleship was sunk by a medley of British warships with the loss of all but 35 of its crew.

### Art For Arts Sake

During a refit in Belfast Leon used his artistic skills to add to the gaiety of the Honeysuckle ambience - the adornment of a polar bear emblem on Honeysuckles funnel. *"I believe we were in Belfast and we got permission, must have done, I can't remember how but normal procedure would have been to ask the Buffer (Petty Officer) who would then seek permission from the skipper. I enlisted my friend Robbie to help do the job. I got the idea for the design from a packet of Fox's glacier mints"*

The skipper of another corvette anchored alongside Honeysuckle admired the work so much he asked Leon to do one for his ship which he did. *" We painted an emblem of 'The Saint' on their funnel. I got the idea from a novel by Les Charteris"*



### Leon From Another Angle

Eric 'Robbie' Robinson kept in touch with Leon for many years after the war and describes him during those times: *"Lenny Mobbs was one of the fittest members of Honeysuckle's crew. In modern terms, a bit of a 'Rambo' type figure. He could dive off the radar housing on top of the bridge, into the water on one side of the ship, go right under the hull and come up on the other side. He was also very strong. When we took an*

*Oerlikon gun apart for cleaning (or whatever), you would have to take the barrel and give it a good twist and the barrel would come away from the breech. Then you looked under the breech for a bolt which held the whole gun to the mounting, pull on the bolt and then remove it and lift off the breech and remainder of the weapon. It was very heavy and it took two of you to carry it away comfortably. Lenny never used to bother with all this and just pulled out the bolt and carried the whole gun away in one piece, single-handed”*

### Cold Comfort

Leon earned an accolade from King George VI. A crew member recalls: *“We had just finished oiling ship in the Faroe Islands when it was discovered we had a cable wrapped around our screws. Lennie Mobbs and Lofty Rowley stripped off and Lennie dived into the freezing water to untangle it”.*

*“I wasn’t able to deal with the wire as it was wrapped too tightly around the shaft”* says Leon, *“We had to get some divers from the Faroes to help. It was really freezing cold and we should have put some clothes on. It wasn’t until then that I was told by the Buffer that*



*I could have used a diving mask, which had been hanging in the port waist unbeknown to me. It had never been tried before. I wish I had known about it. After the attempt the Skipper told me to go to the officers mess while I was given a full cup of whisky. It did me a lot of good.”*

Leon was ‘Mentioned in Despatches’ for his efforts.

### Enemies To The End

The Arctic war was unrelenting. Even without an effective air force towards the end of the war the German Naval submarines did not avert their focus from the job in hand – sinking Allied shipping.

Convoy RA66 left Murmansk on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1945 knowing that there were at least 10 U-Boats waiting outside Kola Inlet. Among this convoy was Honeysuckle and the frigate HMS Goodall. Despite a number of manoeuvres designed to confuse the submerged threat, the Goodall was hit by two Gnat torpedoes from the submarine U968. The torpedoes hit her forward magazine which ripped open and folded back the foredeck, its innards belching smoke and flames. The sides of Goodall were glowing red from the inferno raging inside. Honeysuckle was well placed to offer assistance but could not go alongside due to the tremendous heat. Honeysuckle’s Captain decided to ram his ship’s bows into Goodall’s stern to allow a rescue attempt.

Leon was instrumental in this rescue by being one of a number of Honeysuckle crew in lifeboats:

*“When the Goodall was torpedoed she went up like a torch, most of her bridge was destroyed and the top half folded over forwards over the foredeck from the funnel, the latter had been flattened and she was losing fuel oil which set the sea on fire around her. Honeysuckle lowered the starboard sea boat with Robbie Robinson, myself, Strickland and a couple more. While we were being lowered to the sea we saw a crew member of*

*Goodall jump off from what was left of the burning bridge. He was on fire. As we pulled away from Honeysuckle the skipper took her in closer to the Goodall to get the men gathered at the stern off their stricken Frigate.” LM*

To quote Robbie Robinson *“The temperature of the sea was low enough to totally incapacitate the proverbial metallic primate”*

