

Sailor's Luck (Annotated)

At Sea & Ashore in Peace & War

PART A: 1934 to 1942

Contents

Foreword.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Editor's note.....	4
Personal note.....	5
Chapter 1: Naval Cadet, H.M.S. Frobisher, 1934-5.....	6
Chapter 2: Midshipman, H.M.S. Dragon, 1935-7.....	14
Chapter 3: Midshipman, H.M.S. Southampton, 1937.....	24
Chapter 4: Subs' Courses at Portsmouth; Sub-Lieutenant, H.M.S. Franklin, 1938, and H.M.S. Scarborough, 1939.....	31
Chapter 5: Lieutenant H.M.S. Derby, 1939.....	40
Chapter 6: Lieutenant H.M.S. Challenger, 1940-41.....	45
Chapter 7: The Anselm Disaster and the Surveys in Gambia, 1941-2.....	52
Chapter 8: Lieutenant, H.M.S. Fraserburgh (M/S 15), 1942.....	60

Foreword

(by Rear Admiral G.S. Ritchie CB, DSC)

Geoffrey Hall succeeded me as Hydrographer of the Navy in February 1971, becoming the 20th incumbent of that honourable post since its establishment in 1795 to provide seacharts for the Royal Navy. When these charts were placed on the open market in 1823 the requirement for them began to expand as merchant ships of many nations set about using them world-wide.

During Hall's term of office as Hydrographer he was in overall charge of thirteen white-hulled naval surveying ships collecting hydrographic data at sea, and of the work of 800 civil servants at the Hydrographic Department at Taunton busy compiling, printing and issuing charts to the Royal Navy and commercial agents throughout the world.

Hall was the last Hydrographer to have been surveying at sea before the onset of World War II. On his own admission he was awarded each of his promotions from Lieutenant-Commander upwards on his last chance in each zone, so that on retirement in September 1975 he was nearing his 60th birthday and was the oldest man in the Navy.

During his long years he had enjoyed a widely varied, and often exciting, life in general service, Combined Operations and the surveying service in peace and war, and this included one general service and five surveying ship commands, each of about two years in duration.

Thus the author has a fascinating tale to tell. He writes evocatively, particularly when recalling events at sea - whether it be surveying off South Georgia under the daily stress of ever-changing stormy weather conditions; carrying out beach reconnaissance from a folbot on the Arakan Coast, where he nearly lost his life; making geophysical investigations in the Indian Ocean; or ocean sounding in the North Atlantic. Many found the latter activity boring - not so Geoffrey as the reader will find out on page 193.

For me, however, it was far from boring. Quite apart from the interest and fascination of the developing survey, and my daily stint at hand-contouring of the bathymetry in the Chartroom, the whole business was immensely satisfying. I was aware that Hecla would almost certainly be my last sea-going command, and I intended to make the most of it. Standing there on the bridge, or sitting in the Captain's chair, with nothing 111 sight except the vast blue ocean, the ship surging ahead on a steady course, engines throbbing and machinery humming in the background, officers and men quietly and efficiently performing their duties on all sides, I often thought what a marvellous job I had.'

In 1942 he undertook a six weeks N* course in HMS Dryad, and subsequently enjoyed putting the skills he had into practice. He always derived pleasure from handling his ship in close quarter situations, and was ever ready to take his vessel into tight locations such as the narrow lagoon at Aldabra Island, the constricted harbour of Heimaey in the Westman Islands, or the snuggest cove in South Georgia.

Unusual for this type of book, the tale is told in a very personal vein, an approach which will commend *Sailor's Luck* to historians fifty years or more from now.

The story of how Geoffrey became engaged to Mary Carlisle, a Wren Officer he had never met, by means of a letter written from a Commando camp in Ceylon, and their first meeting six months later in a hotel in Dorchester is delightful.

Once married, Mary packed and followed whenever possible, accepting Geoffrey's white mistresses; she was rewarded by being invited to launch one of them, HMS Herald. Today Herald is the grand old lady of the surveying squadron and as beautiful as ever.

Hydrographers of the Navy have always had to fight within the Whitehall corridors of power to obtain or even retain the ships they require to meet their responsibilities as they see them. Geoffrey Hall fought harder than most of us. Whether he won or lost may be judged by the reader of the final pages of *Sailor's Luck*.

Introduction

This is an abridged and heavily edited extract from my personal memoirs, written down a few years after my retirement for the information of my descendants. Having enjoyed the diaries and memoirs of some of my forebears, and been fascinated by the ambience of their times, I felt I owed it to later generations to pass on to them how one ancestor lived in the 20th century -and, in particular, an account of his career in the Royal Navy which they might find of some interest.

I had an unusually long naval career of exactly 41 years (1934-1975). Unlike one or two 'high flyers' in my group who rose rather rapidly to higher rank (and early retirement), I served the full span of years in each rank, being promoted in every case at the last opportunity! Thus, on retirement and approaching the age of 60, I found myself the oldest serving officer in the Navy - even including 'Their Lordships' (whose Severe Displeasure I was about to incur).

Since I enjoyed naval life, I was fortunate; indeed I am aware that throughout my career luck played a significant part in determining its direction and duration. When many officers would give their eye-teeth for a Sea Command, the fact that six of these came my way suggests at least a measure of good luck, rather than simply the Fortunes of War (or Peace). There were three or four 'Life-or-Death' instances where pure luck (or my guardian angel?) decided the outcome - and other occasions when crucial appointments occurred just as I happened to be 'in the right place at the right time'. Apart from these episodes, however, to have cruised every ocean, touched on every continent and visited many exotic and little-known places world-wide -all in the day's work and at no personal expense - seemed to me the essence of good fortune.

Hence the title of this book. The sub-title outlines its story.

GPDH

Editor's note

The more one likes a book, the harder it is to cut it. The task I was set was to reduce *Sailor's Luck* by about seventy thousand words through a combination of omission, compression and abbreviation. These constraints have cost me much anxious pondering and many a sigh of regret. Thus I have had to omit most of the author's account of his early years and his family life, and also his experiences in retirement. What is left is the enthralling narrative of his career in the Royal Navy. Recognizing his own gift for writing, I have tried to keep to a minimum any editorial interpolations. It has been a true labour of love. What the reader now has before him is the Admiral's own story told in his own words.

David Bourke

Personal note

So, why am I editing my father's memoirs? Today is 27 October 2017, and for various reasons I have embarked on a project of converting 'Sailor's Luck' to a word file (eventually succeeding using Adobe Acrobat), and adding my own notes to the text – but why?

On my journey to Sydney and back on 13 October 2017, I started re-reading Geoffrey's memoirs, and was immediately struck at how good they were, how well written. I wrote in my Chronicle later that evening:

On the flight to Sydney I read the first chapter of Sailor's Luck. I had forgotten how well it was written, really drawing you in to the narrative. The story begins in Iceland in 1934 with the telegram saying Geoffrey had been accepted as a cadet, then several cruises with HMS Frobisher, firstly in the Mediterranean clockwise from Gibraltar to Italy, Pompeii, the Dalmatian coast, to the Aegean and Constantinople. Then the Holy Land including Haifa, Bethlehem and the Dead Sea, then Crete and Malta. In January 1935 they towed the stricken oil tanker Valverde across the western Atlantic to Bermuda, and made headlines news. Then the Silver Jubilee review of the fleet at Spithead under King George V, then cadet exams. Six went on as Midshipmen to HMS Dragon, the only other British person was Michael Highton.

On the plane back I read 3 or 4 chapters of Sailor's Luck, up to the outbreak of WW2. This covered trips to South America and sailing back from Bermuda in a yacht in 1937, and the Spanish Civil War, then out to the Far East with his first survey ship in Ceylon, covering traditional methods of navigation...

But it's not just because they are well written, and intrinsically fascinating: they also provide an extremely valuable source of 'family' history, spanning over 40 years (from 1934 till 1975), and this can provide a framework for other family stories that took place over this time.

However, I think the main reason is that these memoirs show my father 'at his best', portraying him as an extremely capable Officer in the Royal Navy, wise, strong and courageous, concerned for others, with moral integrity, and a deep faith in God (whether explicit or not) – and this is the way I choose to remember him...

Chapter 1: Naval Cadet, H.M.S. Frobisher, 1934-5

HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS YOU HAVE PASSED 5th INTO THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF THE ROYAL NAVY

I looked at the telegram from my father. My cup was overflowing. I remembered my years at Haileybury, my growing determination to join the Royal Navy, my studies in the Army Class and the written entrance examination, which I had taken at College over a five-day period. Some of the papers had been straightforward enough but others I had found appalling, and I had not felt that I had done well. I remembered the Practical Mechanics, in which I had performed better than I expected, the Interview at Burlington Gardens, which had seemed to go surprisingly well, my Medical, which, much to my relief (for I had had my misgivings about it), I had already passed. Now all this had been crowned with success; I had been accepted as a cadet in the Royal Navy.

At the time I heard the news, I was on holiday with my mother in Iceland, and this, my first experience of its charms, had already engendered in me a lifelong love of that country; it had become, and was to remain, the 'land of my dreams'. Now, with this happy news from home, I could relax and enjoy it to the full before joining my first ship at Chatham in a fortnight's time.

[Yes, this was indeed good news, and a fitting start to my father's amazing story, of a career in the Royal Navy spanning over 40 years. As I recall, the Icelandic holiday was in the Vestmannaeyjar, or 'Westman Islands', and almost 30 years later, in August 1964, my father took the whole family for a three week holiday in south-western Iceland – a trip I will never forget – in a land that is wild and remote, and beautiful beyond compare. It is interesting, also, that my father wrote, "My cup was overflowing", which is a direct quote from Psalm 23. Geoffrey often referred to 'luck' and sometimes to his 'guardian angel' – but he downplays the very real faith he had in God – a faith which I believe he kept throughout his life. God certainly had His hand upon my father, as indeed He has his hand upon the generations that follow him...]

