

Brothers at Sea, The sinking of HMS Prince of Wales



By Robert Timson

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Introduction



Harold and Robert Banks

It was during Christmas leave in 1969 that a young sailor met his future wife on a blind date in Leicester.....

A few days later she introduced him to her parents, both of whom had served in the Royal Navy during the war years. He wasn't to know then that the friendliness and warmth of their greeting was beyond that of parents meeting their daughter's boyfriend for the first time.

In time he would learn of another young sailor who shared his name and the tragic events that ended his short life.

What follows is the true story of two brothers - Harold and Robert Banks, and their experiences in the Royal Navy during World War Two.

One

New Recruits

On 31st January 1923 in Felixstowe Suffolk, Harold Owen George was born to his proud parents Richard and Elizabeth Banks. Harold would be the fourth generation in succession to serve in the Royal Navy. His father Richard Owen Banks was a member of the Felixstowe Coastguard Service, having retired from the Royal Navy after twenty years service some four years earlier. The following year on 27th March 1924, another baby boy came along and Robert Henry came into the world.

Towards the end of Richard's time in the Coastguards he had suffered from Tuberculosis, most likely due to the years he spent in submarines whilst in the Royal Navy. Unfortunately the illness slowly got worse and he was discharged unfit from the Coastguard service in 1931.

Tuberculosis was resistant to the sulphonamides of the 1930's and to penicillin of the 1940's, as a result his health slowly deteriorated, and he was moved to a wooden chalet at the bottom of the garden. This was common practice at the time for people suffering with T.B who could not afford proper residential care. In July 1934 he was moved to Fenhouses Sanatorium, Lincolnshire where it was believed the sea air would aid his recovery. However he subsequently died at the young age of 37 years on October 14th 1934.

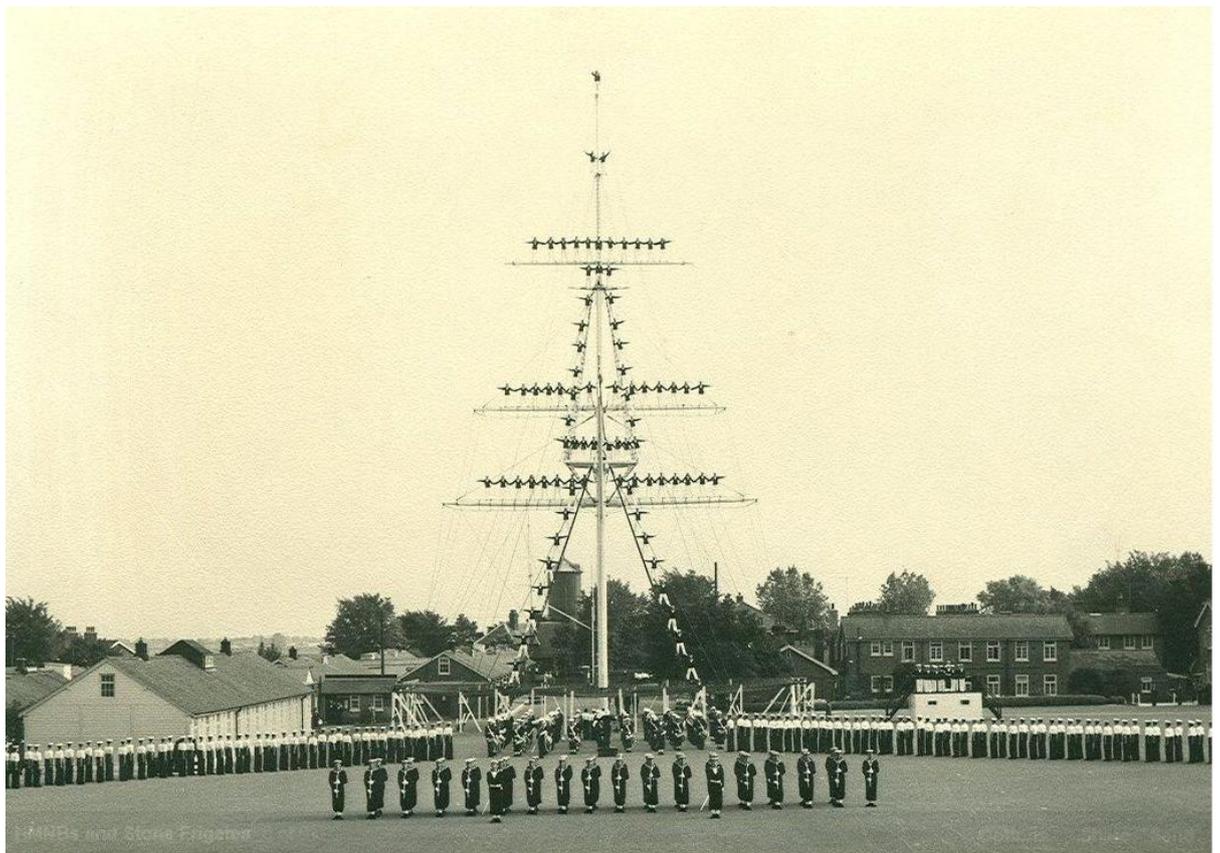
[In the last several decades micro epidemics have occurred in small close knit units on US and British Naval ships and land based units deployed overseas. In 1998 an outbreak of 21 cases of active tuberculosis occurred among the ship's sailors and the marine expeditionary unit on a US amphibious ship. In 2006 a small outbreak occurred on HMS Ocean, several naval personnel had active tuberculosis and 80 cases of latent infection were identified.] (6)

Just prior to the tragic loss of their father, Elizabeth decided that Harold [aged 11] should be boarded at the nearby Royal Hospital School at Holbrook. [Formerly part of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich] Robert would follow his brother a year later, on attaining the entry age.

