

## The Sea and the Sand, Two wartime experiences

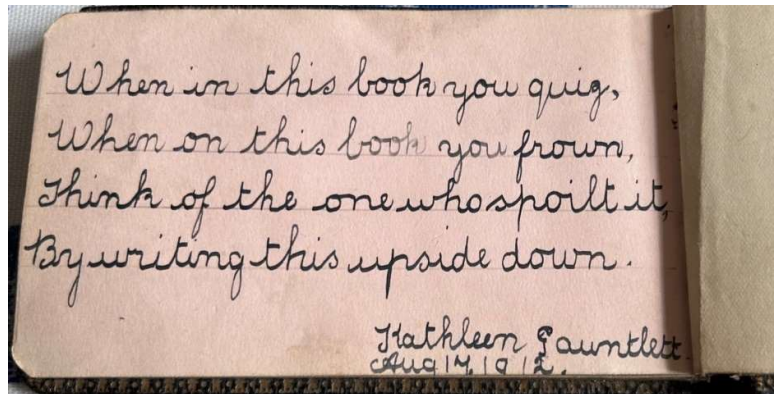
By Janice McEwan

The 1921 census shows Arthur and Mary Anne Taylor living in Compton Road, East Ilsley with their daughters May and Kathleen. Their son Maurice would be born in August of the same year and their daughter Betty in March 1928. Arthur was born in Remenham and Mary Anne in Henley on opposite banks of the Thames but they moved to East Ilsley after the First World War, probably because of Mary Anne's connection to the Gauntlett family, who were then living at the Gables. Mary Anne had worked for the Gauntletts previously and it seems possible that she named her children Kathleen and Maurice after two of the Gauntlett children. Maurice Gauntlett was shot down in action in November 1940 and is commemorated on the East Ilsley War Memorial.

Mary Anne's autograph book contains several pre-war entries from members of the Gauntlett family.



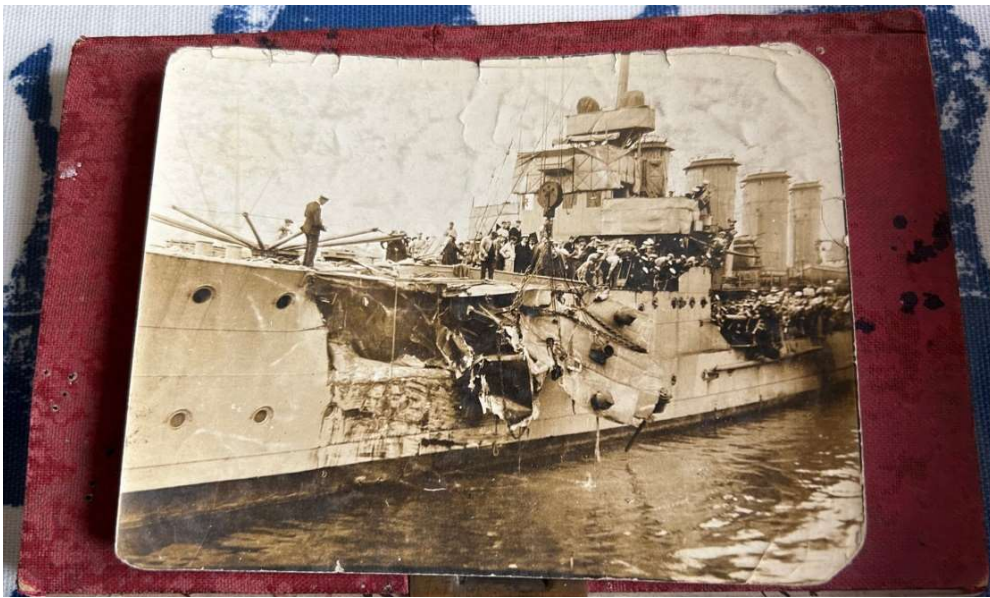
William Blunt.  
Arthur Taylor



Arthur

came from a large family, all of whom grew up in Remenham, Berkshire. His older brothers Frank and Alfred and youngest brother Ernest all served in WW1. Frank and Arthur returned safely but Alfred died shortly after returning home from service (possibly from malaria) while Ernest fell at Ypres in 1915 at the age of only nineteen. Arthur had two other brothers, Frederick, and William, who emigrated in 1913 to Canada, where his descendants still live. His only sister Kate never married and lived into old age in Henley.

