

Diary of James Ashton 25 July – 25 September 1942

Unit - RAF, Cranfield / Serial Number 1279216

In the pages following I will endeavour to write my experiences in the Royal Air Force having been posted on active service overseas.

Saturday 25 July 1942

I arrive at Glasgow docks and board HMS Aorangi along with about 3000 others, being a mixture of airmen and soldiers. Nothing of importance happens during the day. We remain in dock and settle ourselves down to our new surroundings. I soon find that it is not going to be any pleasure cruise. You can well imagine how we were when the boat was made to hold about 500 passengers and it was now holding 3000.

Sunday 26 July 1942

I awake to another day of little importance. Rumour has it that we are probably moving out tomorrow. Apart from that bit of news nothing happened aboard. All I do is wander around the decks observing our various guns of defence and other points of interest on a big ship.

Wednesday 27 July 1942

The day dawns with us having hope of moving being somewhat "cheesed" by now. Our hopes rise when the next boat to us moves out leaving it clear for our departure, but they are dashed again when a ship returns with a gaping hole in her stern having collided with another ship. Thus we are held in dock for another day.

Tuesday 28 July 1942

Today finds us moving about midday gradually leaving the docks. We pass other boats and the activity of a shipbuilder's yard. I have a feeling that I'm leaving everything just when I want it most. We sail down the Clyde passing cheering people and the hills and the countryside. In the river itself, warships, submarines, aircraft carriers all denoting the fact that we are at war and this is no cruise I am on. Late at night we join the rest of the convoy and Greenock who are all anchored in the river awaiting more ships and the chosen time to move out. The sea is not to say calm, due probably to the rough wind and rain which has fallen continuously for several hours.

Wednesday 29 July 1942

We lay at anchor all day just waiting. On board everything continues slowly. General duties are detailed out about fatigues and aircraft spotting.

Thursday 30 July 1942

8:00am. This time we up anchor and move slowly away down the river as a line of ships and their escort. By 4pm we are out of sight of land, the sea is calm; the sun is scorching and being on top deck I find it glorious. The aircraft which accompanied us during the moving, spitfires and coastal

command, have now left us leaving us on our own. As I look around I see it is not such a large convoy as I anticipated, being combined of 13 ships and an escort of a cruiser, 4 destroyers and 2 corvettes.

Friday 31 July 1942

A day I wish to forget. Outside the weather was miserable. A mist prevailed all around and the sea was rough. Sea sickness has gripped most without warning. I learned later a Short Sunderland flying boat had been shot down by one of our own gun crews. How this was mistaken I can't say except that it came so low out of the mist straight for our own ship and one of our gunners fired on it. I also learned the previous day we travelled 310 miles giving us an average speed of 13 knots an hour. Our course is south west.

Saturday 1 August

The weather continued as the previous day and I just lay feeling ill and wishing I was back at Cranfield. I suppose I'm neglecting life on the ship. Well actually from the point of view of ordinary living it was quite different. Queuing seemed to be everywhere, for washing, food, canteen, haircuts and even the lavatory. Hours were spent sleeping, reading or writing. All kinds of entertainment was being organised but at this date were not in action.

Sunday 2 August 1942

Sunday found a big change in the weather, a very hot sun and a calm sea. Since we started we have been travelling in a danger area and were ordered to sleep in our clothing. Today brought us to the nearest point of France bringing us within easy reach from enemy bombers as well as U-Boats. But nothing disturbed the convoy and we proceeded as normal on the same course and from what I could judge at the same speed.

Monday 3 August 1942

The hot weather continues although the sea is inclined to be a bit choppy giving us a slight sickness feeling which disappeared as the day went on. By the heat we could see we were entering tropical weather and plenty of sunbathing took place on deck. Towards evening, we had the unpleasant experience of losing a Corporal who dies after only two days illness. The first ships concert was put on.

Tuesday 4 August 1942

The sea and weather have never been so wonderful as today. It seems like we are on a big lake anywhere in England so calm is the sea. As the day progresses the heat is terrific on top deck. It is truly a wonderful sight and a real pity our voyage is being made in trying times. At 7:30pm to the exact our course is apparently changed and a zig-zag course I taken. All through the night our speed is increased and the Aorangi sails furiously. I learn later a Sub had been detected.

Wednesday 5 August 1942

Orders have been given for us to wear tropical kit but the day dawns with a choppy sea and a rather cloudy sky however it gets warmer as the day passes on and its scorching by the afternoon. The alarm bell goes as I write which is daily reminder for drill.