The school had opened the previous year, and until later years entry was limited to the children or grandchildren of seafarers. Until the 1950s, boys of the school were also required to join the Royal or Merchant Navies, and as such their education was focused on maritime matters. Although this requirement has not been in force for some decades, the school has retained certain naval traditions such as naval uniform, divisions [formal parade and march past as practised in the armed forces] and an element of marching.

This was to be Harold and Robert's life until they were old enough [at 15 years] to join the Royal Navy as boy seamen.

On June 13th 1938 Harold enlisted at the service School HMS Ganges at Shotley in Suffolk. He was to become an accomplished gymnast and "button boy." [Having the honour of standing on the very top of the 143 ft mast (below) during a parade] During his time at Ganges, he enjoyed all sports especially football and hockey.



The mast at HMS Ganges



Richard Owen Banks



Robert with Harold on leave



At Royal Hospital Holbrook - Robert Back Row right, Harold front row far left.

In September 1939 Harold was drafted on to HMS *Pembroke* to commence training in the Signals Branch. His father had also been a signalman [in those days he would have been called a Telegraphist] and Harold was keen to follow in his father's footsteps.

In December 1939, having passed through his basic training, Harold was then drafted to HMS *Victory* (Barracks) at Portsmouth. By this time Britain had been at war with Germany for three months and he would have been keen for a draft to an active ship of the Fleet.

His draft chit duly arrived, and his first sea going draft was to HMS *Berwick* in July 1940. *Berwick* was a heavy "County Class" cruiser.



HMS Berwick at anchor

Two

Harold "Monty" Banks and HMS Berwick - 1940

Since May 1940 HMS *Berwick* had transported Royal Marines to Iceland and the island was taken over on the 10th May 1940 to prevent the occupation by a German force. A number of German civilians and technicians were made prisoners and transported back to the United Kingdom. Very rough seas were encountered on passage to Iceland and the majority of the Marines cluttered gangways and mess-decks throughout the ship, prostrate with sea-sickness. One unfortunate marine committed suicide. (1)

During the next few months *Berwick* operated from Scottish bases, twenty-four days on the Northern Patrol, four days in harbour to recuperate. These were stressful days, both mentally and physically. The continuous movement of the ship in rough seas, coupled with thoughts of an enemy torpedo at any moment, meant the whole ship's company of almost eight hundred men were completely exhausted by the end of each patrol. It was in this period on July 31st 1940 that Harold joined the ship and became "Monty" Banks for the remainder of his life.

Later in the year *Berwick* was despatched to the Mediterranean and joined Force "H" at Gibraltar on 7th November 1940 under the command of Admiral Somerville. Monty and his shipmates participated in a number of operations in the Mediterranean during the next few weeks, the first being on the 9th November. *Berwick* was in company with other ships including the *Ark Royal*, when she experienced high level bombing and numerous near misses by the Italian Air Force, in the Sicilian Narrows.

On the 11th of November the *Berwick* was part of the escort for the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* when she mounted an attack on the port of Taranto with torpedoes and bombs. Three Italian battleships were torpedoed and considerable damage was done to the port installations.

Between 14th and 16th November HMS *Berwick* deployed with Force "F" as part of the reinforcement of the Mediterranean Fleet. In company with HMS

Glasgow, HMS York and HMAS Sydney, the ship transported troops from Alexandria to Piraeus.

On the 27th November 1940 HMS *Berwick* was involved in the Battle of Cape Spartivento, off Sardinia. A British force consisting of battleships *Renown* and *Ramillies*, aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the *Berwick* and three other cruisers plus nine destroyers met an Italian force consisting of two battleships, four heavy cruisers and twelve destroyers. The enemy turned away, made smoke and a long - range battle ensued.

“The Italians were too fast for our forces and when we were within thirty miles of Sardinia we gave up the chase. One enemy cruiser was set on fire and two enemy destroyers were damaged. *Berwick* was the only British casualty, having been hit by 8 in. shells. This resulted in the loss of “X” turret with the death of seven men and nine wounded. Repairs to damage were carried out by the ship`s staff.” (1)

This prompted Monty to send the following Telegram to his mother:-



On December 24th 1940 HMS *Berwick* was operating as one of the escorts for the British troop convoy WS.5A in company with HMS *Bonaventure* and *Dunedin*.

German Admiral Wilhelm Meisel aboard the Cruiser *Admiral Hipper* (8x 8" guns) located the convoy during the late afternoon on Christmas Eve using radar at a range of 23km. The weather was poor with driving rain and a strong southeast gale creating whitecaps on a heavy swell, and with the visibility less than one mile. Once the convoy had been detected, the ship's crew had been shadowing it throughout the night, but failing to realize it was heavily escorted including the County Class heavy cruiser *Berwick* (8 x 8"guns).

On Christmas day 1940 (near the Canary Islands) At 0808 hours, Admiral Hipper fired on the troopship *Empire Trooper* (16 soldiers killed) and freighter *Arabistan*, taking advantage of mist and rain; but she was soon chased off by a corvette and three cruisers; *Berwick*, *Bonaventure* and *Dunedin*. In retreat, Admiral Hipper fired at her pursuers, striking the Cruiser HMS *Berwick* on the rear gun turret ("X"), killing the gun crew of four Royal Marines. *Berwick* was hit four times in all.

