

### **Dr Leonard D A Hussey OBE (1891-1964)**

Squadron Leader Hussey was the Station Medical Officer at RAF Benson during the last war, and with his famous banjo enjoyed organising concerts to entertain Benson and Ewelme villagers. He would also take village children to Benson to concerts as Cynthia Winfield remembers.

Biography - Leonard Hussey had been picked by the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton to join the Shackleton Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition [1914-17] as a young meteorologist – the youngest and smallest member of the crew. When pack ice crushed their ship the '*Endurance*' each man was allowed one personal item to salvage, Hussey chose his banjo. In April 1916 he was marooned on uninhabited Elephant Island with 22 colleagues, whilst Shackleton took 5 men to row to South Georgia to mount a rescue mission. (A famous feat of seamanship and navigation against all odds). Hussey had kept his companion's morale up with his banjo, especially at Saturday Concerts. Shackleton rescued his men almost 5 months later!



**Leonard Hussey with a Huskie**

Returning to England he joined the British Army and served in France and on the Russian Front, leaving with the rank of Captain. After the war he qualified in medicine, becoming a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.

Sir Ernest Shackleton kept the young Hussey in mind and invited him to join another expedition to Antarctica as a meteorologist and assistant surgeon in 1921/22 aboard the '*Quest*'. Unfortunately, before they could embark, Shackleton died of a heart attack on South Georgia with Hussey in attendance. Hussey was tasked with taking the body back to England, but Lady Shackleton requested her husband be buried on South Georgia at a ceremony on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1922.

During the Second World War Sqdn Ldr Hussey was appointed as Station Medical Officer at RAF Benson circa 1943-1946.

From the chapter the Royal Air Force and Ewelme in the Glimpses of an Oxfordshire Village book –

One notable person stationed at RAF Benson was a medical officer, Squadron Leader Leonard Hussey who held the Polar Star. He had been on the ill-fated Shackleton Expedition to the Antarctic as a young Meteorological Officer, and had spent the winter of 1916 on Elephant Island whilst Shackleton and a few brave men made their epic journey in an open boat to South Georgia for help. He was with Shackleton in January 1922 prior to a new expedition, when the great explorer suffered a fatal heart attack. An example of Squadron Leader Hussey's military role is in the front of the Pilot's Log Book loaned by Flying Officer P W Robeson. 'Doc' Hussey writes - *"10/6/45 Passed for Decompression Chamber Tests for Photographic Reconnaissance, and Light Bomber Mosquito Squadron High Altitude flying. L Hussey S/L Senior Medical Officer, RAF Benson, Oxon."* 'Doc' Hussey was a banjo player and villagers can remember him playing at concerts in the village hall after the war and giving a slide lecture on Antarctica. Carole Knowles remembers how kind he was to the 'evacuees' and how he took her to Benson Village Hall to sing in a concert with the RAF Band.



Dr Leonard Hussey

His love of singing with his banjo was enjoyed by many in Ewelme, particularly the younger children.

#### Village Memories -

Eric and Carole Knowles lived at Saffron House and were evacuated from Liverpool to Ewelme whilst their father served at RAF Benson during the war. They had vivid memories of Sqdn Ldr Hussey. Eric remembered *'the show Wings for Victory with the famous banjo and the Antarctic lecture too'*. Each man had been given a set of photographic plates, that had been salvaged from the *'Endurance'*

Eric's sister Carole said – *'Sqdn Ldr Hussey was the camp doctor and as evacuees we were fussed over, and I can remember him taking me to Benson to sing in a concert with the RAF Band. I also remember him doing an evening [slide lecture] on one of his expeditions with Shackleton - I can't remember which one but he was a doctor probably a medical student at that time, I don't know and he played a ukulele. In later years I saw him on 'This is Your Life.'* [ It was not his Life – but he was a guest and appeared with his banjo].

Carole continued - ....'Hussey's talks in the Reading Room about being a medical student [actually a Met Officer] with Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic 1914-1917. I got my love of geography from those talks and ended up teaching Geography and Maths in our local Comprehensive School. All my friends know about my love of the Antarctic and one girl belonging to my Embroiderers' Guild did a 3D embroidery of Frank Hurley's famous photograph of the Endurance ice bound in the Weddel Sea in 1915 as a gift to me after my three years as Chairman of the local branch of the Embroiderers' Guild'.

Bob Quixley the son of the school's headmaster remembered – 'Concerts during the war – I remember Wg Cdr Hussey singing and playing his banjo - a good evening - like a Victorian entertainment'.



**One of the concerts in which Dr Hussey was involved. Dr Hussey is on the far right in the top row.**

And with Hussey's designation incorrect ... *In the War there was an evening's entertainment in the Rifle Range a sort of review - and the commander of RAF Benson a Wing Commander Hussey played the banjo and sang; I think it was the Donkey Laugh - that was fun'.*

It was Eric Knowles who gave the Ewelme Society the lead to the staging of Hussey's slide show in February 2007. He had heard Geoff Selley FRGS give the illustrated talk as he had been gifted the photographs and Hussey's script. He made it his aim to take this talk around the country under the title '*The Greatest Survival Story Ever Told*'. The report appeared in the Ewelme News -

### **The Greatest Survival Story Ever Told**

On Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2004 the Village Hall was packed to capacity to see the Shackleton Antarctic Expedition slide lecture given by Geoff Selley FRGS. The audience was enthralled by the collection of slides - copied from Frank Hurley's original expedition photographs of some 90 years ago. The collection once belonged

to Dr Leonard Hussey, who was a young banjo-playing Meteorological officer on the ill-fated expedition. (In 1916 Hussey and 21 companions were marooned on inhospitable Elephant Island when their intrepid leader Ernest Shackleton and 5 crewmen set sail on an epic 850 mile voyage in a 22 ft open boat upon some of the stormiest seas on the globe. Against all odds, and by a miraculous feat of navigation, they finally reached South Georgia. After waiting for a desperate eternity of some four and a half months, Hussey and his fellow castaways were finally rescued). Therefore, this unique lecture was a real adventure story, featuring courage and extreme endurance, but laced with humour.

During the Second World War Dr Hussey was Senior Medical Officer at RAF Benson and he delighted in giving his magic lantern slide lecture in many venues in the local area. As Geoff also owns Dr Hussey's original script, he is able to recreate the actual presentation given by Hussey. Geoff was pleased to meet four members of the audience who had seen the original lecture in the Reading Room 63 years ago. Also present, and armed with some interesting photographs, was former WAAF Jean Copeland, who featured in some of the Station's Theatre productions, staged by Dr Hussey and featuring his famous banjo.

After the lecture the audience had an opportunity to ask Geoff questions and examine the many books and artefacts (including Hussey's original lantern-slide machine) on display. As a tribute to those heroic explorers of past times Geoff is determined to keep the slide lecture alive, and hopefully he will return to the area in the not-too-distant future to present it again.

This was so well received Mr Selley also returned to give it to the Benson and Dorchester History Society's.

[The writer can remember 'Doc' Hussey in the Sick Bay at RAF Halton in 1953 – a slight grey-haired man. He had written a biography '*South with Shackleton*' which was inscribed to my mother after one of his slide lectures].