Friday 7 August 1942

Another day just passes. The heat is now unbearable. Orders are given for us to sleep on deck.

Saturday 8 August 1942

Our course has been changed now to east heading for the West African coast. The day passes as normal, the heat increases.

Sunday 9 August 1942

Today the weather is very heavy but rain falls which is the best part of the day. A Dutch sub is sighted and joins us apparently heading for the same port as us.

Monday 10 August 1942

Land is sighted and by tea time we lay anchor at Freetown harbour. It looks like real jungle land from where we are looking. We are not allowed ashore. It is real elephant country. Elephants can be seen on the countryside surrounding us. Native boats draw alongside our ship and much enjoyment is had by the troops at the expense of the natives.

Tuesday 11 August 1942

We are still at anchor refuelling from ships alongside. Freetown is known as the "white mans grave", on account of the yellow fever plague which is common ashore. That being the reason we are not allowed ashore. The weather is very clammy and there doesn't appear to be any air at all.

Wednesday 12 August 1942

Another day passes spent in Freetown harbour. I wish that we continued on our voyage as I'm feeling properly browned off with this place.

Thursday 13 August 1942

Another day passes after spending another restless night. It is impossible to get a decent nights sleep. The sweat simply pours off us. There is very little air and we are crowded together sleeping in hammocks on tables and on the floor. There is only a partial black out starting at 10:30pm and it's a real treat to see lights blazing for the first time in 3 years.

Friday 14 August 1942

Rumour was that we were going out during the night but this morning finds us still in the same position. During the day another convoy comes in and in it is the largest ship in the world, the Queen Mary, towering above the other ships it can easily be recognised

Saturday 15 August 1942

8:00am and we are on our way much to the relief of us all. We travel fast and are soon out of sight of land. How our convoy has changed as there are more ships although it seems one or two others have left the convoy. Towards evening we roll heavily and I feel sick.

Sunday 16 August 1942

Another day I wish to forget being ill nearly all day. At 21:30 hours we crossed the equator. We are now travelling down the West African coast.

Monday 17 August 1942

This morning I felt a lot better and sickness was leaving me. During the morning the Neptune ceremony was performed. I learned that by us reaching Freetown we had travelled 4000 miles.

Tuesday 18 August 1942

During the night two American ships join us heading for the same port. Apparently there are now 17 ships in the convoy with an escort of cruisers, two destroyers and an armed merchantman. Today passes normally. The weather is getting cooler now.

Wednesday 19 August 1942

Today the weather is much cooler. We proceed as normal.

Thursday 20 August 1942

I suppose the weather is equal to English and orders are given for us to wear our ordinary clothing again.

Friday 21 August 1942

During the night we ran into heavy weather and this morning we are rolling heavily. The worst yet which of course makes us feel bad again and wishing I was on a solid bit of ground.

Saturday 22 August 1942

The weather calms down a bit today and we proceed as normal. Our course is due south and by now we must have travelled 8000 miles.

Sunday 23 August 1942

We proceed as normal. I think our course has changed to south east.

Monday 24 August 1942

We are now heading east. During the day half the convoy leaves us and changes its course. As night draws in the sea gets rough.

Tuesday 25 August 1942

There are only ten ships in the convoy now and the day dawns with us in terribly rough weather. We roll all over the place. It is clear now that we are heading for Cape Town instead of Durban as was originally intended.

Wednesday 26 August 1942

We are still in bad weather and rolling along very slowly. We are travelling through mine infested waters.

Thursday 27 August 1942

11:30am and we are in sight of land and at 16:30 hours we dock in Cape Town. Table Mountain stands out well as we enter the harbour and the town itself looks very modern.

Friday 28 August 1942

We are allowed ashore today from midday to midnight. Cape Town is truly a wonderful city, very modern and the people are very hospitable and pro-British. The surrounding holiday resorts are also beautiful. Today I visited Muizenberg which was 10 miles outside of Cape Town. I had a wonderful day. It's great to be on land again after a month at sea.

Saturday 29 August 1942

We are allowed out again today and I had another good day. The people here are really wonderful to us. I've never met anyone in England equal to these people for hospitality

Sunday 30 August 1942

Today instead of another day ashore as we expected, 11am sees us moving out of dock and away from Cape Town. By afternoon we are well out at sea and land is fading away. Table Mountain just being visible and so we said farewell to a great city. Our convoy now has changed and it is compromised of ten ships, mostly cargo boats. There are only two troopships and our own escort and one cruiser. Our course is north east.