"X" turret was hit and knocked out by an 8" HE (High Explosive) shell and the other three hits were 8" AP. One AP hit below the waterline abreast "B" turret flooding the magazine. It also flooded the lower steering control room forcing the coxswain to order it evacuated. *Berwick* had to go over to manual steering control which required greatly reduced speed. Another hit the forward starboard 4" turret, knocking it out, and it detonated 18 meters further taking out the air intake for several of the boilers. A third AP was deflected by the belt downward into the bilge space where it detonated, flooding 13 meters of wing tanks. *Berwick* would spend a long time in dockyard hands to repair the damage. Most of *Berwick's* salvos fell well short with two well over. (2)

Carriers HMS *Argus* and HMS *Furious* launched aircraft to hunt for *Admiral Hipper* as she retreated toward Brest, France for routine repairs, but the German cruiser would not be found. Later on the same day, 150 miles to the east, *Admiral Hipper* detected and sank the British ship SS *Jumna* 6078 GRT; 111 survivors in the water were left to drown.

Damage received from the encounter with the *Hipper*, meant *Berwick* had a brief stay in Gibraltar for temporary repairs, before returning to Portsmouth for major repairs in early 1941. The ship was in the dockyard undergoing repairs during the massive air raids on the city. [Monty recalled seeing a parachute bomb hanging above the ship from a crane mast in the Dockyard]

HMS *Berwick* was in dockyard hands for damage repair until June 1941 after which she joined the Home Fleet and the remainder of her war time career was spent escorting convoys to and from Russia or in support of Home Fleet operations off Norway and in the Arctic (Capt. George Haines Faulkner, DSC, RN. 2 May 1941 - February 1943).

“On completion of repairs to the ship, we left Portsmouth and proceeded towards a Scottish base with the intention of renewing operations in Northern areas. The weather in the Irish Sea was very bad and in a thick fog *Berwick* was in collision with an unidentified ship, sustaining considerable damage to the port side, including a 4 in. gun turret. Repairs, carried out in Glasgow docks, were completed in June 1941.

“Petty Officer Cook “Jack” Frost was the only fatality during this incident, a sad loss. ‘Jack’ had been a popular member of the ship’s company, having been the organiser of our ‘Sods Operas’ and other entertainments during the time spent on the West Indies Station prior to the outbreak of war.

The following few months were spent on the Northern Patrol, twenty four days of rough weather in freezing temperatures in the Denmark Straits, four days in Rosyth to thaw out. A number of mercantile blockade-runners were intercepted during these patrols, one of which, on sinking, left the surrounding sea littered with oranges and grapefruit. We did not stop to reap the harvest; as submarines liked sitting targets.” ⁽¹⁾





Entering Piraeus Harbour, Greece



Under fire from the Italian battle Fleet

Three

Robert Banks and HMS Prince of Wales - 1941



Bob and shipmate enjoying some summer fun on Plymouth Hoe.

Robert Banks would have been avidly following the exploits of his older brother and the *Berwick*, and he would have secretly envied his battles with the units of the *German Fleet*. He had now completed his basic *Seamanship* training and was itching to join an active ship.

When he had been informed that he was to join the 'Prince' [as would any young man of seventeen] Robert would have been excited to be joining the newest battleship in the Royal Navy. The state of the art *Prince of Wales* was better designed, better protected and as well equipped as any of her predecessors, in fact she was considered unsinkable.

[It is not documented when Robert (Bob) joined the *Prince of Wales*. I have therefore included some historic actions in which the ship was involved during 1941. His first letter to his mother has him onboard in September 1941, but my guess is that he joined the ship at either Birkenhead or Scapa Flow with a large intake of ratings from Devonport prior to sailing to the Far East.] RT

By the end of December 1940 HMS *Prince of Wales*' decks were swarming with around 1300 Dockyard workers putting the finishing touches to the brand new ship. Her time in Birkenhead Dockyard was coming to an end and she was desperately needed at sea. [3] Unfortunately those docks were blitzed by the Germans and POW was damaged. The ship suffered extensive flooding and had to be pumped out by the local fire Brigade.

This was the start of an "unlucky" tag that attached itself to the ship. There followed two further incidents around that time including being run aground on a sandbank whilst being towed by tugs, and an accidental firing of a pom-pom gun during reloading, which caused an injury to a Dockyard worker in Rosyth.

On May 22nd 1941 The *Prince of Wales* set sail with the *Hood* in pursuit of the *Bismarck* and the *Prince Eugen*, they had been spotted on the way to attack Atlantic convoys supplying Britain. *Prince of Wales* was only two months out of the makers' yard and carried some technicians from Vickers Armstrong who were retained onboard due to main batteries faults. [4]

Two days later between 0500 and 0600 *Prince of Wales* and *Hood* engaged with the Battleships *Bismarck* and *Prince Eugen* in the North Atlantic. POW was heavily involved in the first contact and scored three hits on *Bismarck* including two critical hits, one which caused extensive flooding forward, and another which exploded under *Bismarck*'s armour belt causing machinery damage, the combined effect of both hits caused her to make the ill-fated decision to return to port. *Prince of Wales* sustained damage and was forced to abandon the action. *Hood* was sunk. (6)

[The *Bismarck* was subsequently sank by the Royal Navy a few days later]

Following the action with the *Bismark*, a sense of injustice was felt amongst the crew of the *Prince of Wales*. Despite acquitting themselves well in the battle, a feeling of letting the *Hood* down was perceived by other ships. The *Hood* was a very popular ship in the Navy and although the charge was completely without foundation, *Prince of Wales* was felt to have let *Hood* down and immediately took on the reputation of being a 'Jonah'. (10)



Hood and Prince of Wales in pursuit of the Bismark

In early August of 1941, HMS *Prince Of Wales* carried Sir Winston Churchill to Newfoundland which was then still a British Colony [it became a part of Canada in 1949] for a meeting with US President Roosevelt, who a year after the Germans attacked Poland, Denmark the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France, still kept the US neutral. During this meeting in Argentina Bay they drew up the "Atlantic Charter" which was to outline their vision for a peaceful post-war world.