On Thursday, 13th September 1934, clad in my new tailor-made naval uniform, I joined a throng of other 'new entry' cadets and entrained for Chatham to join H.M.S. *Frobisher*, the Cadet Training Cruiser. We were at once put to work. The ship was like an oven and we spent the rest of the day sweating profusely as we stowed baggage, shifted stores, underwent medical inspections and were classed, categorised, lectured and organised. Finally, after a meal and a long-awaited cold shower, we were permitted to sling our hammocks and 'turn in', just about 'dead to the world'. The next day was even more strenuous. Not only were we joined by over a hundred ex-Dartmouth cadets, but we had to prepare the ship for sailing down-river to Sheerness, where we moored to a buoy and proceeded to embark enormous quantities of ammunition.

[These first chapters are so vividly written, it's almost as if the events took place 'yesterday'. But I happen to know my father kept a very detailed diary during the year 1934-5, because he knew it would be an especially interesting year – and no doubt these memoirs draw heavily on the actual diary entries made at the time.]

We were off on the first of three training cruises which, spread over a twelve-month period, would fit us to qualify as midshipmen for service in the Fleet. The ex-Public School (or 'special entry') cadets - who were regarded as completely inexperienced in the ways of the sea - were known as 'Preliminaries', and this cruise was intended to bring them to the same level of naval knowledge as their ex-Dartmouth contemporaries (who had had four years of naval training and indoctrination). The 'Pubs' (as we were commonly referred to) were, however, generally assumed to be better educated than the 'Darts' and, because we had decided on a naval career at a more mature age, we were better motivated and certainly more enthusiastic. By comparison the 'Darts' tended to be more blasé. After five days at sea we reached Gibraltar on September 20th and remained there for the rest of the month. Everything was new to us: life on a warship, life in the balmy Mediterranean, the sights, sounds and smells of Gibraltar itself, the glorious sunshine and the heavenly bathing - and though the routine aboard ship was tough and relentless, we enjoyed it. When pay day came, and we received one shilling per day, we could hardly believe it. To have all this and to be paid for it as well! It seemed too good to be true! Life for the cadets may have been tough and strenuous, but it was anything but monotonous. Besides working as crew members from 6.30 each morning, we were under continuous instruction - both theoretical and practical - till late in the afternoon, and this was interspersed with daily Divisions and Prayers, Physical Training, drills, boat-pulling and sailing, armed landing parties, ceremonial parades and inspections, visual signalling exercises by night and by day, and all manner of ship's duties, to which we were frequently roused by bugle calls at any hour.

Frobisher was a heavy cruiser, built in the 1920s and armed with six 7.5" guns, four 3" anti-aircraft guns, and six 21" submerged torpedo-tubes. She was a very fine-looking ship, on which 'spit and polish' had been lavished unstintingly. The upper-deck screens and bulkheads were heavily enamelled, the wooden decks scrubbed white and spotless, ropes everywhere 'cheesed down' in immaculate coils, and every conceivable fitting of highly polished brass. She was a ship to delight the eye of any sailor - and we quickly came to take an enormous pride in her. Indeed, much of our time when not actually under instruction was spent washing, scrubbing, scraping, sweeping and polishing different parts of her - both on deck and between decks. In those inter-War years, H.M. ships were expected to be 'spick and span' at all times and much energy went into keeping them so.

The normal practice at sea (weather permitting) was for the ship to stop for about half an hour at Evening Quarters in order to carry out various drills. As often as not, all boats would be manned and lowered to pull round the ship or to recover lifebuoys thrown overboard a mile or more astern, or to recover torpedoes. Those not involved with the boats might be sent out to exercise 'Tow For'ard' or 'Tow Aft' or 'Collision Stations' or 'Out Paravanes'. Alternatively they might simply double round the ship or do P.T.

Sometimes, as we moved eastward through the Mediterranean, the pipe would be 'Hands to Bathe'. Then we would all strip off and dive over the side. In depths of 1,500 fathoms, with the sea cairn and a brilliant blue, this was an unforgettable experience. To open one's eyes under water and stare down into the abyssal deep was to witness a watery world of incredible purple. Then as one surfaced, one realized, rather alarmingly, that the ship had slowly drawn away (she still had way on), and one had to strike out hard with the others to catch her up.

[Ah! I can just picture the thrilling experience of diving into the deep blue sea...]

Boat-hoisting was quite a performance - in fact, when all boats were down, a major 'evolution'. *Frobisher* had at least eight pulling-boats - four cutters, two whalers, a gig and a galley - as well as several motor-boats and motor-pinnaces. At sea it was often the case that all the pulling-boats were down together, sometimes under sail, and manned by up to a hundred cadets. A flag signal from the yard-arm would recall them, either separately or in groups. 'Clear Lower Deck - Hoist Boats' would be piped, the Royal Marine Band would muster on X-Gun Deck, and one boat on each side would sweep up to its falls and start hooking on (in a seaway this could be hazardous). 'Haul taut singly!' would be bellowed aft at the fifty or more hands manning the falls along the decks, then perhaps, 'Walk back ship-side fall!' or, preferably, 'Marry the falls!', followed by the order, 'Hoist away!' - when the band would strike up some rousing tune (e.g. 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?') as the hands stamped their way aft in time to the beat and the boat with its crew would rise towards the davit-heads. As it approached them, another bellow, 'Handsomely!', and the band would slow its beat.

Then, 'Avast hoisting', and the music would stop - followed by the order: 'Ease to the life-lines!' as the boat's crew jammed further movement of the falls, which were then turned up on the stag-horns. This procedure was repeated for each boat on each side, but the whole performance might be completed inside ten minutes.

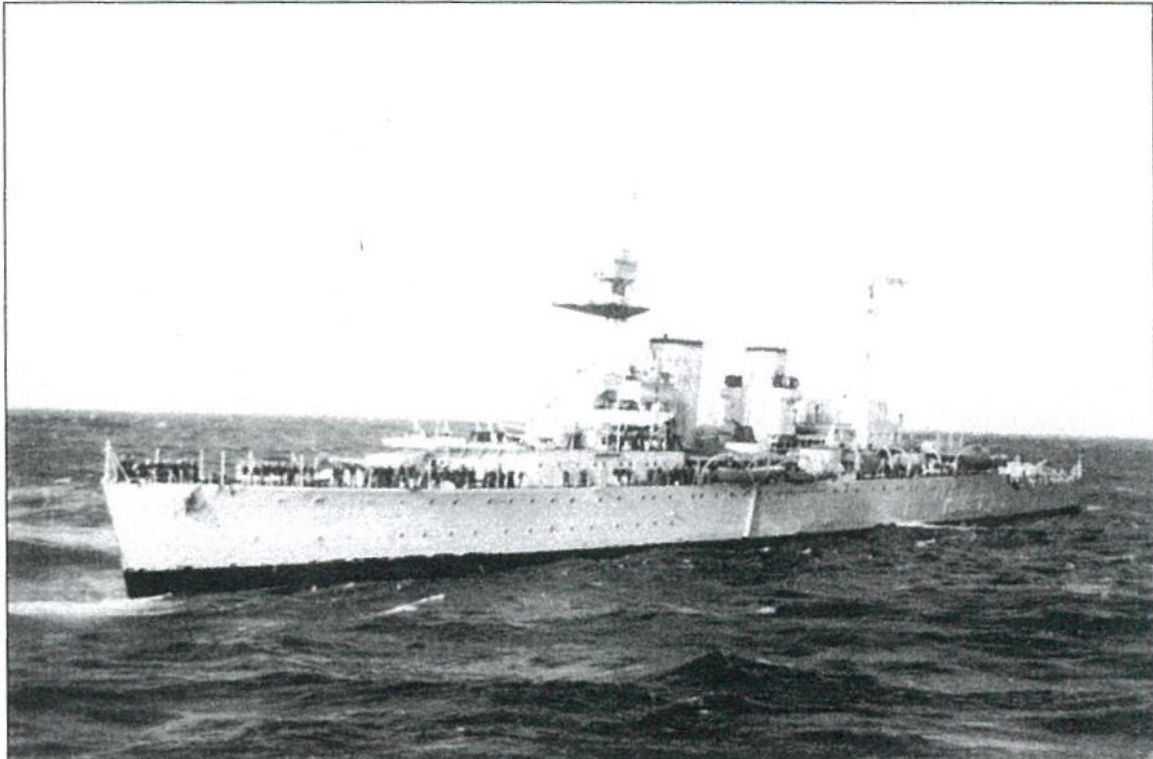
All that autumn we moved steadily through the Mediterranean on a 'clockwise' cruise, calling at exotic ports of which we had previously only dreamed: Naples (from which we visited Vesuvius and the ruins of Pompeii), Gravosa and Ragusa on the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia (where we fell in with H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth*, the flagship of the Mediterranean Fleet), the Aegean Sea and the Greek Islands, Gallipoli and the Dardanelles, Constantinople (as it then was), where we paraded through the streets with band playing to lay wreaths on the Turkish War Memorial, and where we visited the Blue Mosque, the Mosque of St. Sophia, the Imperial Palace, the Seraglio - with its eunuchs - and the Treasury, where over a hundred million pounds-worth of incredible treasure was displayed. We spent the last week of October at Mudros and the first week of November at Haifa (from which we visited all the holy sites at Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem and bathed in the Dead Sea).

