

Contribution from Mike Booth
Howe 1947 -1951

THE GREEK EARTHQUAKE

Wednesday 12th August 1953

A series of four earthquakes hit the Greek Ionian Island of Kefalonia, the third and most destructive (magnitude 7.3 on the Richter scale) on Wednesday 12 August. The epicentre was directly under the southern tip of the island and as a result the shoreline is now about 2 feet higher.

Virtually every house on the island was destroyed and in the days and weeks that followed nearly 80% of the islands 125,000 inhabitants were evacuated to seek a new life elsewhere. On the 13th the cruiser HMS Gambia and HMS Reggio, a Tank Landing Ship with elements of 3 Commando Brigade embarked, left Malta for the Ionian Islands. The C-in-C (Mountbatten) flew out by Sunderland flying boat, returning to commit all possible help from the Mediterranean Fleet. On Friday the cruiser HMS Bermuda (Flag Officer Flotillas, Med) and the cruiser HMNZS Black Prince sailed. Our frigate, HMS Wakeful was under sailing orders and storing ship. "We started provisioning, taking on enormous quantities of flour, salt, potatoes and onions; picks and sandbags; blankets and candles. On Sunday 16th August we ordered to sail for Greece on Monday to relieve the destroyer HMS Daring, which had been the first ship to arrive in the islands. More provisions and other stores were embarked and at 1015 Monday 16th we left Malta, onions and potatoes stacked all over the upper deck."

Tuesday, 18th August

This morning we anchored off Argostoli, which was a complete ruin. A number of warships were lying off the town - Black Prince, an Italian destroyer and two water tankers, a US destroyer and large transport, a Greek destroyer; and lining the waterfront were several landing craft. "We all went ashore, ready for anything, very keen and found that all we would be doing was supervising the withdrawal, manning the HQ and guarding the base." Our task was not earthquake relief at all but supervising the return of consumables, stores, transport, generators, etc which were no longer needed. Ashore the scene was was one of surreal and awe inspiring devastation "but very unlike blast damage, trees are still green and growing, the houses have all collapsed but many windows are still unbroken, pictures and light fittings still hanging intact". Providentially a preceding sequence of minor shocks

followed by the major quake just before noon meant that most people were out of their homes as they collapsed and there were very few serious injuries. "Those remaining were living in very crowded tented camps outside the town, perhaps fortunate that this is not the rainy season as all their possessions in town were now totally exposed to the elements. Their money now has no legal value as all the banks were looted, so wanting anything, the people either have to ask us or barter amongst themselves" All the main streets in town had been cleared and damage to the power station and pumping station had been repaired by RN/RNZN teams. "The Yanks were rushing about blowing up every thing they could; the Greeks and Italians were doing absolutely nothing and the Brits doing very little except organising every one else. Officially the Ionians were in shock but in the words of one of the Greek welfare workers: 'they are a spineless lot due to cross breeding and it is time for relief to slacken off and the local authorities take matters in hand". The British Naval HQ ashore, manned by Wakeful, was set up under the verandas of the remains of a waterside cafe, very badly shaken and

barely standing, with tents for stores and shore party accommodation. "The owner looked after us very well and no doubt he benefited quite considerably!" Across the (cleared) road was the tented hospital and the base camp of Royal Marines from 3 Commando Brigade. "The nurses always managed to look fresh and immaculate in spite of living in tents amidst the dust and rubble. Our working parties got down to some good work ashore. 'Chief' (the Engineer Officer) and his stokers took over the power station from the Black Prince New Zealanders while our electrical party wired up the base camp, hospital and some street lighting. The children's hospital was run by a very exceptional woman, and everyone really dug out for her. We (Wakeful ship's company) managed to pinch a Nissen hut to replace her tents and Chief personally organised the laying of fresh water piping for her." There was a nightly curfew and armed Marines, Carabinieri and sailors guarded important buildings and patrolled the streets to prevent looting. Our sailors were ashore for 48 hour periods of guard duty, and towards the end of their time, were "patrolling the streets with fixed bayonets, unshaven, some capless and shirtless, socks rolled down over their boots, their bronzed, sweaty bodies covered in dust.

That afternoon I was running our motor boat between shore and an RAF Sunderland flying boat which arrived from Malta with helicopter spares and other stores, set to leave with newspaper correspondents and blood plasma which was no longer needed. However, on reloading the aircraft, the captain and crew seemed unsure whether the aircraft was overweight or not, so after some dithering they took off 'light' leaving me to ferry a bunch of disgruntled newspaper men back to shore. They, the press and the BBC, have to be treated very politely but are continually making demands and getting in the way, causing more trouble than the earthquake survivors." That evening Daring left Kefalonia for Athens where she would be the guest of the Greek Government. After shocks were still being felt, and a surprise to me, even on board at anchor in the bay.