Exactly four months later the teak deck on which they stood would be under water in the China Sea and hundreds of the boys who sang hymns that day would be gone as well.



Churchill and Roosevelt meet on Prince of Wales in Newfoundland, Canada



Front row: Roosevelt, Churchill and to his far left, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound

In September the *Prince of Wales* was assigned to Force "H" [Operation Halberd] in the Mediterranean. She joined a large convoy escorting ships between Gibraltar and Malta. Soon after this deployment the ship returned to Scapa Flow where the C in C * Home Fleet was advised by the Admiralty that *Prince of Wales* was being sent out to the Far East.

27th September 1941 Robert Banks wrote home:-

"Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know that this will be the last letter you will receive from me for a considerable time. Even at the moment of writing this we are somewhere at sea. A destroyer is taking our last mail off tonight.

The reason for this being my last letter is that we are going foreign. We have onboard with us now, a new Admiral [Sir Tom Phillips] instead of the Vice-Admiral we had on before.

You can tell the girls that I am sorry but the party is off for a considerable time. Give Jim and Harold all the best. For I have only time to write this one letter. Harold was lucky getting that ten days leave. I only wish that we had got some before we went foreign. It's strange that we didn't. [This was a common complaint amongst the crew, who had had very little leave in the preceding weeks; it was also almost certainly one of the main reasons for low morale onboard.]

Well I must close now by telling you to listen to the wireless and read the papers for further news of us.

From your loving son Bob.xxxxxxxxxx

P.s. I will take this chance to wish you all a merry Christmas and prosperous new year."

It is unlikely that any newly commissioned battleship had ever been worked so hard in the first months of her service as the *Prince of Wales*, but the ship had survived without serious harm, at least not to her structure, but there is some evidence that the morale of her crew was not all it might have been. The lack of time to work up the ship peacefully, the trauma of seeing the *Hood* blown to pieces, the recurring mechanical defects for which time for proper rectification was never allowed, few opportunities for leave -all these had impaired the settling down of the crew. (10)

* Commander in Chief

Four

Force "Z" The Eastern Fleet

25th October 1941

At 1308 hours on Saturday 25th October 1941, Prince of Wales hauled up anchor and steamed down the Clyde towards the open sea and the Far East.

Admiral Sir Tom Phillips

Because he had a short stature, Phillips had the nick name of "Tom Thumb". He was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the China Station in late 1941, an action which raised some controversy in the higher echelons of the Royal Navy, where he was considered a "desk admiral". He was appointed acting Admiral, as the ship left the West of Scotland and headed south. (6)

November 5th 1941

"The ship stopped at Freetown [now Sierra Leone] for refuelling. After a short stop there we continued southwards, and despite the grim war situation carried out the traditional and light hearted 'crossing the line' ceremony." (5) [See second letter home on following page]

November 16th 1941

"We sailed into Table Bay, but our stay in Cape Town, much to our disappointment, was brief, and two days later we set off again with some urgency for Colombo. Ten days later we travelled with a naval detachment then designated as Force G, consisting of the flagship, the new battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*, together with the veteran Great War-era battle cruiser HMS *Repulse*, and the four destroyers HMS *Electra*, HMS *Express*, HMS *Encounter*, and HMS *Jupiter*." (5)

The deployment of the ships was a decision made by Winston Churchill. He was firmly warned against it by the First Sea Lord, Sir Dudley Pound, and later by his friend, Field Marshal Jan Smuts, PM of South Africa, who prophesied the fate of the capital ships, when he addressed the crew of HMS *Repulse* just before she left Durban for Singapore.

The earlier grounding of the carrier HMS *Indomitable* in the West Indies left the capital ships without naval air cover, as no replacement would be provided. This was recorded by a crew member as a “bitter and ominous piece of news” (5)

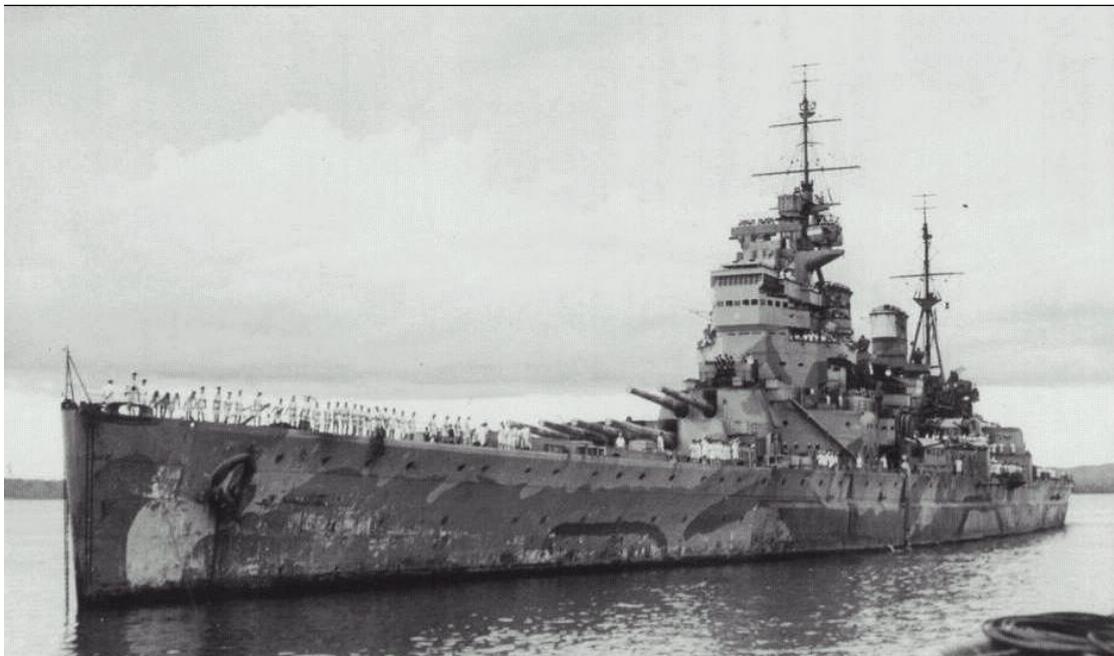
November 14th 1941.....Second and last letter from Robert (Cape Town)

"Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know how I am getting on. I am allowed to tell you a few things which might interest you, otherwise there is not much for me to tell you. We crossed the line a short time back, [equator] and we had the peace time ceremony. There wasn't much time for the whole ship's company to have a ducking, so they picked five out of each mess. Seeing as this was my first crossing I was one of them, it was fun while it lasted. Tell Harold from me that I have beaten him to the crossing.

This letter was despatched from Cape Town which was our last port of call, and that is all I can tell you at present. If you have been listening to the wireless lately, you will have guessed the rest.

Well I must close now, hoping you are all keeping well. Give my love to the three unknown girls. Best love to all." Bob xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx



HMS Prince of Wales arriving in Singapore December 1941



Admiral Sir Tom Phillips (right) and his deputy Admiral Arthur Palliser on the quayside at Singapore Naval base December 2nd 1941 (6)

The initial excitement and enthusiasm [for joining Prince of Wales] felt by Bob and his cohorts would by now have diminished considerably. The well known ventilation issues with the KGV* class battleships meant that the temperature in the mess decks and working areas would be in the region of 95 to 100 degrees F. It would have been almost impossible to sleep in the mess and a lot of the ships company therefore slept on the upper deck.

December 3rd 1941

Article in the Daily Mirror newspaper...

” A big naval force including capital ships has arrived at Singapore, Britain’s Far East stronghold. The ships were headed by the Battleship Prince Of Wales, Flagship of Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, whose appointment to the command of ships and naval establishments of the China station was announced on Monday. After arrival of the ships it was officially stated that the “Eastern Fleet is now in being”.

Cheering crowds packed the waterfront. The fleet stretched away to the horizon, where the silhouettes of big battleships could be seen.”

***King George V**

Five

The sinking of the Prince of Wales and Repulse



HMS *Prince of Wales* (left, front) and HMS *Repulse* (left, behind) under Japanese air attack on 10 December 1941. A destroyer, either HMS *Electra* or *Express*, is manoeuvring in the foreground. (6)

December 8th 1941...

Phillips had long held the opinion that aircraft were no threat to surface ships, this was in common with the widely held view that Battleships could not be sunk by aircraft, and so he took Force "Z" comprising of HMS *Prince of Wales*, HMS *Repulse* and an escort of four Destroyers: HMS's *Tenedor*, *Electra*, *Express* and HMAS *Vampire* out of Singapore Naval Base to intercept the Japanese without air cover. That decision has been discussed ever since.

Admiral Phillips left his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Arthur Palliser, at the command post ashore. Phillips used HMS *Prince of Wales* as his flagship.

December 10th 1941

At 02:11 on 10 December Force "Z" was dispatched to investigate reports of Japanese landing forces at Kuantan.

Earlier that week the two year old *Prince of Wales* had a fault with her surface scanning radar, this was attributed to the extreme heat and humidity. The fault had not been remedied and the ship sailed with the radar out of commission.

"We sailed north-east around the Anamba Islands, as the water around the actual coast of Malaya had been heavily mined. On the morning of the 9th, we were spotted by a high flying enemy aircraft off Khota Bahru. By mid-morning waves of Jap planes were coming over, [88 planes of the I.J.N] some bombers, some torpedo carriers. The enemy had a very early success, when a bomb hit our port side propellers, distorted them and so, as the shafts continued to spin, the distortion caused them to open up gaps in the hull so there was considerable flooding especially in the engine rooms. These were evacuated. Now both ships were taking water and the tragedy was that because of the grounding of the Carrier *Indomitable* off the US earlier on, we had no defence against air attack".[8]

In a second attack at 11:30 one torpedo struck *Prince of Wales* on the port side, wrecking the outer propeller shaft and causing the ship to take on a heavy list. A third torpedo attack developed against HMS *Repulse*, a *Renown*-class battle cruiser in Force Z, but she managed to avoid all torpedoes aimed at her. (6)

A fourth attack by torpedo-carrying Type 1 "Bettys" sank *Repulse* at 12:33. Six aircraft from this wave attacked *Prince of Wales*, with three of their torpedoes hitting the ship on the starboard side, causing flooding. Finally a 500 kg bomb hit the catapult deck, penetrated through to the main deck and exploded, tearing a gash in the port side of the hull. At 13:15 the order was given to abandon ship and at 13:20 *Prince of Wales* sank; Vice-Admiral Tom Phillips and Captain John Leach were among the 327 fatalities. (6)