[It is significant, I feel, that my father visited the Holy Land, now Israel, at the age of 18. This too must have been an unforgettable experience, and perhaps a formative one.]

Then we moved west to Candia in Crete, where we viewed the recently excavated ruins of Knossos. In mid-November we were at Malta, home of our huge Mediterranean Fleet. Moored in the Grand Harbour and Sliema Creek, and comprising six Capital Ships and a vast array of cruisers and destroyers, this made a tremendous impression of British naval power. After a week at Algiers, we moved to spend the last week of November at Gibraltar and returned to Chatham on 6th December. We spent the following week sitting examinations (during which my mother paid a visit to the ship) and got home for Christmas leave on 14th. What a tremendous experience our initiation into the Navy had been! Those three months had effectively dispelled any lingering doubts any of us might have had over our choice of profession.

Our next cruise was to the West Indies. We sailed from Chatham on 11th January, bound for Trinidad, and were ten days out when we hit the headlines in the national press. A 10,000-ton British oil-tanker was on fire in mid-Atlantic and was screaming for help. She lay 450

miles to the westward, without power or steerage, and with most of her engine-room crew either dead or seriously injured. A north-westerly gale was in progress and the tanker S.S. *Valverda* was wallowing in heavy seas. Six other ships were within 500 miles of her, three of them considerably closer than we were. But we had the speed, up to 29 knots. At 0730 on Monday morning, 21st January, as *Frobisher* rolled her way south-westward at the leisurely pace of 12 knots, we were electrified by the pipe: 'Ship will go to the rescue of an oil-tanker on fire'.



Frobisher preparing to tow a stricken tanker, Mid-Atlantic, 1935

Altering course to starboard and working up to full speed, the ship was soon crashing her way through huge seas and shuddering from end to end from the impact of the waves and the vibration of her engines. Awnings were furled, boats turned in, all loose gear lashed down, and storm lifelines rigged along the upper deck. But as our speed increased, so the damage grew: two of our starboard boats were stove in, several reeled hawsers were torn from their deck-fittings and washed overboard, and most of the guardrails and stanchions on the starboard side were smashed or bent double. The motion was indescribable: everything for'ard of the bridge was either totally submerged or pointing to the sky, huge waves swept repeatedly over the fo'c'sle and 'B' Gun Deck, towering clouds of salt sea-spray obliterated the foretop - and often the masts and funnels - and black smoke poured out from both funnels, obscuring the sea on the port quarter, while at every thudding pitch, the stern rose into the air and our four propellers raced uncontrollably. Nine thousand tons of heavy cruiser driven at full power into the teeth of a North Atlantic gale is an awesome sight - and we'd never experienced anything like it. So violent and unpredictable was the motion that it was impossible to move anywhere without clutching on to some fixture. Yet we spent that evening clad in oilskins and bringing down the heavy hawsers, manilas, grasses, towing

pendants, slips and shackles on to the quarter-deck, ready for 'Tow Aft' - and getting drenched to the skin in the process.

I was Midshipman of the Morning Watch and at dawn on the Tuesday we received a faint message from *Valverda* saying that she could see our searchlights shining on the clouds; we were in contact. When we came upon her, there was a small French ship lying near - but doing nothing. She had been only 80 miles away when the S.O.S. went out and on seeing us, she pushed off. We had beaten all the other ships in the race to get there first and now it was up to us. Weather conditions were appalling, but the fire in the tanker was out. The whole after part of the ship was burnt out and blackened, the boats had been destroyed, the engines were out of action, the ship was powerless, one engineer was dead and several others were in a critical condition. During the day we eventually succeeded in passing a line across by Schermuly gun, and by evening we had our 6½ inch towing wire shackled to the tanker's chain cable, ten shackles of which had been veered out through her hawse-pipe. We started to move forward. The wire came up bar-taut, humming -and we held our breath. The tanker yawed right over to starboard, her rudder jammed hard over. The hum of the wire rose several octaves -and then everything went slack. It had surely parted. But it hadn't! It was *Valverda's* chain cable that had parted -in her hawse-pipe! It was unbelievable. Chain cables just don't part -they just don't. But this one had. We were left with 100 fathoms of 6½ inch towing wire and 10 shackles of chain-cable hanging from the after fairleads -weighing some 15 tons. That was more than our electric capstan on the quarter-deck could cope with. We had no alternative but to slip the lot.

For the next three days we wallowed -both literally and metaphorically. We wallowed in the troughs of the Atlantic rollers and we wallowed in rumour, speculation, indecision and frustration. H.M.S. *Guardian*, a net-layer equipped with special towing gear, arrived on the Wednesday and took the tanker in tow, but made no headway whatever. *Valverda* yawed wildly (as she had done with us), and during the night the tow parted. *Guardian* gave up and transferred her special 5½" towing wire to us. Gradually the storm abated and on the Friday, having put a skeleton crew of experts aboard the tanker and brought off her injured men, we got her in tow again. This time we had brought our own chain cable aft from the fo'c'sle and veered half a shackle (about six fathoms) of it through our after fairleads as a 'spring'. The other end of the tow was shackled to the tanker's cable, which, now that we had restored power to her windlass, was gradually veered out to ease the terrific strain on the wire as we forged slowly ahead. The same old trouble recurred: she couldn't steer and went off at right-angles to the line of advance, forcing us to stop repeatedly and go astern so as to avoid parting the wire. We made no headway. On the Saturday, with the tanker still miraculously 'in tow', our engineers succeeded in repairing her steering gear, and from then on things began to settle down. Gradually we worked up to about five knots.

For the next six days we struggled slowly towards the nearest land, Bermuda, 900 miles to the northwestward, with twenty thousand tons of deadweight wallowing astern of us (the tanker was fully laden). It was a long and testing interlude of hopeful anxiety. However, on the last day of January we arrived at Bermuda and lay off the coral reefs waiting for the dawn. The task before us was to manoeuvre the giant tow through the long narrow channel cut through the reefs into the sheltered waters of the lagoon. This meant a complete change of tactics, as well as of towing gear, for we now had to keep the tow close up under our stern so as to keep her from yawing into those deadly submerged reefs. The job took us all the next day and all the next night. Two more hawsers were parted in the process, but by

keeping our searchlights on the tanker as we painfully weaved our way through the sinuous two-mile channel, we somehow managed it, and, as the last wire parted under the colossal strain, *Valverda* let go her anchor in calm and safety.

So ended the famous '*Valverda* incident' - a saga indeed. We found that we had made history. Not only had we featured prominently in the newspapers at home (with photographs flown home from H.M.S. *Guardian*), but we had broken records. We had been continuously at sea for longer (22 days) than any H.M. ship since the Great War, and we had accomplished the second longest non-stop tow on record (900 miles). By any standards it was a magnificent feat, but for us cadets it was an object lesson in determination, professional skill and practical seamanship that none of us would ever forget.

[Wow! What an amazing adventure, and so vividly recounted, drawing no doubt on the 1934-5 diary my father had kept at the time. I especially like that last sentence, as I think it expresses some of the character traits that would shape my father's life: 'By any standards it was a magnificent feat, but for us cadets it was an object lesson in determination, professional skill and practical seamanship that none of us would ever forget...']

Of course the gilt on the gingerbread was the salvage money - announced many months later in an Admiralty Fleet Order. I think we all got rather more than we expected. After our toils and anxieties, the coral islands of Bermuda seemed like Paradise. We spent two days there, resting, refuelling and repairing the damage. Then we set off (into the teeth of another gale) for the West Indies. Four days later we reached Barbados, where we found half the Home Fleet anchored off Bridgetown. Later we moved on to St. Lucia and from there to Montserrat. But it was the Virgin Islands that we really fell for, and here we spent our last week in the West Indies. The ship's routine and our courses of instruction were relaxed, and much of our time at St. Thomas and Tortola was spent in soaking up the sun, swimming, sailing and picnicking on the beaches. The islands seemed wild and virtually uninhabited, and we treasured the memory of them on the long voyage home. In April, while the ship refitted at Chatham, we got some well-earned Easter leave. When we returned in May, we found *Frobisher* had been equipped with a sea-plane and a crane to hoist it in and out. In the same month we took part in the celebrations for the Silver Jubilee of the King and Queen at Rosyth, where we dressed ship over-all. We were now Senior Cadets preparing for promotion to Midshipmen, and were largely preoccupied with working up to our Passing-Out exams in two months' time.

Before we left *Frobisher*, however, we had one final summer cruise, beginning with a visit to Copenhagen (where we found ourselves bowled over by the beauty of the flaxen-haired girls) and thence to Oslo and Trondhjem (where we found the Norwegian girls, if possible, even prettier) before returning to Scapa Flow for summer exercises, in which virtually the whole of the Home Fleet was engaged. Here we were kept properly on our toes. A constant stream of signals emanated from the Flagship and had to be repeated down the lines, signals sometimes affecting us, sometimes not. It was our third taste of the highly disciplined life of the Fleet, where no mistake or slovenliness went unnoticed, calling forth a signalled reprimand from one eagle-eyed Admiral or another.

It was quite a relief to resume our independent programme. We left the Orkneys, rounded Cape Wrath and sailed down the west coast of Scotland to Loch Linnhe, where we anchored

off Ballachulish. Here the cadets obtained valuable experience in handling boats under power and sail in the very strong tidal streams flowing in and out of Loch Leven.