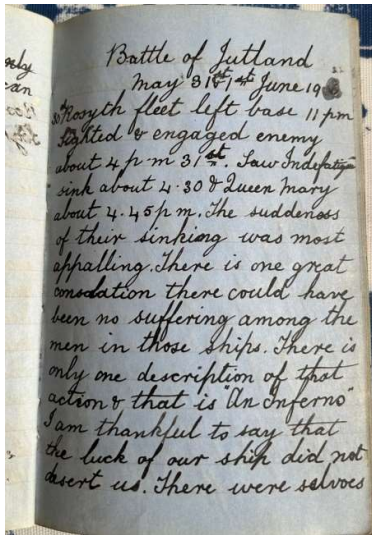
Arthur served in the First World War having initially joined the Royal Marines Light Infantry as a Private at Portsmouth in 1909. Only limited information is available about Arthur's service record, probably because a large number of WW1 records were destroyed in a German bombing raid in 1940. By 1913 Arthur was a member of the crew of HMS Fearless, an Active class battle cruiser under the command of Captain (later Rear Admiral)



Arthur's diary with a photo of HMS Fearless, taken at Hull in 1916. Fearless had been damaged after a collision with HMS Hydra.

Arthur wrote his own account of two naval battles in which he took part: the battles of Heligoland Bight in August 1914 and Jutland 31 May - 1 June 1916 aboard HMS Fearless. This excerpt taken from his account of the Battle of Heligoland Bight reflects not only the excitement of battle but also a compassionate attitude towards the enemy, and apparently the troops dined on tinned beef and boiled potatoes after the battle! Arthur also relates that Fearless was subsequently visited by the King, George V, at their base in Rosyth.

*"In all they hit Fearless 19 times but only one of these done any real damage and that did not reduce our fighting value. All hits were above the water-line. It was only by providence and the masterful tactics of our Capt and Navigator that we had so far got off lightly. It was up to us to see this enemy off somehow for we could not get away from her without leaving the retirement of our Commodore uncovered; and that we would not do. So we made up our minds to chance everything in beating the enemy off and were gaining very good results when something ominous appeared on the scene. It was a Battle Cruiser, whether friend or foe we did not know. However nothing daunted we challenged her. Imagine our thoughts if you can for on her answer rested our fate. Either a speedy and glorious death or instant relief. It seemed jolly hard lines for us to have gone through so much victoriously only to have our lights put out without being able to make our teeth felt in return. Still we were game to chance it big as she was. Human nature is somewhat curious for & after having seen so much slaughter all around one begins to get callous. But not actually callous for when later on some of the enemy wounded were brought on board there was nothing but sympathy all round for them poor devils all battered and maimed. Well the cruiser turned out to be one of our own who had thus come to our timely assistance. A great cheer went up from us as we heard her guns boom & saw her shots falling about the enemy. Our work was not yet done however for we had to take the Laertes in tow as she needed our assistance. Some of the rest of our boats had not got off any too light but they managed to get along under their own steam."*



The first page of Arthur's account of the Battle of Jutland in 1915.

During the battle, Arthur witnessed the sinking of Indefatigable and the Queen Mary. He describes the action as "An Inferno." Fearless's role in the battle was to lead the Battle Cruiser Squadron into action and then to retire to the flank to provide cover. In September 1915, while returning from raids on the German coast, Fearless was holed by HMS Hydra, with some loss of life.

Owing to lack of any further records, it isn't possible to recount the remainder of Arthur's war but he returned home safely and moved to East Ilsley in 1919. In later life he worked at the Central Ordnance Depot in Didcot. He died in 1949 and he and Mary Anne are both buried in Ilsley churchyard.

Their son Maurice attended primary school in East Ilsley and would have been a contemporary of Ben Jones and Alan Hall, who are both commemorated on the East Ilsley War memorial. He went on to St Bartholomew's School in Newbury but after briefly working as an optician's assistant, he joined the RAF aged seventeen in June 1939 before the outbreak of war.



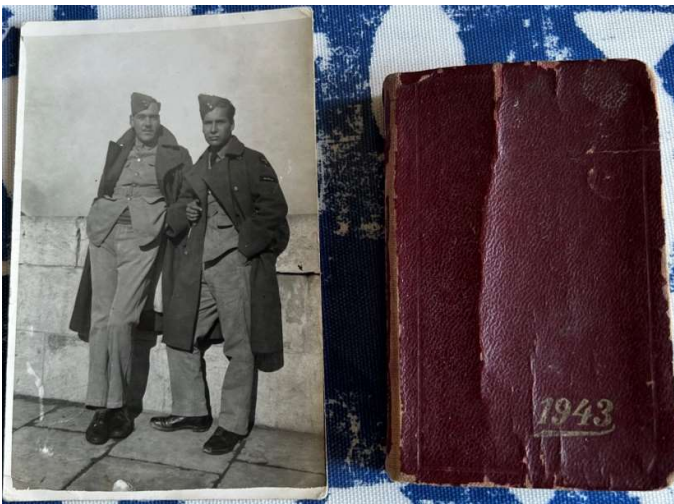
Maurice is standing on the far right in this photo of the football team.