“I was five decks down keeping the pom-pom guns supplied with ammunition; suddenly there was nobody on the upper deck to take the ammunition off us. Frantically I clambered up three floors trying to find a usable door to the upper deck but failed. I then remembered there was a porthole in the mess room. I ran there, managed to open the porthole and saw men already in the water. After managing to escape through the porthole, I jumped clear of the listing ship, into the oil thickened sea.”^[9]

“*HMS Express* was alongside; men boarding her along ropes, jumping from P.O.W. Some missing the deck and being caught between the two ships. Some wounded were successfully transferred to safety. Because the rising keel of the P.O.W. was threatening the stability of *Express*, she withdrew to a safer position.”^[8]

“I slid down the starboard side of the ship as far as the armoured layer and then jumped clear into the oily sea and put a fair distance — say 5 yards between me and the fated ship. Non swimmers were going under and I could hear the crashing of heavy items below decks, falling from deck to deck head (floor to ceiling). In the water there were several large baulks of timber, which had been stored on deck, presumably for emergency repair work during the voyage. I swam to one of these and helped about ten men to join me, showing them how to do a clumsy breast stroke to keep afloat. There were some carley floats around but they were all more than full. We swam for a total of one and a half hours and then *Express* returned, P.O.W. having gone under — gracefully but tragically”^[8]



POW Survivors being taken aboard HMS Express.

Official Statistics

- *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were the first capital ships to be sunk solely by air power on the open sea (albeit by land-based rather than carrier-based aircraft), a harbinger of the diminishing role this class of ships was subsequently to play in naval warfare. The wreck lies upside down in 223 feet (68 m) of water, near Kuantan, in the South China Sea.
- The loss of life was the greatest ever experienced by the Royal Navy in one incident. Over 840 Officers and men died. Admiral Phillips was the highest ranking Allied officer to be killed in combat during the war.
- Dead: HMS *Prince of Wales* 327, HMS *Repulse*: 508

The morning after the battle, Prime Minister Winston Churchill received a phone call at his bedside from Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord.

Pound: Prime Minister, I have to report to you that the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* have both been sunk by the Japanese - we think by aircraft. Tom Phillips is drowned.

Churchill: Are you sure it's true?

Pound: There is no doubt at all.

Churchill hangs up

He later recorded:

"In all the war, I never received a more direct shock... As I turned over and twisted in bed the full horror of the news sank in upon me. There were no British or American ships in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific except the American survivors of Pearl Harbour, who were hastening back to California. Over all this vast expanse of waters Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked." (6)

Six

Missing in Action

The terrible news of the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had quickly circulated around the fleet. Onboard *Berwick* Monty would have been very concerned about his brother and also desperate for news from home. His mother would have written and informed him that Bob was missing, but she would not accept that he had been killed in action and believed that he was still alive somewhere. Over the months that followed she would write a number of letters to the Prime Minister and anyone else that she considered may have some information about Bob. It would be another five months before she was officially notified that her son had been presumed dead.

In May 1942 Elizabeth Banks received an official confirmation from the Commander in Chief Devonport, a letter from the Red Cross and a letter of sympathy from H.R.H King George VI.

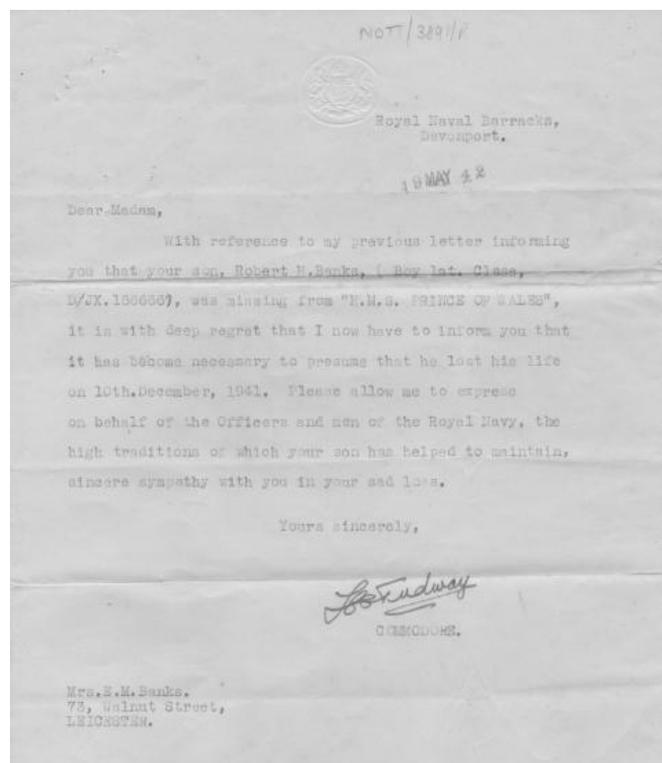
Dear Madam,

With reference to my previous letter informing you that your son Robert H Banks, (Boy 1st Class, D/JX 166666) was missing from "HMS Prince of Wales", it is with deep regret that I now have to inform you that it has become necessary to presume that he lost his life on 10th December 1941. Please allow us to express on behalf of the Officers and men of the Royal Navy, the high traditions of which your son has helped to maintain.

Sincere sympathy with you in your sad loss.

Yours sincerely,

Commodore





BUCKINGHAM PALACE

The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great sorrow.

We pray that your country's gratitude for a life so nobly given in its service may bring you some measure of consolation.

George R.I.

Mrs. E.M. Banks.

