

## James Scobie in World War Two.

### Introduction

Thousands of men and women from the Vale went off to serve in the forces in World War Two. When war broke out in September 1939 there was none of the public rejoicing or jingoism which had characterised the start of the First World War in 1914. Apart from anything else the horrendous examples of trench warfare in 1914-18 had removed any illusions of the nobility of war. However, people were even clearer in 1939 about the necessity of fighting this war – it was demonstrably a war to defend democracy and freedom. Hitler and Mussolini had already made sure that the issues could hardly have been clearer and although people greeted the outbreak of war with a heavy heart and also with considerable fear, they also did so with a strong sense of purpose.

As people joined up they didn't regard themselves as heroes but went to war with an almost grim determination: there was a job to do, something left over from the previous war. This time, nothing would be left to be sorted out by the next generation.

This is the story of one such man, Billy Scobie's father James Scobie and one of his friends from Bonhill. Jimmy Scobie came from Levenbank Terrace, Jamestown and volunteered at the start of the Second World War, to join the Royal Navy. He was an engine room artificer and was promoted to Chief Petty Officer, in which uniform he appears below. As Billy says, James Scobie would have been the last man to suggest that his service was anything out of the ordinary and indeed there were a great many other sailors who had very similar experiences.

But to us, 70 years later, what he went through seems anything but ordinary. He served on several destroyers and on the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal in the Battle of the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean. He was on the Ark Royal when it played its part in the sinking of the Bismark in May 1941, and in November 1941 when the Ark was torpedoed and sank the next day only 35 miles from Gibraltar. All but 1 of the 1,488 crew survived, being taken on board escort destroyers.



**HMS Ark Royal after being hit by a torpedo with HMS Legion alongside disembarking the crew** (Photographer, Lt S J Beadell RN, official photographer. Imperial War Museum collection.)

That sounds very calm and controlled to-day but at the time the shock of the explosion, the chaos until the extent of the damage was understood and the frantic efforts to save the carrier must have made for a very tense time for the whole crew of the Ark Royal and was anything but an ordinary experience.

However, even Jimmy Scobie would probably have felt that the incident which Billy writes about here was unusual to say the least. An incident in which he was a witness and participant but in which the leading role was played by another Vale man who was Jimmy's life-long friend.

### **The Battle of the Atlantic**

#### **“Eternal Father, Strong to Save.”**

**By Billy Scobie**

The church was packed because it was a christening service. You always knew when there was going to be a christening – the embroidered cloth which hung down in front of the pulpit would be white, and there'd be lots of strangers in the congregation. The ladies with the baptismal party would be wearing something that wee bit special. Behind the general babble of pre-service conversation, the organist was playing something suitably dignified, and I checked out the hymns on the Order of Service sheet. He tends to favour what I'd call melancholy airs, whereas I much prefer something rousing. That morning it was about fifty – fifty.

One minute to eleven. I glanced at the Roman numerals of the elegant gold watch which had been a gift from Granny Baxter to my father, some fifty years earlier. The minister, followed by the Session Clerk and then the Church Officer came striding down the centre aisle. The Kick-Off.

A reluctant hush fell over the congregation as the tall Session Clerk, who always reminds me of the town marshal in a western, stood by the lectern, fixed us all with clear, sharp eyes, and said “Good Morning, Friends”.

You see somebody. You think you should know them, but you just can't quite make the connection. It was like that with this big bloke who was sitting a couple of pews in front of me. He seemed to be one of the visitors. About my own age – mid-fifties. Well-built, good head of greying hair... It was when the minister said the name of the child who was being baptised that the penny dropped. The surname. That's who the big man was. I could place him. He was obviously one of the family. The last time I'd seen him he'd been in uniform. He was with one of the emergency services. For the life of me I couldn't remember which one.

The minister held the baby in his arms. Cameras flashed. The women ooh'd and aah'd, and the baptismal party beamed. We all stood to sing the Blessing – “The Lord bless thee and keep thee...”



**Jimmy Scobie on board ship**

I remembered a story my own father had told me about this fellow's father. To put that story into context I must say a little something about the Battle of the Atlantic. This terrible naval conflict was waged between 1939 and 1943. During those years it was feared that the German U-Boats would win the Second World War for Hitler by preventing food and other essential supplies reaching Britain by sea. Convoys of merchant ships, and the escorts which tried to protect them, sailed under constant threat from U-Boat torpedoes. At this time Britain and those nations allied with her lost over 50,000 seamen and 15 million tons of shipping. The U-Boat crews were feared and hated. The way they waged war was considered sheer terrorism.

My father was serving aboard a Royal Navy destroyer in the North Atlantic.

In the course of an engagement his ship had rammed and sunk one of the detested U-Boats. Crewmen who had escaped from the sinking vessel were at the mercy of freezing high seas as they bobbed about in the oil-streaked water, kept afloat by scraps of debris and life-jackets. Feeling ran high against these men, and some of the destroyer's crew were issued with small arms and cutlasses. There was clearly an intention among some of the armed seamen to butcher the U-Boat men in the water. The red mist had come down and in the circumstances officers would not, or could not, prevent it.

One of the British sailors clutching a cutlass was, like my father, from the Vale of Leven. He was from Bonhill. As the heavy waves brought the U-Boat survivors closer to the destroyer, from its decks the British crewmen began to be able to distinguish faces. Then a wonderful thing took place. They stopped thinking of the men in the water as Germans, or Nazis. They were no longer the hated enemy. Instead they began to see frightened sailors like themselves. Men swallowed up by war and facing death.

The Bonhill man was the first to throw away his cutlass. He asked for a line to be tied around his waist and with no regard for his own safety he jumped into the angry sea to rescue some of the German sailors. One by one others of the Royal Navy crew put aside their weapons and followed his example.

My father was in most things a cynical man, not given to undue sentiment. He did not romanticise. I believe this to be an accurate account of what he witnessed. The Bonhill man had been called Andy Reid. He was, of course, father of the big chap at the christening.

I guess the baby being christened on that Sunday morning was probably Andy's great-grandchild. As we sang the last hymn I wondered how many German grand-children and great grand-children were alive today because of the example of that Valeman... and I confess, there were tears running down my face.

## James Scobie's Poem



**James Scobie in Chief Petty Officer's Uniform**

Like most servicemen who were away fighting the war, Jimmy Scobie's thoughts often turned to home. He'd left the Vale in 1939 to join the Navy and had seen a great deal of action at sea, but his heart remained in the Vale as this poem, written during the war, amply demonstrates. The final verse in particular, spoke and continues to speak, of the yearning for home of everyone away at war

Jimmy did come back again and went on to lead a full and eventful life, and although he didn't talk much about his wartime experiences to "outsiders", Andy Reid and he got together from time to time in their "Ain Wee Toun" to quietly remember their extraordinary times.

## **MY AIN WEE TOUN**

There's a wee toun o'er in Scotland  
Where my heart has always been.  
It's deep down in a valley,  
Wi' a river in between.

The toun itsel' is humble,  
In its ain simplicity,  
But the people there are happy  
And supply grand courtesy.

The hills around this valley  
Are clad in great array  
Wi' heather and wi' mony trees  
That nane can take away.

When you walk along the river bank  
Your heart o'erflows wi' joy  
When you realise the source that sends  
That river flowing by.

And mony a happy day I've spent  
Around that toun o' mine;  
And mony other lads have spent  
As mony days as mine.

Some day we may come back again  
To that ain wee toun o' mine;  
And hope to find it just the same  
As we left... in '39.

**James Scobie**