

Information sheet no 023

Philip Vian

Philip Vian was born on 15 June 1894 in London. He was educated at the Royal Naval Colleges at Osborne and Dartmouth. During World War One, Vian served on the destroyer HMS *Morning Star* and witnessed the Battle of Jutland in 1916, although his ship did not play a direct part. In the following year, he was promoted to Lieutenant, and served in the destroyers HMSs *Ossory* and *Sorceress* for the remainder of the war. After the war, he specialised in gunnery.

In 1929 he was promoted to Commander and served on the Far East station in HMS *Kent*. In December 1929, he married Marjorie Haig and spent two years at the Admiralty. He then joined HMS *Active* in 1932, leader of the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla in the Mediterranean. In 1934, he was promoted Captain and commanded the 19th DF (Mediterranean) during which time they were sent to defend Malta during the Abyssinian crisis. He was later transferred to command the 1st DF and in July 1936, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, they were involved in the evacuation of British subjects, exchange of refugees and acted as a floating communications centre for the Ambassador. After a brief period back at the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, he was appointed as Flag Captain to Rear Admiral Lionel Wells in HMS *Arethusa*, flagship of the 3rd Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean. In August 1939, he was made Captain of a flotilla of elderly destroyers, based at Devonport. During the short period of his command, while in HMS *Mackay*, he came into close action with a German U-Boat attacking a tanker. He was appointed to HMS *Cossack* in command of the 4th DF in January 1940 for escort duties to and from Scandinavia.

In February 1940, Vian led his flotilla to the Norwegian coast to seize the German ship *Altmark*, known to be carrying British prisoners transferred earlier from the scuttled pocket battleship, *Admiral Graf Spee*. After a long search, the *Altmark* was sighted in Norwegian waters and taking refuge in the Jossing Fjord. Vian took HMS *Cossack* into the fjord and sent a boarding party on to the German ship. After a scuffle with the enemy crew, the boarding party rescued the 300 prisoners and coined the famous cry "the Navy's here!" Vian was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for this engagement.

Soon after this, Vian temporarily transferred to HMS *Alfridi* and took part in the Norwegian campaign during April to June 1940 and was involved in many actions including the evacuation at Namsos, during which his ship was sunk. He was mentioned in Despatches for his part in the action. In May, he returned to HMS *Cossack* and in October 1940, took part in Operation DM that involved the destruction of a German convoy off the Norwegian coast. For this action, he was awarded a bar to his DSO. He spent the rest of the winter on escort duties.

Between 24 - 27 May 1941, the 4th DF joined in the search for the German battleship, *Bismarck*. Along with ships from the Home Fleet under Admiral Tovey, the flotilla shadowed and attacked the stricken *Bismarck*, which was finally sunk on the 27th. Vian received a second bar to his DSO.

In July 1941, Vian was specially promoted at the age of 47 to Rear Admiral by the First Sea Lord, Sir Dudley Pound. He was sent on a visit to Russia to negotiate for naval cooperation between the two countries, but these were

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unsuccessful at the time. He was then appointed to Force K at Scapa Flow, to prepare for convoys to Russia. As part of the preparations, the force, led by Vian in HMS *Nigeria*, was sent to Spitsbergen and Bear Island where, in August 1941, they destroyed the coal-mining facilities, withdrew the Norwegian settlers, and evacuated the Russian colony back to Russia. During their return, following reports of a German convoy in the area, Vian attacked the convoy in Hammer Fjord, where due to the nature of the fighting, HMS *Nigeria* rammed and cut in half the German training cruiser *Bremse*. A few weeks after this event, the first Russian convoys commenced and Force K was disbanded.

In October 1941, Vian took command of the 15th Cruiser Squadron at Alexandria. There were few ships available and the enemy forces were greatly superior. The main British tasks were to ensure the survival of Malta through supply convoys and the prevention of supplies reaching the Axis armies in North Africa. In December Vian successfully bombarded Derna, and later in the same month he took his first convoy to Malta, which resulted in the first battle of Sirte against an Italian force. In early March 1942 Vian's flagship, HMS *Naiad*, was sunk while escorting a small force from Malta. Vian survived and transferred to HMS *Cleopatra*. At the end of the month, he led another convoy destined for Malta. On passage, it met with the Italian battle fleet under the command of the same Admiral who had led the enemy force in December, and the second battle of Sirte commenced. Through great bravery and tactics, the merchant ships remained unscathed from surface attack, although enemy aircraft caused serious damage. The outcome was that one merchant ship arrived safely, one was beached at Malta and the third was sunk. Vian received a personal message of congratulation from the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Vian was also awarded the Knight Commander of the British Empire on 31 March 1942.

After an unsuccessful convoy to Malta in June, his health was deteriorating and in September 1942, Vian was sent home for rest. When the aircraft he was in broke down in West Africa, he contracted malaria and was seriously ill for several months. Although better, in April 1943 he was deemed only fit for shore service, something that he was not fond of, and he was appointed to a post on the staff planning the invasion of Europe. However, before he could commence, he was sent back to the Mediterranean to take over an amphibious force whose commander had died in an air crash. He commanded an amphibious force during Operation Husky, the successful landings at Sicily in July 1943 and again, commanded a squadron to cover Operation Avalanche, the landings at Salerno in the following September. Vian returned to the UK and took command of the Eastern Task Force in January 1944, in preparation for the invasion of Normandy. In HMS *Scylla*, he commanded three British forces during the initial assault in June 1944. In November he was promoted to Vice Admiral and made Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath for his services during the Normandy invasion. In addition, he received four Mentions in Despatches. He was then appointed to command the aircraft carrier squadron and joined the British Pacific fleet to work with the Americans against the Japanese. The task force made four attacks on oil refineries in Sumatra, and in March 1945, joined in the operations to capture Okinawa.

At the end of the war, after his return from the Pacific, Vian became Fifth Sea Lord at the Admiralty, in charge of naval aviation until 1948, when he was promoted Admiral. In addition to his British decorations, he was awarded the US Distinguished Service Medal in 1946, Medal of the Order of St Olav (Norway), Order of the Dannebrog (Denmark) and the French Croix de Guerre, as well as being a member of the French Legion d'Honneur and Legion of Merit. In 1950 he was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet with HMS *Vanguard* as his flagship, and retained this

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position until he retired from the service in 1952. On his retirement, he was promoted Admiral of the Fleet, a rank that is normally confined to First Sea Lords, in recognition of his exceptional service during WWII. In addition, he was awarded the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath.

After leaving the service, he undertook several commercial directorships. He died at his home in Ashford Hill, near Newbury on 27th May 1968.