LOST IN PRINCE OF WALES AND REPULSE

Robert Henry Banks, whose mother lives at 73, Walnut-street, Leicester, has been officially notified that her son has not been reported as a survivor from H.M.S. Prince of Wales.



He was 17. He attended the Greenwich Naval School at the age of 11. His father, who died seven years ago, was a sailor. There is another son, aged 18, in the Navy.

A.B. John Edward Carter, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. Carter, of 112, Southfields-drive, Leicester, is officially reported missing from H.M.S. Repulse.



His father, a Leicester post-man, was formerly a Company Sergeant Major in the 2nd Leicesters, and served in India for many years. His son, John Edward, was born there 20 years ago. He attended Linwood-lane School, and joined the Navy four years ago.

WAR ORGANISATION OF THE BRITISH RED CROSS SOCIETY and ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM

President: HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN. Grand Prior: H.R.H. THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, K.G.

WOUNDED, MISSING AND RELATIVES DEPARTMENT

Chairman: THE DOWAGER LADY AMPHILL, C.I., G.B.E.

7 BELGRAVE SQUARE LONDON, S.W.1

30th May, 1918.

Telephone No. GLOUCE 3896
 Telegram Address: "WOMHCL RIGHTS, LONDON"
 Mrs. E.M. Banks, 73, Walnut Street, Leicester.

DG/FR RN/R 4482

Dear Mrs. Banks,

We are greatly distressed to hear from the Admiralty that your son, R.H. Banks, Boy 1st Class, D/JK.166668, H.M.S. "Prince of Wales", has been reported as "presumed dead".

It is indeed grievous that after so long a time of anxiety and suspense you should have this cruel news, and we would like to extend to you the deep sympathy of this Department in your great sorrow and loss.

Yours sincerely,
Margaret Ampthill
 Chairman.

The fate of Robert Banks has never been discovered. Despite extensive searching, there are no references to him in the various accounts of that fateful day in December 1941. His name is on the war memorial to the *Prince of Wales* on the Hoe at Plymouth and also on the official website for the crew:-

www.forcez-survivors.org.uk/biographies/listprincecrew.html

On 12th May 1942 Elizabeth received the following war gratuity from the Admiralty:-

**CERTIFICATE
OF THE INSPECTOR OF SEAMEN'S WILLS.**

ADMIRALTY, the 11th day of November 1942.

In pursuance of Act of Parliament 28th & 29th Vic., cap 111, and Order in Council 28th December, 1895, which provide that the Naval Assets of any deceased COMMISSIONED OFFICER, WARRANT OFFICER, PENSIONER, CIVILIAN, or OTHER PERSON mentioned therein, belonging to or having belonged to a Naval Establishment, when not exceeding One Hundred Pounds, may be paid without Letters of Administration or Probate of Will being taken out, if the claimant's right has been duly investigated and allowed by the Inspector of Seamen's Wills, whose Certificate sanctioning payment is to have the same force and effect as, and the payment on its authority be as valid and conclusive as if made under, Probate or Letters of Administration; I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE APPLICATION OF

Mrs. Elizabeth May Banks
residing at ** 43, Walnut Street,*
Leicester
claiming as *Mother and the only person*
entitled to the estate
the Effects of the late *Robert Henry Banks*
an Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy,
O.N. D/JX 166666 who died
intestate a bachelor on the 10th December 1941

has been duly verified and attested as prescribed by the Order in Council and the statements therein appearing to be true, that the said Claimant is entitled to receive what is due on account of the deceased in the Naval Department (it not exceeding ONE HUNDRED POUNDS), in order to administer the same according to Law.

[Signature]
for Inspector of Seamen's Wills.

Description of Effects for which this Certificate is granted.	Amount	Made and Date of Payment.
Residue of Wages	£ 4 18 1.	<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> PAID 355115 27 MAY 1942. </div> <div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> 90399 Paid Full No 5599 20-5-42 </div>
WAR GRATUITY.	12 10 -	
NAVAL PRIZE MONEY	4 4 -	

N.B.—When payment has been made and (at the time) duly noted in the proper column, this Certificate being the legal recognition of the party's right to the extent set forth therein should be delivered or transmitted to the claimant.

NOTE
This Certificate
should be
carefully kept
and not
destroyed or
mislaid.

* Address before
5 CHARNWOOD DRIVE
MARKFIELD
LEICESTER

K

45

Seven

HMS *Berwick*, On Arctic Patrol

For Monty the war continued and HMS *Berwick* was placed under the command of the Home Fleet. In early 1942 the ship was operating between the Northern British bases and Norway. On 17th January she sailed from Iceland with other Home Fleet units to the Tromso area following a report that *Tirpitz* had broken-out of port. However the search was unsuccessful and *Berwick* returned to Iceland.

During February *Berwick* was deployed in Iceland attempting to intercept German fleet reinforcements including *Prinz Eugen* and *Admiral Sheer* who were reported en passage in the North Sea to join *Tirpitz*.

On 20th February *Berwick* was detached from Fleet units to join H.M Aircraft carrier *Victorious* with four Destroyers to provide air cover. The operation was later cancelled after enemy ships were reported anchored in Aasfjord.

In March 1942 Based at Scapa Flow, *Berwick* sailed with a powerful convoy escort comprising of the battleship *King George V*, HMS *Victorious*, Destroyers *Onslow*, *Intrepid*, *Ashanti*, *Lookout*, *Icarus* and *Bedhouin* to join battleships *Duke of York* and *Reknown* the Cruiser *Kenya* and Destroyers *Faulknnor*, *Eskimo*, *Punjabi*, *Echo* and *Eclipse* to provide cover for passage of Russian Convoy PQ.12 and return Convoy QP.