Leon recalls:

*“We picked up 4 of the Goodall’s crew out of the water. I believe we had others hanging on to the gunwales trying to get aboard and in their efforts they overturned us, or rather we just sank. I noticed Robbie on the stern with just his head and shoulders above the water, he was still holding onto the tiller. Now we were all swimming as the seaboat disappeared beneath us and it was every man for himself. The water was cold even though we were clothed (clothing makes a difference for a while but not for long). The Farnham Castle was close to us, picking up survivors and we made for her, hopefully to be rescued ourselves. We were hauled on board and then I noticed two men on a Carley*

*Float floating towards the burning oil making no attempt to save themselves, probably in shock but also out of the reach of any rescue attempt. What a way to go, I had to turn away. After some time aboard Farnham Castle and after a welcome mug of rum, a Russian launch came alongside and took the five of us back to Honeysuckle”*



Leon was in the left hand life raft

The sinking of the Goodall was a particularly sad event. It marked the last ship to be sunk in the conflict. The next day was V.E. day – the end of the war in Europe.

Leon, along with other long time survivors of Honeysuckles crew received a commemorative plaque from Harry Carter of the Goodall as a gesture of thanks.

The end of the war was also the end of HMS Honeysuckle which was grounded in Milford Haven and broken up. On her final voyage she was emblazoned with a banner that read “See you all in Tokyo” as a reminder that events still raged elsewhere.

Ever the reluctant landlubber, Leon was keen to get back out to sea: *“I went back to Chatham Barracks, it was terrible. It was built to hold 3000 and there were 7000 men there. I went to the office for a draft to a ship, any ship, sometimes twice a day until I was told not to show my face there again. As I was walking across the parade ground, who should I bump into but AB Stacy, late of Honeysuckle. ‘What’s up with you and your long face?’ I told him that I hated the place and wanted to get back on a ship. I was missing the happy life I’d had on Honeysuckle. ‘Right’ he said ‘Take this to the signal office and tell them I sent you’. He handed me a piece of paper that he had written on in pencil. I thought is he kidding me or what? But took a chance and handed the slip to the rating in the office. He said ‘What kind of ship do you want?’ I couldn’t believe my ears and told him a small ship, but I was still dubious. ‘Here you are then’ he said ‘it’s a minesweeper going to the far east. Take three weeks leave then join it at Portsmouth’. I took my three*

*weeks leave and returned on time but it had already left – a big disappointment. The rating in the office gave me another chit for a frigate based in Londonderry. He said ‘Take three weeks leave and..’ Scrub the three weeks I said. I was on her for three months. Thanks Stacy, I can’t believe it to this day. Stacy was a 3 badger and they knew their ropes”.*

### Service History

In all, Leon served on The Honeysuckle from 1942 to 1945 covering at least 16 Arctic Convoys and an assortment of other missions including the Malta run, Gibraltar, Sicily, Alexandria, Algiers, Sierra Leone, Freetown and Normandy.

Apart from his Mention in Despatches he was also awarded The 1939-45 Star, The Atlantic Star, The Italy Star, The Africa Star, The Defence Medal and the 1939-45 War Medal with Bronze leaf. From the Russians he received the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Medal and now the Arctic Star medal will accompany them.

### Life After The Navy

Leon was discharged on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1946 and never did return to a career as a Commercial Artist but found employment in many other environs including working down Desford Coal Mine, Engineering, Building work (including the old cooling towers in Raw Dykes road – as his Dad, Fred, had also done) and eventually he became a Toolmaker up to retirement.

His love of art was never far from his mind and in a period of inspiration he painted many scenes he remembered from his war years (some were given away to his shipmates and to naval establishments). He also painted a number of sailing ships and an assortment of animals. Mr. Gatsby of art fame in Leicester Market Place once remarked that Leon’s painting of an elephant was reminiscent of the works of renowned artist David Shepherd.



Now 90 years old Leon still has affectionate recollections of his time aboard Honeysuckle and the men he served with, most of whom have now sadly passed away. He retains his love of all things Naval and still enjoys the odd Tot now and again.