By mid-July we were anchored off Torquay and from there moved out into the Channel to rendezvous with the 9th Cruiser Squadron of the Reserve Fleet for the Spithead Review. The other ships of our Squadron, *Effingham*, *Hawkins* and *Vindictive*, were all manned by Reservists and we now joined up with them for elementary manoeuvres. We then took under our wing the similarly manned 10th Cruiser Squadron (*Cardiff*, *Calypso*, *Caledon* and *Curacoa*). Steaming eastward in Line Ahead, the eight cruisers were joined by eight minesweeping sloops of the Reserve Fleet. The whole formation, led by Vice-Admiral Commanding Reserve Fleet (in *Effingham*), then steamed up through the Solent, keeping careful station, and took up their allotted berths for the Review. It was an impressive evolution and earned us a 'Manoeuvre Well Executed' signal from the Admiral.



9th and 10th Cruiser Squadrons followed by Flotilla of Minesweeping Sloops forming up for Royal Fleet Review, Spithead, 1935. Frobisher is 4th in line.

The Silver Jubilee Review of the Fleet at Spithead took place on 17th July 1935. King George V was in the Royal Yacht, *Victoria and Albert*, and the occasion was moving, spectacular and deeply memorable. The whole might of the Royal Navy (excluding the China, West Indies and Cape Cruiser Squadrons) was engaged, together with the big Ocean Liners representing the Mercantile Marine, many foreign warships and hundreds of yachts. They were ranged in parallel columns as far as the eye could see - with every vessel dressed overall and with their crews manning the side. Preceded by the Trinity House yacht *Patricia*, the beautiful and graceful Royal Yacht steamed down the line with her two bell-topped funnels gleaming, the Lord High Admiral's flag at the fore, the Royal Standard at the main, the Union Jack (flag of an Admiral of the Fleet) at the mizzen. As she did so, every ship in turn gave His Majesty three heartfelt and rousing cheers. Flag-signals then broke out

from every yard-arm, ordering the Fleet to weigh and proceed - and the whole vast array of battleships, cruisers, destroyers and sloops steamed out to sea in the wake of *Victoria and Albert*, led by Admiral of the Fleet, His Majesty, King George V. With the Fleet clear of the land, the Royal Yacht then turned about and passed down the lines at full speed, flying the signal, 'Splice the Main Brace'. H.M.S. *Frobisher* then broke off and headed for the French naval base at Brest, where we spent the last week of our final cruise. Here we got down in earnest to our Passing-Out examinations, both written and practical. These, so far as I can remember, comprised Seamanship, Navigation, Pilotage, Communications, Engineering, Gunnery, Torpedoes, Officer of the Watch and Divisional Duties. Rather to my surprise, I did quite well, and also won the Prize Essay. It was significant that every one of the top ten places was held by a 'Pub' (So much for the Dartmouth Entry!). Vacancies for Midshipmen in the Fleet - both at home and abroad - were promulgated before we broke up at Chatham in August. Six of us, who had habitually 'slung' in the airy

After Control Room, opted for the six vacancies in H.M.S. *Dragon*, preparing for her last commission on the America and West Indies Station, and were duly appointed.

Chapter 2: Midshipman, H.M.S. Dragon, 1935-7

After a wonderful leave between appointments I joined my new ship, H.M.S. Dragon, towards the end of August. Hitherto, as Cadets, we had been more or less 'on probation' in the Navy. True, we had been Officer Cadets, but that position had carried no authority, no permanence. A Cadet was not considered an officer. As fully-fledged Midshipmen, however, we were classed as 'subordinate officers' and were part of the working complement of the ship - with a whole range of ship's duties - and were paid five shillings a day. The six of us who had occupied the After Control position in the Training Cruiser (and made it our exclusive preserve) formed Dragon's whole complement of Midshipmen. Three of us were Canadians (Mids. Caldwell, Russel and Boak), belonging to the Royal Canadian Navy, one (Mid. Mackay) was a New Zealander, while the other two (Mid. Highton and I) were English. We shared the Gunroom with one Sub-Lieutenant (who was President of the Mess), one Sub-Lieutenant (E), one Paymaster-Midshipman and one Paymaster Cadet - ten of us in all.

H.M.S. *Dragon* was a Light Cruiser of 4,800 tons, built at the end of the Great War. She was armed with six 6" guns, three 4" High-Angle guns, two 'Pom-poms' and four 3-pdr. saluting-guns. She also carried twelve deck-mounted 21" torpedo-tubes. Six boilers powered two sets of turbines, each of which drove one propeller shaft, developing 40,000 h.p. at full power - and giving a speed of 29 knots. Her full complement was about 600, including some 30 officers all told. She was commissioning (for what we thought was to be the last time) to rejoin the America and West Indies Squadron. We were due to sail on the Monday morning (26th August).

At the time we joined, the end of August 1935, the international situation was deteriorating, with Mussolini becoming increasingly bellicose and intransigent over Abyssinia and Britain and France squaring up to him and demanding action from the League of Nations. Our Fleet in the Mediterranean was being steadily reinforced and most of the other cruisers of the Squadron were withdrawn from the Station, leaving *Dragon* to 'show the flag' in South America. Official visits by H.M. ships to foreign ports involved a high degree of ceremony and protocol, the detail of which was laid down meticulously in King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions (K.R. & A.I.), the Navy's bible. Knowledge of these details was part of a Naval Officer's stock-in-trade, and Midshipmen were expected to have it at their finger-tips. Flag-showing cruises and courtesy visits were intended to improve or consolidate friendly relations between Britain and her trading partners overseas - and, as was well known, 'trade followed the flag'. Although at this time our stock stood very high in all the South American countries, many of them were very 'touchy' in matters of national pride. It was therefore essential to the success of our mission that national susceptibilities should never be offended or appear to be slighted.

On entering the approaches to a foreign port for the first time, *Dragon* would hoist the national flag of the country concerned at the yard-arm and, with the ship's company smartly 'fallen in for entering harbour', and with the Royal Marine Band assembled, a 21-gun national salute would be fired. This would be returned with an equal number of guns, either by a warship of the host country or by a shore fort, or sometimes by a troop of field-guns lined up on the shore. If a foreign Admiral were present, his Flag would then be saluted with the appropriate number of guns (perhaps 17), depending on his rank, and that would be returned with the correct number of guns for a Post-Captain. As soon as we had berthed (or

anchored), a Lieutenant or Sub-Lieutenant would be sent off by boat as Officer of the Guard, wearing his sword, with ensign and pendant flying (often under sail or being 'pulled'), to call on the foreign warship both as a matter of courtesy and to fix up details of any further calls, e.g. between the ships' respective Captains. At the same time, British representatives at the port (Consul, Vice-Consul or a senior Embassy official) would board the ship to conduct the Captain on a round of formal calls on the various foreign dignitaries in the area (perhaps the State Governor, the Naval C-in-C, the Port Admiral, the Mayor and the Harbour Master -and possibly the British Ambassador).

Later in the day each of the Captain's calls would be returned. As the foreign dignitary approached the ship, a bugle or pipe would sound the 'Still', and as he mounted the gangway, the bugler would sound the 'Alert', all those on the quarter-deck solemnly saluting, while if the caller were a naval officer, he would be 'piped over the side'. A Royal Marine Guard with fixed bayonets might be drawn up for his inspection, and while this was in progress, the Band would strike up the appropriate tune to which his particular office or rank entitled him, 'Rule Britannia', 'Iolanthe' or 'The Garb of Old Gaul'. This sort of thing might be repeated half a dozen times or more during the course of the day, and in tropical conditions it called for a certain stamina on the part of all those assembled to receive the caller: the Guard, the Band, the Commander, the Officer of the Day, the two Midshipmen of the Watch, the Quartermaster, the Bugler, the Boatswain's Mate, the Gangway Sentry etc., all in full white uniform with swords, dirks and medals to the fore. If, as was often the case, the calls were made by boat with the ship at anchor, the Gangway Staff, supervised by the Midshipmen, was kept extremely busy, conducting the movement of the boats, ordering them to lie off (or at a boat-rope), and calling them alongside when required.

After a day or two the 'ceremonial' tended to fade out - but meanwhile the invitations had been flooding in: four officers for tennis, six officers for riding, eight officers for a cocktail party and dance, two officers for a week-end up-country, a cricket XI and a Rugger XV to play the locals, a sailing-race against the local Yacht Club, eight officers to play polo, all officers to be honorary members of the Country Club... and so on. It was made very clear to us Midshipmen that it was our duty to take up such invitations whether we liked them or not - and always to return the hospitality.

[This is a fascinating picture of British diplomacy and international protocol at the time, and it seems my father entered fully into the spirit of things.]

On one occasion we were visiting Buenos Aires at a time shortly after the death of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Jellicoe. On the Sunday, therefore, we had a ceremonial Church Parade to attend a Memorial Service being held for him in St. John's Pro-Cathedral. It entailed the whole Ship's Company marching through the streets of Buenos Aires with the Royal Marine Band playing.