[Described by Sir Winston Churchill as "the worst journey in the world", conditions on the Arctic Convoys were some of the bleakest faced by any Allied sailors. Besides the ever-present threat of enemy attack, the crews braved extreme cold, gales and pack ice.

From September 1941 when the first convoy left, to May 1945 when the missions ended, 87 merchant ships and 18 Royal Navy warships were sunk, making the loss rate higher than any other allied convoy route during WWII.]

HMS *Berwick* was in refit during 1942 at which time her hanger, catapult and associated aircraft handing equipment were removed and enhancements were made to the surface and air warning radar fit and also with the addition of directors for the close range anti-aircraft armament.

Monty Banks recalled:

"During the day time there used to be an icy wind blowing, and at night it was freezing. 14 degrees below zero was the warmest weather we had. One day I took a bucket of boiling water up to the Flag deck, and by the time I had finished throwing it on the deck the water was cold slush. Imagine turning out of a warm hammock to do four hours watch at night!"



HMS Berwick on Arctic patrol



P.O Yeoman Harold 'Monty' Banks



Ordinary Seaman Robert Banks



On leave in Leicester at the chip shop



On leave from RNH Holbrook

Eight

Remainder of R.N service 1942-46

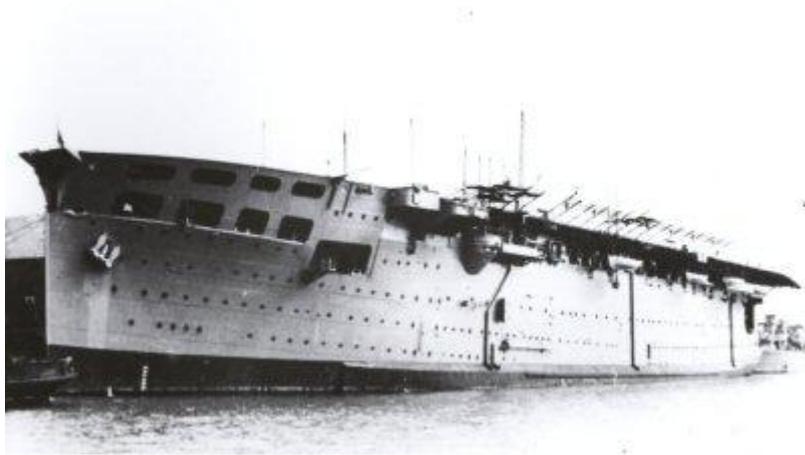
Monty Banks left HMS *Berwick* in November 1942 following advancement to A/Leading Signaller. He was drafted to HMS *Mercury* where he undertook more extensive signalling training. As this was a shore draft, he would have enjoyed some time on leave and being able to visit his mother who now lived in Leicester. Elizabeth had taken over the lease of a chip shop in the town, and no doubt Monty would have been put to work there helping in the shop.

After completing his Leading Signaller's course he was drafted to the aircraft carrier HMS *Argus* on 2nd December 1942. A few weeks earlier the ship had been part of the eastern Naval Task force involved with the invasion of Algeria during the Allied landings in French North Africa. On return to the U.K the ship went into dock for repairs for a month, it was at this time that Monty joined her.



Monty Banks [Front 2nd left] with shipmates HMS *Argus* early 1943

There followed a more lengthy refit between February and May 1943, in this period the *Argus* was reclassified as an escort carrier and after the completion of her refit, she was relegated to deck-landing training.

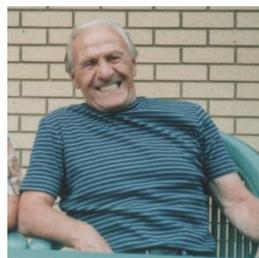


Argus in 1938 (11)

In the following year Monty was drafted back to HMS *Mercury* where he moved on a month later to HMS *Excellent* at Whale island Portsmouth. Towards the end of the war he was posted out to India (HMS *Braganza*) as a Petty Officer Yeoman of Signals where he was employed as a Trainer for the Indian armed services. He returned to Portsmouth in the U.K in December 1945 on HMS *Lucia*.

Monty left the Royal Navy in April 1946, he married a local girl [Iris] who was serving in the WRNS at Devonport in July that year, and went on to have four children. He died in April 2008 aged 85 years.

Although eligible for the Arctic Star [Russian convoy medal] Monty wasn't interested in applying for it. He was a very modest man and never wore his medals.





Medals awarded: (Top):- Harold Banks, (Bottom):- Robert Banks

Acknowledgements

1. Petty Officer Stan Foreman R.N, [Berwick]: memoirs *BBC History*
2. Dave Saxton. [Berwick] : *Naval History forum*
3. Leading Sick Berth Attendant Sam Wood R.N [POW]: "*Lost voices of the Royal Navy*"
4. Able Seaman Bob Tilburn R.N: [Hood] "*Lost Voices of the Royal Navy*"
5. Surgeon-Lieutenant Dick Caldwell R.N: [POW] "*Lost voices of the Royal Navy*"
6. Wikipedia
7. John Macmillan: [POW] "*Far Eastern Heroes.org*"
8. Commander R.V Ward RNVR: [POW] *Survivor of Prince of Wales*
9. Leading Cook Frederick "Bim" Hardy [POW] : *Leicester Mercury*
10. Martin Middlebrook: "The Sinking of the Prince of Wales and Repulse"
11. Imperial War Museum