Monday 31 August 1942

Our course is still the same and we are sailing close to the coast of Africa.

Tuesday 1 September 1942

We are still sailing east in the Indian Ocean. The sea is a bit choppy.

Wednesday 2 September 1942

The sea today is very calm, our speed has slackened and we are travelling very slow. We are hugging the coast.

Thursday 3 September 1942

Today being the war is 3 years old and the day is observed as a day of prayer. The same as in England. We are now very close to the coast. Two corvettes join our escort and planes fly around us for a short while. Rumours as to our final destination are all over the ship, each one apparently from a better source than the other. Among the countries rumoured are India, Aden, Egypt, Madagascar, Kenya and Ceylon. But the "pukka Gen" as to our final destination is unknown. Late in the day two more ships join the convoy.

Friday 4 September 1942

Another two ships join us and there are now fourteen ships in the convoy. Our course has changed to east. The weather is getting hot again as we enter the tropics.

Saturday 5 September 1942

The weather continues very hot. Our course is east. We are travelling fairly fast. Here are a few facts about the Aorangi. Displacement 18,500 tons, speed 16 knots, a New Zealand ship registered in London. Six decks. She has seen many trips during this war. Transported American troops to England previous to this voyage. Was in the evacuation from Singapore being one of the last ships to leave.

Sunday 6 September 1942

Today was us back in tropical kit again as the heat increases.

Monday 7 September 1942

We proceed normally, our course is still the same. The weather is very hot and the heat on top deck is unbearable.

Tuesday 8 September 1942

Another day passes without interference. Our course is now north. Still very hot. Sea very calm.

Wednesday 9 September 1942

Another day passes without incident. We are now nearing the equator

Thursday 10 September 1942

Our course has changed now to west. During the day half the convoy leaves us including the cruisers apparently making for Mombasa, East African port. Our speed slackens considerably and we proceed very slowly.

Friday 11 September 1942

Today I have burnt myself rather excessively from the sun. The convoy or rather what's left of it, six ships, an armed merchantman and a destroyer. We travel very slowly all day. We crossed the equator at noon and the heat is unbelievable.

Saturday 12 September 1942

The heat increases today our own course is due west making for Aden.

Sunday 13 September 1942

Still very hot weather.

Monday 14 September 1942

We continue normally.

Tuesday 15 September 1942

Another day passes normally.

Wednesday 16 September 1942

At 11am land is sighted and by 2pm we lay anchor in the harbour at Aden. We are not allowed ashore so we don't see much of Aden itself. From where we are we can see camels moving along the roads and Arabs in colourful dresses. We are only in for eight hours during which time the sweat poured off us in gallons. It was by far the hottest weather we had ever experienced yet. By 8pm we were out and made our way up to Red Sea in the darkness.

Thursday 17 September 1942

The weather is still terrifically hot. As dawn breaks I see we are on our own and travelling fast. It is apparent now our final destination is Egypt which it is hoped we'll reach on Sunday.

Friday 18 September 1942

We are still travelling up the Red Sea. Land is visible on both sides of us, very barren and not very encouraging. The hot weather continues. A special watch is kept for enemy aircraft.

Saturday 19 September 1942

Preparations are made on board for disembarking, ie drawing of deep sea kit bags, webbing, changing of English money etc. Weather still very hot.

Sunday 20 September 1942

And we arrive safely at Port Tewfik after a voyage of 20,000 miles. By tea time we disembark off the Aorangi via lighters as she lay in the harbour. As we move away we take our last look at the ship that has brought us safely on a long voyage. On shore we are conveyed through barren desert country to a camp forty miles away. A P.T.C. and dome combined. We settle down the night in tents. *[No. 21 Personnel Transit Camp. R.A.F. Kasfareet.]*

Monday 21 September 1942

Sand everywhere we awaken to our new surroundings. The name of the place where the camp is in Kasfareet. Some chaps are posted during the day but I am not included. At night I went to show in the camp.

Tuesday 22 September 1942

More chaps are posted. At night I went to a local cinema. We had an air raid on the way back to camp.

Wednesday 23 September 1942

I am posted to 205.A.W.E.S along with six other blokes. We are given extra kit. At night I went through to native village on our way to the Suez Canal port where there is a cinema. The village simply stinks. The natives live in terrible conditions. Their houses made of mud and straw.

Thursday 24 September 1942

We went swimming in the Suez Canal. No further word about our posting yet.

Friday 25 September 1942

Another day lounging around the camp. Went to the local cinema.