Buenos Aires was a thriving city with a population, at that time, of over two million. Traffic was heavy even on a Sunday morning, and the streets were filled with cars and lorries. It was quite a long march from the naval dockyard to the Cathedral and my job was to go on ahead of the parade to warn the traffic police so that there would be no hold-ups. There were no traffic lights in those days, but at each street intersection a policeman wielding a white baton stood in a raised kiosk controlling the flow of traffic. My Spanish was none too good, but with some simple gesticulations and the words, 'El crucero ingles, Dragonne', I tried to

convey my message - to no avail. The policemen, though puzzled, ignored me, cars and lorries continued to speed across the intersection, and all the while the sound of the band and hundreds of marching feet grew louder and louder behind me. Something had to be done or there would be chaos. So, throwing caution to the winds, I drew my dirk and holding it at arm's length, marched into the centre of the road, faced the on-coming traffic, and mustering all the authority that I could, held up my left hand (with the dirk outstretched in my right) and brought the traffic to a standstill. I'm not sure who was the more astonished, the policeman or the motorists - or me! But it worked and the parade marched on. At each of the following intersections I repeated the procedure, the traffic police simply gaping at me, and the parade reached the Cathedral exactly on cue. In the circumstances, of course, it was the obvious thing to do - but it certainly impressed the officers, and after it was all over, I was summoned to the Wardroom and plied with drinks. *[High fives!]*

It will be apparent how fortunate we were, at the tender age of nineteen or so, to have visited so many countries and ports. Over a period of 21 months we made no less than 35 visits, ranging from Rio Plato in the south to Newfoundland in the north and embracing the whole of the Caribbean and the West Indies. We visited two ports in Newfoundland, four in Canada, three in the U.S.A., two in Mexico, one in Argentina, one in British Honduras, one in Uruguay, seven in Brazil and eleven in various islands of the West Indies, as well as visiting Bermuda nine times.

It might be thought, from the foregoing, that naval life consisted of little apart from 'fun and games'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sport, recreation and social activity were vital counter-weights to long days and nights of hard work, humdrum business and strenuous exercises. We were well aware that international relations were steadily deteriorating and that war was probably not far round the corner. Thus few opportunities were lost, on passage between ports or on ocean voyages, to practise our surface and air gunnery, multiple torpedo attacks, landing or boarding parties, emergency stations or damage-control exercises. Apart from that, the Midshipmen had very little spare time. They were watch-keeping at sea, and in harbour they were either 'day-on' or boat-running, while in normal working hours, whether at sea or in harbour, morning and afternoon, they were generally 'under instruction'. Occasionally, if there was a great deal of activity in the ship, or if we were required for other duties, 'Instruction' would be waived. But this was exceptional. In the ordinary course, our instruction would start in the Gunroom at 0900. At 1015 there would be 'Stand Easy' till 1030, followed by instruction in a different subject till 1130. In the afternoon there would be two periods, from 1315 till 'Stand Easy' at 1415 and from 1430 till 1530. The subjects in which we were instructed included Seamanship, Gunnery, Torpedo, Electrics, Engineering, Navigation, Pilotage, Wireless-telegraphy, Visual Signalling, Ship Construction, Mechanics, Mathematics, Meteorology and Modern Languages. The 'technical' subjects were normally taught by the ship's specialist officers, Warrant Officers or senior specialist ratings, while purely 'academic' subjects were the province of the Instructor Officer.

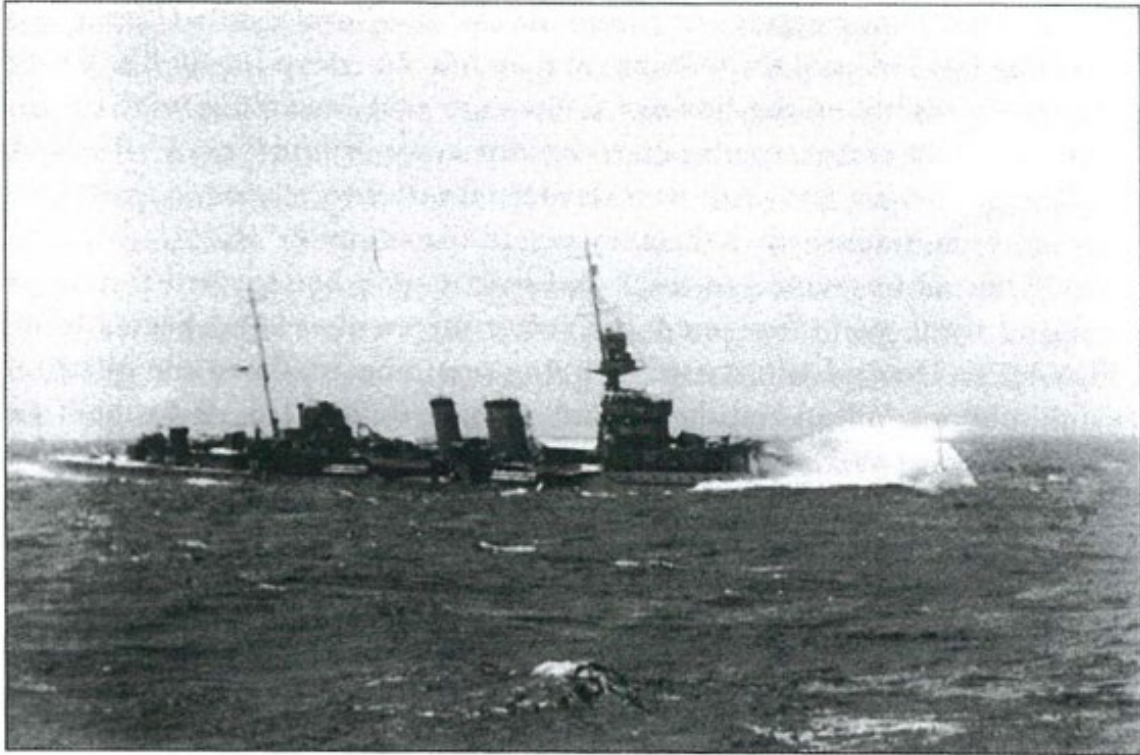
The purpose of our Instruction, apart from improving our professional knowledge, was to fit us for our Midshipmen's examination at the end of our two years, and for subsequent promotion. I may say that a Midshipman's all-round knowledge at that stage was pretty comprehensive, and probably superior to that of any other officer or rating, for the simple reason that officers, as they progressed in rank and experience, tended increasingly to concentrate on their own 'specialisations' and to put the groundwork behind them - while the

Petty Officers and Chief Petty Officers, while highly expert in their own particular fields, lacked the breadth of training which Midshipmen of the Executive Branch received.

By the beginning of 1936 *Dragon's* Midshipmen had all received job changes, and I found myself appointed Navigating Officer's Assistant (or 'Tanky'), a job I had rather hankered after. This involved me in all sorts of theoretical and practical work connected with astronomy, nautical charts and time. To ease the Navigator's relentless task at sea, I would set up the Star Globe (showing the bearing and altitude of all the visible stars and planets) prior to the taking of the morning and evening star-sights, record the exact time and altitude of each 'shot', back up the sights with sights of my own, check the Navigator's calculations, work out the time of Meridian Passage for noon sun-sights and the times of sunrise and sunset at the ship's expected positions, wind, check and rate the ship's three chronometers against one another, check and rate the deck-watches against the chronometers or radio time-signals, and keep the large outfit of charts corrected up to date from Admiralty Notices to Mariners. It was a demanding job but extremely interesting, and, moreover, it excused me from night watch-keeping!

[Fascinating – I must Google the 'Star Globe' and understand how this kind of navigation was done.]

While the ship was at sea, opportunity was seldom lost to carry out some form of gunnery or torpedo practice. Full calibre shoots normally required a Battle Practice Target (B.P.T), which would be towed by a tug, but 'Throw-off' shoots, whether full calibre or sub-calibre, could be carried out using the ship's boats, one of which would be sent away with a 'marking party' with a Midshipman in charge. H.A. shoots were often carried out against smoke-bursts or flares - or, if another ship were in company, against a kite flown by that ship, or sometimes against 'met' balloons. 'Repel Aircraft' - to exercise our close-range anti-aircraft weapons - could also be carried out using improvised targets, though a sleeve target towed by a seaplane was preferable. Practice torpedo attacks, using the ship's boats as targets, would often be carried out at Evening Quarters, and recovery of the 'spent' torpedoes became a standard task for the Midshipmen in the boats. For exercise purposes the torpedoes were fitted with 'practice warheads', which were buoyant, the main body of the torpedo having slight negative buoyancy. Thus, at the end of its run, a torpedo would be floating vertically, the tip of its orange-coloured practice-head just visible among the wave-crests. The Midshipman in charge of the sea-boat (a five-oared whaler) would direct the boat close up to the bobbing practice-head (being careful not to get too close, or the boat could be stove in), while the Torpedo Party in the bows would lean out, snatch a spring-hook on co the head-ring, slide a steel wire noose down the torpedo, and haul it up by the tail. With the torpedo securely lashed head-and-tail close alongside the boat, it would be rowed back to the ship and hoisted in. Torpedoes are extremely expensive weapons, and to lose one (which seldom happened) was to provoke an immediate Court of Inquiry.