Wednesday, 19th August

"At about 0130 this morning (most of us were still in the wardroom discussing the days events) a very eccentric chap arrived onboard, introducing himself as Captain Simpson of the 'British Friendship to Greece Society' He had to be seen to be believed - scruffy, in dirty shorts, with spindly legs, his stockings held up with red tassels, very thick glasses, a tuft of hair on top of his head and three days growth. He demanded a meal, was given one, and put to bed. After breakfast the next morning he was packed off ashore - that's the last we will see of him we all thought! "The flying boat arrived again with stores at 0900, (and I continued running our motor boat to meet her), then flew on to Zante with gear for Bermuda and returned to pick up a Maltese medical team, RN SBAs (Sick Berth Attendants) and more of the press for the return flight to Malta" Reggio completed embarking the Marines, transport and heavy equipment and sailed for Malta after lunch. I was free, able to go ashore to have a good look round and take photographs. "I've taken a lot of photographs and an Israeli newspaper editor promised to send me all those taken for his paper" He did and I still have them. "At first I felt extremely callous but the locals were always ready to pose or show me a good view. A group of Greek women in an organisation similar to the WVS (all claiming to be personal friends the Greek Royal family) were responsible for the delivery of all our supplies to the survivors. The amount of food distributed each day is really remarkable and I cannot imagine how we would have managed without these ladies. I was fortunate to obtain a ride in a Jeep with one of them to a camp 2 miles from Argostoli where the occupants claimed to have British nationality. Apparently they were Maltese who arrived here over 100

years ago and had long forgotten their native language; not considered Greek they seemed to be treated rather unfairly and were short of food and clothing. When I got back to base, a Royal Artillery driver and I loaded up a 30 cwt truck with food, clothing and tents and which we delivered. They were very grateful. This also gave me the opportunity to see the countryside, practically unaffected by the shocks, crops still growing, trees undamaged across the island, vineyards full of grapes, and the livestock quite indifferent to the state of the surrounding villages. Harvesting will be made difficult by the lack of any covered storage space."

"Rear Admiral Norris with his staff joined Wakeful this evening from Black Prince - before she sailed for home - and we became the flagship. The staff were accommodated in the sickbay and in hastily cleared cabins - I was very fortunate to keep mine." The wardroom, normally home to 10 of us plus our Greek liaison officer (Lt.Cdr Stathakis) was now swamped with the Admiral's staff, some welfare people, the press, and 2 civil servants - "one Air Ministry, the other an Atomic Bomb expert - they didn't discuss why they were present. Camp beds were set up in every available space and on deck under the upper deck awnings." (Wakeful had no air conditioning - so camp beds on the upper deck the best place for our visitors at night) "At 6 pm the Greeks finally took over the running of the power station (which had been restored and run by the RN/RNZN for five days) - and that night the power supplies failed."

A generator was brought in to provide our base and hospital lighting. "During the evening the large USN transport which had been landing relief supplies at Lixouri across the bay, sailed, leaving just one American destroyer (USS Gyat) in the anchorage and about 20 sailors ashore."

Thursday 20th August

I was duty onboard. With the Admiral and his staff embarked, our boats were running non stop. Wakeful, like most frigates and destroyers of that time had just two powered boats, a 25 foot motor cutter and a 16 foot fast motor boat, which were in constant use. Our sea boat, a 27 foot whaler, was even towed to help out. "Captain Simpson reappeared on board to see Doc. Apparently he fell asleep in the sun yesterday, and coming straight out from England, was very badly sunburnt. After treatment, and breakfast, he was sent on his way again. Finally, leaving the shore HQ, he added a finishing touch by tripping over a tent rope, falling flat on his back whilst attempting to shake hands." I understand that he wrote under the name of Evan John and died a few years later. ('Doc' our frigate squadron MO, had returned to the ship from the hospital ashore) "Doc was full stories about the situation as he arrived with Daring, the first ship here. She was followed by three Israeli patrol boats and an American cruiser - between them they'd got the situation under control before any Greeks arrived. The Americans set up a clearing station to decide which survivors should go for medical treatment, who should be evacuated or moved to tented accommodation, the Israeli's were marvellous and organised the evacuation by sea, and the Brits set up the hospital with 6 doctors - 4 British and 2 American. (There were only a dozen or so serious injuries but thousands of minor cuts etc which did not require a doctor) Then the Greek Navy arrived. 'We will take over the hospital but we have no drugs, surgical instruments or tents', they said, so they took ours. The Italians followed with a fleet of lorries, which were promptly borrowed by the Greeks, so they just sat around for a day then left. More Italians came later, but mainly for sightseeing!" That evening HMS Forth, the submarine depot ship, arrived to relieve Wakeful in Argostoli. Those of our ship's company still ashore returned onboard, "handing over the HQ, one Landrover, one Jeep, one 30cwt lorry, 2 water bowsers and 6 motor bikes to Forth. The tented hospital's only patients were now maternity cases."

Friday 21st August

“The RASC Tank Landing Ship ‘Humphrey Gale’ loaded with all the remaining unwanted stores and heavy equipment sailed this morning.” Rear Admiral Norris had a number of official visitors during the forenoon and a VIP lunch party - “guests included the Greek Prime Minister’s wife, Madame Papagos, and General Iastrides, Greek Army. She was dressed like a Victorian hospital matron, all starched whites, and his arrival was dramatic - the British helicopter carrying him crashed while landing ashore and rolled over. No one was hurt! The pilot came on board later: ‘I got wind up my chuff’ he told me.” When the Admiral’s lunch guest had departed, lower deck was cleared so that he could thank the ship’s company for their good work before he and his staff left for Malta by Sunderland flying boat. By 1530 we were on our way too.

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COPIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS PERTAINING TO MIKE BOOTH'S
EXPLOITS IN THE GREEK EARTHQUAKE AND THE RECOVERY OF
COMET YP



Argostoli



Argostoli



Argostoli



Argostoli



Catarina



Marconi Underwater TV



Sketch at the time by Mike of Pye
TV

Have condensed them for ease of transmission.
Hope you receive them easily.