Maurice was posted to North Africa in March 1940 and remained there for the duration of WW2. He wrote a diary for all of 1942 and part of 1943 but unlike his father's stirring descriptions of two naval engagements, this is a factual day by day account of life in the North African desert, which shows that war can include long periods of boredom and inaction.

Maurice trained as ground crew at the RAF School of Technical Training in St Athan and after his arrival in North Africa in March 1940 he joined RAF 55 Squadron in Egypt. In January 1941 he transferred to 51 Repair and Salvage Unit (RSU) at Qasaba in the Western Desert. The Repair and Salvage Unit not only repaired damaged aircraft but also had the task of recovering planes which had crashed in the desert. After serving for more than a year with the RSU, he had some leave in Cairo then transferred to 107 Maintenance Unit (MU) at Kasfareet Air Base, Egypt in March 1942.

Following the defeat of the Germans in North Africa in 1943, Maurice remained in Egypt and Libya for the duration of the war.

1942 was an eventful year as Maurice served in the RSU, making repeated journeys into the desert to recover crashed aircraft and then working on a variety of planes, including Blenheims, Audax, Marylands and Hurricane. He also had to face the twin hazards of sandstorms and German bombing raids. In April 1942 after spending ten days leave in Alexandria and Cairo he was posted to 107 MU at Kasfareet Air Base, seeming initially unimpressed “don’t think I shall like it much” and again later “what a life, eat, sleep, work. Never mind, if it helps.” In September 1942 he spent some leave in Jerusalem, where he visited the Old City and the Mount of Olives, and Tel Aviv. In October the unit was visited by Air Marshall Lord Trenchard. He refers occasionally to the continued fighting in the desert and mentions that “the enemy is in full retreat” in November.



Maurice and a friend in typical wartime pose plus Maurice's rather battered 1943 diary.



On leave in Alexandria.

In January 1943, Maurice was still at 107 MU and refers to the progress of the Allied advance. In February, as the German forces were pushed back, perhaps in order to relieve the monotony of life, he volunteered for an assignment, which involved a journey from Egypt across Libya to Tunisia. After some leave in Alexandria he was on the road, sleeping under lorries en route and stopping

at various locations, including Misrata and Tripoli where he visited old friends at 51 RSU, then westwards via a new aerodrome with mention of air raids and an artillery barrage. During this time he was engaged in the constant repair of aircraft which had been damaged in fighting with the German forces. He passed through Castel Benito and Medenine airfield, which had been recently taken from the Germans by New Zealand forces, then on to Fauconniere, Sfax and Bou Ficha in Tunisia. At the same time the German forces in North Africa surrendered and the North Africa campaign came to an end on 12 May 1943.

On 21 June 1943 Maurice was posted to 136 MU near Benghazi in Libya. At this time he references the surrender of the Italian Mediterranean islands Lampedusa and Pantellaria. But while many Allied forces were now proceeding to Italy, Maurice remained in North Africa for the rest of the war. The battle for Sicily commenced but for Maurice, life was now fairly humdrum, although he began to work for the first time on Spitfires. He enjoyed some further leave in Alexandria but his diary becomes increasingly laconic and finally comes to an end in October 1943, probably because of the increasing monotony of life.



At least he seems to have had a good dinner at Christmas 1943.

He served in various other units, including the Middle East Communications Squadron, was promoted to the rank of Corporal and travelled home after the end of the war, arriving into Liverpool, where he and other returning troops enjoyed their first British rain shower for five years. He returned home to East Ilsley, failing to recognise his excited seventeen year old sister Betty, whom he had last seen as an eleven year old child. He seems to have stayed in the RAF and had flying training before his final release in July 1946.

His wartime medals included the Africa Star, the 1939 - 1945 Star, the Defence Medal and the 1939 - 1945 War Medal. Having left for war at the age of only eighteen and spending five whole years away, he found it difficult to settle back into civilian life and to decide on a career. He would talk about his wartime experiences, mentioning places he had visited or humorous episodes involving the local population but his diary, which gives a lot more perspective on his daily life in the desert, was only read by his family after his death.