Dragon working up to full power, West Atlantic, 1936

Perhaps the most dramatic and interesting of these war-practices was to exercise 'Night Encounter', a relatively frequent occurrence as it was the Captain's favourite exercise. It would take place, normally, during the First Watch - well after dark. About 2100 the cutter, equipped for sailing and carrying an Aldis-lamp and hurricane lantern, and with a crew of 16 and a Midshipman in charge, would be lowered to within about six feet of the wave-tops. The officer on deck would then order 'Out pins', and would watch for the approach of a high wave-crest before ordering 'Slip'. With luck, the heavy boat would fall smack on top of the wave. With the ship slowly forging ahead, towing the cutter by its boat-rope, the boat would sheer out under helm, slip the boat-rope and hoist sails. The Midshipman's orders from the Captain would be to steer a certain compass-course for an hour - and show no lights. The ship, meanwhile, would gather speed and soon be lost to sight, perhaps her masthead steaming-lights being occasionally visible on the horizon as the cutter breasted a big wave. It was really rather an eerie experience to be cast away in mid-ocean on a dark night, with nothing but one's own slender resources to rely on - apart from a supreme confidence that the ship would somehow be able to find one again. The ocean seemed so huge and menacing when viewed from sea level, and if the wind freshened, the cutter surged ahead and heeled more and more to leeward and started shipping seas inboard. Then the question was: should one luff up and shorten sail, or press on and risk it? As the hour approached and there was darkness on all sides, had the ship lost us? We would get ready to light the hurricane lantern to illuminate our mainsail -when suddenly a star shell would burst in the sky, far away on our beam, followed by another and another, slowly falling on their little parachutes and lighting up the whole wide ocean, silhouetting the cutter to the eyes of those on the ship's bridge and calling forth two blinding white rays as the great searchlights opened on us. The exercise would then be a success. We would be considered 'sunk'. But it was not always so. Sometimes, due to erratic steering, a drastic change in wind-direction or

a faulty boat's compass, the ship would fail to find us. Our Aldis light would then be shone and it would be the Middle Watch before we were recovered.

The last days of October 1936 were spent in the West Indies but were later dominated by the grounding on coral reefs of a large Spanish liner (S.S. *Cristobal Colon*) off the north end of some outlying islands of Bermuda. Together with the dockyard tugs, *Dragon* did her utmost to tow the ship off. For four days we tried in every way we could, but the liner was impaled amidships on a transverse ridge, her double-bottom badly holed, her hull making water, and beginning to break up under the pounding of the sea. We were conscious throughout of undertones of the Spanish Civil War, then in its fourth month. The ship flew the Republican ensign and was on her way to Latin America with a cargo of coal to exchange for munitions of war. Her officers were incompetent and the crew rebellious. Her ownership was in doubt and salvage costs unlikely to be met. After enormous expenditure in effort and material, it was decided by the Governor to abandon the ship. Our Royal Marines stood by in case of mutiny, and the crew were removed in the ship's boats to a disused barracks ashore, together with their personal belongings. Slowly the lights dimmed, as water crept up to the ship's generators and, with a wisp of steam curling from her funnel, *Cristobal Colon* gradually died - forlorn and abandoned.

By January 1937 we were once more in the West Indies, and after an energetic but highly enjoyable time in Jamaica, we steamed westwards to one of its dependencies, the Cayman Islands. Here we spent a week, heavily involved in the Annual Regatta for the local schooners - beautifully built ships of up to 130 tons - mainly employed on the turtle trade with Honduras and Nicaragua. Some of us were fortunate enough to participate in the races, and I shall never forget the unique experience, and the excitement, of sailing in the brand-new schooner, *A.M. Adams* of 120 tons (the Caymanian favourite) against the highly unpopular reigning champion, *Goldfield*. They were the only two ships in the 100-ton Class 'A'. The race was to be over a 35-mile triangular course and the wind was a fresh north-easterly. It was a superb exhibition of old-fashioned seamanship, motivated by supreme ambition and intense personal animosity between the two ships' Captains. After narrowly averting a collision with *Goldfield* (which had suddenly luffed and crossed our bows, drawing forth a volley of abuse from our skipper), a formal 3-course hot luncheon was served on the roof of the after cabin. This was preceded by the Captain solemnly reciting a long and involved Grace while the race continued. A second sitting followed, at which Grace was said by the Mate. Meanwhile the two ships, having rounded the first mark with *Goldfield* slightly in the lead, were now racing neck and neck on the beat to windward. We rounded the second mark just ahead of our rival, and led her all the way down the 7-mile reach to the finish, crossing the line a mere 15 seconds ahead of her. Great were the shouts of joy and triumph as *Goldfield* was beaten, but they were short-lived. A signal to the Regatta Committee pronounced *Goldfield* the winner - on *time*! Everyone was astonished, including the two ships' Captains, neither of whom was aware that they had been racing against time.

From the Cayman Islands we set course to the south-westward for a speck on the chart labelled 'Swan Islands', 150 miles away. Our mission was 'hush-hush', but the purpose of it gradually unfolded. As dawn broke, we peered ahead with binoculars, seeking vainly for the islands, till suddenly the masthead lookout cried 'Land-ho on the port beam!' We'd damned near missed them! Rounding up to approach from the south-westward, we anchored in the only possible place, at the S.W. end of Big Swan. It was a 'fairytale' desert island that we beheld, with a fine white sandy beach fringed with a profusion of coconut palms growing

right down to the water's edge. To the right of the beach was a stone jetty with a flagstaff, from which - lo and behold! - flew the Stars and Stripes. Our mission was to lay claim to, and annex, the islands on behalf of the British Crown, their handful of inhabitants being exclusively Caymanians. While the Headman (and virtual owner of the islands) came off to see the Captain, I took the motor-boat in with some officers, and was fortunate to get ashore myself. The scene was idyllic, quieter and more peaceful than anything I'd experienced, and I was overwhelmed by its beauty and tranquillity. The only sounds, apart from the rustle of the wind in the palm trees, were the cackle of a few hens and the neighing of a nearby horse. I met one or two of the inhabitants, who had no idea what power, if any, claimed the islands, and who told me that the only reason they flew the American flag was that it was the only flag they had! (This was soon rectified: with our gift of a large Union Jack flying from their flagstaff, our captain was able to report 'Mission Accomplished'.)

By now, in 1937, the situation in Europe was causing mounting concern - in particular the blatant intervention of Germany and Italy in the Spanish Civil War. In the light of this, Britain had initiated a massive rearmament programme including the compression into two years of a ship-building programme that had been intended to extend over ten. As a result of this, two new modern cruisers, *Apollo* and *Ajax*, arrived on the Station and *Dragon* became obsolete. It had been decided that she should return to the U.K. and pay off into Reserve.

First, however, the Coronation of the new King, George VI, was to take place on May 12th, and all the ceremonies and celebrations marking the event had to be organised and prepared. The Squadron was to disperse from Bermuda to other parts of the Station to take up their duties as Guardships for the local ceremonies. *Dragon* was to go to Antigua before returning home, while *York* was to remain as Guardship at Hamilton, just across the Sound. Two days before the ships were to disperse, a Mr. Mackay, the owner of a magnificent yacht, invited *Dragon* to allow three of her young midshipmen to sail home in her with him.

This was one of those 'opportunities of a lifetime' which was simply not to be missed. Our Captain reacted with enthusiasm: 'It'll teach those young snotties a thing or two about seamanship - do 'em a power of good,' is apparently what he said. But permission had to be sought from the C-in-C, and even confirmed by the Admiralty. Meanwhile lots were drawn among our 'Executive' midshipmen for the three preferred places, and as it turned out they fell on Michael Highton, Pat Russel and me. (This was true justice, as the others had already enjoyed some long leave in Canada, whereas we three had had none for nearly two years).

Approval came through from the C-in-C the day before the ships dispersed - and after some hurried packing up and farewells to friends and shipmates, we three were transferred to the flagship for our last week in Bermuda. We were quite sad to wave goodbye to good old *Dragon* and to the others, as they steamed out of the Sound (*Dragon* flying her long paying-off pennant from the masthead), but we were soon absorbed in *York*'s multifarious preparations for the Coronation ceremonies. As regards ship's duties, I found myself Mid. of the Day to start with, and Mid. of the Motor Boat shortly afterwards. On the 10th May, *York* proceeded across to Hamilton, where she moored close in front of the prestigious Royal Bermuda Yacht Club.

The following evening a big Dance was held on board, attended by all the local elite and a great many Americans. The whole town was in festive mood, with flags and bunting, coats-of-arms and decorated arches every-where, all the yachts and ships dressed overall by day

and ablaze with lights at night, and crowds of people singing and merry-making in the streets.

On Coronation Day the main event was a magnificent Parade, 21-gun salute, and March Past by the Navy and Army before H.E. the Governor, with massed bands of the Royal Marines and the Sherwood Foresters - and attended by huge crowds all 'dressed up to the nines'. It was a most impressive performance, which lasted all morning and was hugely appreciated by the thousands of spectators, among whom were hundreds of Americans who had come to Bermuda for the big occasion. It was followed, in the afternoon, by a big Garden Party at Government House, attended by everyone of note (including, of course, ourselves!)

This was our last day in Bermuda, and it was rounded off in unforgettable style by the Coronation Ball at the famous 'Bermudiana' Hotel, where 500 tables had been reserved for private parties. Mr. Mackay, in whose schooner, the *Elk*, we were due to set out for England the next day, invited the three of us to join his party, starting with drinks on board the yacht. There followed a truly unforgettable evening of drinking, dining, and dancing in the superb surroundings of that magnificent hotel, with four or five dance bands playing in different rooms and another one out on the lawn. So ended Coronation Day in Bermuda, a fitting end to the many happy and eventful days we had spent there.

On Thursday the 13th of May we set sail for England in the 180-ton schooner, *Elk*, in which her owner, Mr. Mackay, had been cruising in the West Indies. His wife and two daughters had quailed at the Atlantic crossing and opted instead for a safer and more comfortable passage in S.S. *Orbita*, so we three midshipmen were allotted their quite sumptuous quarters. The yacht was 131 ft. in length with a 24 ft. beam, and carried, with all sails set, 7,500 sq. ft. of canvas. She also had powerful auxiliary engines. Her crew consisted of Master, Mate, Boatswain, Chief Engineer, Cook, Chief Steward, Steward, Assistant Engineer and six Able Seamen - 14 in all, plus the owner and us three passengers.

The very last thing we wanted, of course, was to be regarded as passengers (and that was far from our Captain's intention). It was quickly agreed, therefore, that we should be auxiliary members of the crew, and also that we should back up the Master's astro-navigation. For the first seven days of the voyage we were close-hauled and beating to windward while endeavouring to sail a Great Circle course. *Elk* was carrying jib, fore-stays'l, fores'l and mains'l and, with the help of the auxiliary motor, was making good about seven knots. We would have preferred to do without the engine. Not only did it interfere with the yacht's natural motion and with the way the sails drew, but it also caused an appreciable amount of vibration. However, the owner was keen to get home as quickly as he could. After a week the weather changed. The wind dropped and the sky cleared, and with just a vestige of S.W.'ly breeze, we hoisted the balloon jib in lieu of the jib and stays'l. The following day we encountered a heavy beam swell from the N.W. and, to take advantage of the slight westerly breeze, we took in the balloon jib and hoisted the large squares'l on the foremast (which was equipped with a wide yard for the purpose). Annoyingly, however, we were still using the wretched engine.

Meanwhile we three were 'pulling our weight' - literally! - pulling and hauling with the seamen when sails were changed, taking 'tricks' at the wheel (and *Elk* certainly handled beautifully), and doubling up on the Master's star-sights and sun-sights. We never did find out what

method he used to calculate his position lines (it certainly wasn't the Marc-St. Hilaire method, at which we were adept), and we began to trust our own fixes more than his. But these were lazy days for us, and when not sleeping, drinking or eating, we spent much of our time reading and sun-bathing.

[I Googled Marc-St. Hilaire, and was introduced to the world of classical nautical navigation.]

However, on the ninth day of our voyage the weather broke and we awoke to a grey, tumbling ocean surging up in white, foam-capped waves under a leaden, rain filled sky with a strong south-westerly wind. The time had come to revert to our original rig and to dispense with the motor. We were now running with the wind on our port quarter with all sails drawing well, and bowling along merrily. This was really sailing, and, with a heavy following sea lifting our transom high in the air, skilled helmsmanship was needed to prevent the schooner from broaching to.

The weather steadily deteriorated and by nightfall we were driving before a full gale, lee scuppers under and decks awash, making an incredible twelve knots. It was a most exhilarating sensation, sails bellying forward, rigging bar-taut, masts and booms bending, seas cascading over the decks and hatches, and the gale howling through the rigging. It couldn't last. Lashings were beginning to be carried away, and at dawn all hands were called on deck to shorten sail. We took in the mains'l, all 2,300 ft. of it. It was a hell of a job and it took us over an hour to get it in, some of us being nearly washed overboard in the process. Later on we set the squares'l again, and the following day took it in again and set the main tris'l. This was the pattern of life for several days as the wind shifted from one quarter to another. We had little peace, and were frequently soaked to the skin by breaking seas or sudden rainsqualls.

After a fortnight's sailing the wind shifted again and blew steadily from the south, so we re-set the mains'l, hoisted the main-tops'l, and with the fores'l, forestays'l and jib already set, we were carrying more sail than ever before. As we reached along at a good eleven to twelve knots, we must have looked a magnificent sight. After 15 days we sighted our first landfall, the Bishop's Rock Lighthouse, and next day (26th May) we reached Hythe, near Southampton. We were home!



The yacht, Elk, sailing home from Bermuda, 1937

What a memorable voyage that was, and what a unique experience! We would recall it for the rest of our lives. We got in on a Friday and travelled up to London by train. How marvellously fresh and green the English countryside looked after all those months abroad! We had forgotten how beautiful our own country looked, being sated with the exotic attractions across the Atlantic.

[I love this description of England, one that I have echoed on many occasions.]

[But my grandparents did not stay at Tumbly for very long, as they moved to Legbourne in 1938 – I'm not sure of the reasons why.]

Chapter 3: Midshipman, H.M.S. Southampton, 1937

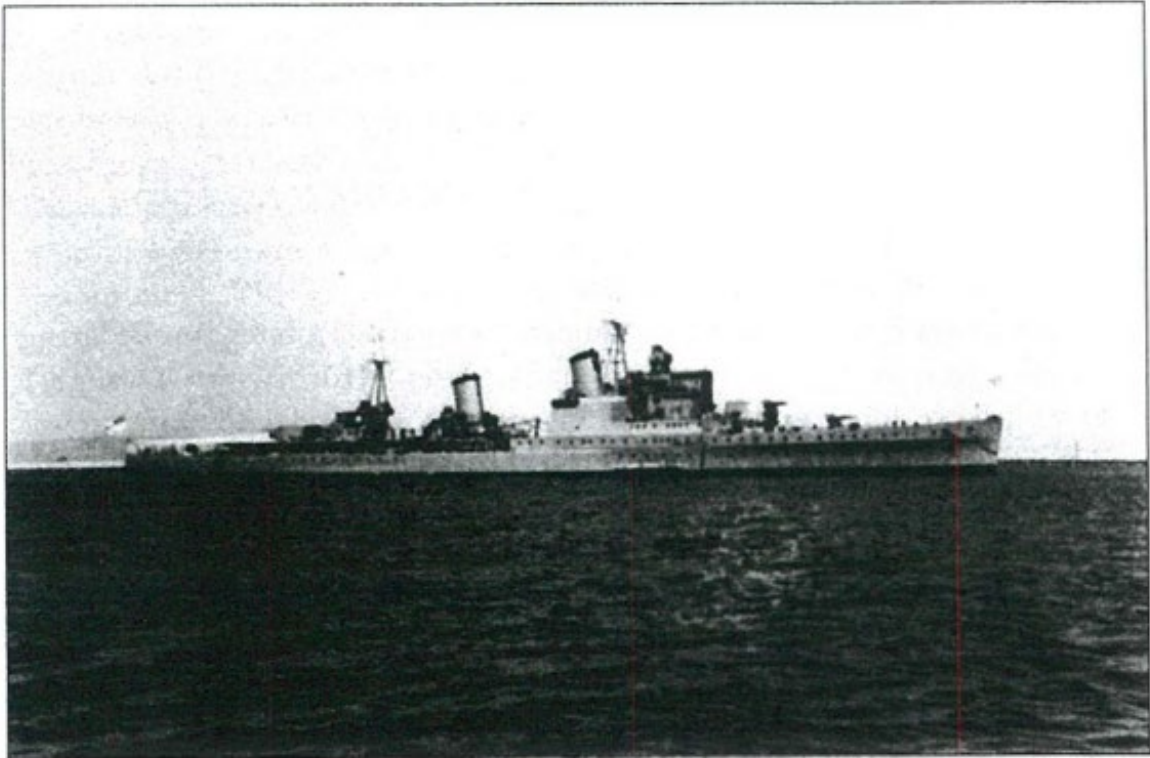
A week after our arrival in England I received a telegram ordering me to join H.M.S. *Southampton* at Portland - 'forthwith'. Though I could well have done with a bit more leave, this was indeed terrific news. *Southampton* was our very latest cruiser, the first of the new 10,000-ton heavy cruisers of the 'Southampton' class, and the Flagship of the 2nd Cruiser Squadron. I got down there the same evening and was delighted to find that my old friend Michael Highton was joining the ship with me. Arriving on board, we were confronted by the First Lieutenant, who peremptorily inquired why we had not sought permission to join p.m.! (The convention is that on taking up a new appointment, one should do so before 9 a.m.). We had evidently attached too much urgency to the word 'forthwith', and would have done better to have put ourselves up in Weymouth for the night.

The first thing I discovered was that I was Senior Midshipman, so I had to start taking over the duties of that office. Compared with *Dragon*, the ship was so large and modern that it needed time and effort just to get used to it. The Gunroom, which was designed for eight, was rather over-crowded. We now had a complement of two Sub-Lieutenants, two Paymaster-Midshipmen and eight Executive Midshipmen. However, we gradually 'shook down' and had a useful run up through the North Sea in company with our sister ship, *Newcastle*, before mooring two days later in the Firth of Forth.

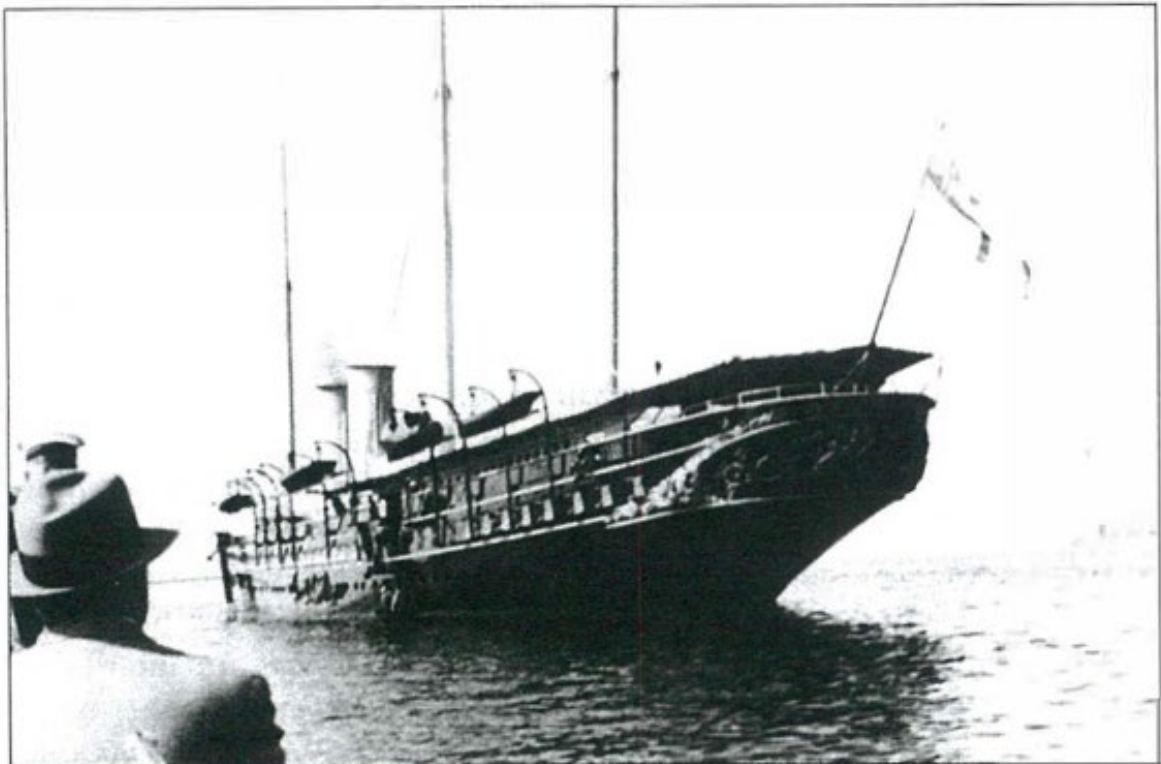
For the rest of June and the first half of July it was exercises, exercises, exercises - surface and anti-aircraft gunnery practices, and drills of every kind - all designed to bring the new squadron up to a reasonable pitch of war-readiness. Some of these practices were carried out in the North Sea and some in the S.W. approaches to the English Channel, where large-scale Trade Defence and Coastal Defence exercises were mounted by the Home Fleet in conjunction with the R.A.F. and other services. In interludes between successive phases of intense activity, *Southampton*, together with many other units of the Fleet, usually anchored in Weymouth Bay or Torbay.

There was a lot for us to work up. We had the very latest weapon-systems, with highly sophisticated control arrangements: 12 6"-guns in 4 turrets as main armament, 8 4"-guns in 4 mountings as anti-aircraft armament, and, for close defence, 2 0.5" multi-machine guns and 2 2-pdr. pom-poms with 4 barrels on each. We also carried 6 torpedoes in 2 triple-mountings and 3 'Walrus' amphibian seaplanes, which could be launched either side by an athwartships catapult. During our first full-calibre shoot at a Battle Practice target, we found our main 6" guns surprisingly accurate and capable of a high rate of fire. We also found our aircraft of enormous value in a reconnaissance role - particularly during the Trade Defence exercise.

On 28th July, in perfect weather, the King and Queen crossed from Scotland to Northern Ireland in the Royal Yacht, escorted there and back by a force of cruisers and destroyers led by *Southampton* - an impressive and memorable occasion.



Southampton, flagship of 2nd Cruiser Squadron, 1937



Victoria & Albert awaiting the King and Queen for passage to Northern Ireland (with heavy naval escort), Loch Ryan, 1937

Soon after these events, I was granted 16 days' summer leave - the first decent whack I'd had in two years - and spent most of it at my parents' home, Tumby Chase. On returning to Chatham, I was sent to undergo two weeks' 'destroyer-time' on two different ships, H.M.S. *Wishart* and H.M.S. *Wanderer*. *Wishart* was an Improved 'W' -Class destroyer, day-running in the Thames Estuary with seamen's training classes, and doubling as Emergency Destroyer for the Nore Command. She was based in the stream, just below Chatham, and usually picked up her training classes at Sheerness. Apart from a Lieutenant-Commander in command, she had no executive commissioned officers, and was under-manned in all departments. This meant that we midshipmen were given far more responsibility than we had enjoyed hitherto, becoming Officer of the Watch at sea, Officer of the Day in harbour, and Duty Commanding Officer at week-ends. In addition we took charge of all boat-lowering and hoisting operations during sea training. After a week we transferred to H.M.S. *Wanderer*, another 'W'-Class destroyer, which was working week-and-week about with *Wishart*. We completed our second week's destroyer-time in her.

A few days after we had re-joined *Southampton*, she sailed north for a concentrated period of exercises with other ships of the Home Fleet in the Cromarty Firth, operating out of Invergordon. *Southampton* had now been fitted with two radio-controlled pilotless seaplanes for use in anti-aircraft 'throw-off' shoots. They were known as 'Queen Bees'. We also had a bevy of R.A.F. and civilian 'experts' on board to control them. The day came when we were to launch 'Queen Bee' No.1 for the edification and exercise of the Fleet's A.A. gunners. Off it went, zooming into the sky and performing all kinds of spectacular manoeuvres, which gradually became more and more alarming. From the worried frowns on the faces of the experts' and their frantic knob-twiddling, we very soon deduced that all was not well. Eventually, as the plane began a series of inverted 'loops' and adopted an upside-down posture in flight, the experts announced that she was 'out of control' - whereupon 'Queen Bee' No.1 went into a tight spin and dived into the sea! We retrieved what was left of the wreckage and a few hours later we launched 'Queen Bee' No.2. This one did everything she was required to do: high-level runs, passing-runs, low-level runs and dive-bombing attacks. On each of these manoeuvres she was met by a thunderous hail of fire from the Fleet. The decibel count was certainly impressive; less so was the accuracy of the gunfire. As it died away, the 'Queen Bee' flew off. It continued to do so till it was not only out of range, but out of radio contact too. Its automatic emergency gear then took over and it crash-landed in the sea, buckling up both its floats as it did so. (Verdict on the day by the C-in-C: 'Thoroughly unsatisfactory. An inquiry will be held.')

Towards the end of September it was decided to send the ship's drifter down to Chatham. (Every major warship had its own steam drifter, manned by herself, lovingly cared for, and used as her tender). Ours was named *Lunar Bow*. Our Sub-Lieutenant (C.D. Madden) was put in command, and I and Roger Keyes (son of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes) were the two Midshipmen appointed as his officers. We sailed from Invergordon on the Monday evening, and on the Wednesday we put in to Hartlepool for coal and fresh water. Carrying on to the southward, we encountered a lot of fog and, during my Middle Watch, some hair-raising moments when we got in among a huge fishing fleet, the myriad lights of which were quite bewildering. Whenever we passed a light-ship we closed it, passed over newspapers and magazines and took off any mails, and in daylight hours we sometimes did a little bartering with passing trawlers for fresh fish. We entered Great Yarmouth on the Thursday evening on a full flood tide - and narrowly escaped being thrown against the breakwater.

Here we spent a glorious night among the fleshpots. Next day we had trouble with our navigation - caused, I discovered, by the Navigating Officer misapplying the effects of Variation and Deviation to our compass course! However, as much by good luck as by good management, we got into Sheerness that night and were safely moored up in Chatham by noon on the Saturday (October 2nd) in time for week-end leave.

We were now to become directly involved in the Spanish Civil War. Because General Franco's Insurgents were being more or less openly backed by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, whereas the Spanish Government enjoyed the sympathy of Britain and France, there was an increasing risk that these four Powers would be drawn into open conflict, thereby precipitating another European War. Already there had been an alarming number of 'incidents' (accidental or contrived) involving attacks on the warships of these countries, and this had driven the four Powers to conclude a Non-Intervention Pact. One of the provisions of this was the setting up of an International Naval Patrol (known as the Nyon Patrol). It involved the warships of Italy and Germany patrolling the coasts of Government-held territory, while those of Britain and France patrolled those of Franco-held territory.

Practically the whole of Northern Spain (except a small part of Asturias) was by this time held by the Insurgents, and this sector was allotted to Britain to patrol. When we rejoined *Southampton* at Sheerness on 8th October, we found that her 'B' and 'X' turrets had been painted over in huge red, white and blue stripes to indicate her nationality in unmistakable terms to marauding aircraft of either side. It also served to remind us, as we sailed next day for the Patrol Area, that we were now (for the first time in our lives) on Active Service. We took over command of the Patrol from the Rear Admiral commanding 2nd Battle Squadron in H.M.S. *Resolution*, and headed for our forward base at St. Jean de Luz. Here we made final preparations for Rear Admiral Calvert (CS2) to co-ordinate the patrol work of the four destroyers placed under his command: *Fearless*, *Foxhound*, *Electra* and *Escort*.

On 15th October we went into War Routine, with all armament closed up with live ammunition, extra-large ensigns at peak and fore, colours flood-lit, and sailed for the Patrol Area. Gijon and Aviles in Asturia were under heavy bombardment, at least six British merchant-ships were trying to evade the Insurgent naval blockade to get into the ports with relief supplies, and Franco's naval forces - notably the cruiser *Almirante Cervera* and the minelayers *Vulcano* and *Jupiter*, were ready to pounce on them as soon as they crossed the 3-mile limit of territorial waters. We were faced with a very tricky situation, which hung on the strict observance and interpretation of International Law.

As *Almirante Cervera* was in charge of the Insurgent naval forces in the area, we deemed it prudent to establish a polite working relationship with her - and cordial messages were exchanged with her at intervals, often at close quarters. The first incident we had to contend with was the arrest of a French merchant-ship by a Spanish armed trawler on the very edge of the 3-mile limit. We reported this to the French naval authorities at Brest, who immediately despatched two of their latest destroyers (*Le Fantasie* and *L' Audacieux*, as well as a third, *Le Terrible*). We kept them informed of the situation as they steamed at high speed through the Bay of Biscay during the night, and next morning they secured the release of the merchantman (which the Spanish maintained had simply been held 'for examination').

A few days later, while Gijon was being pounded to rubble by land and air, a potentially dangerous situation arose. A British merchant-ship, S.S. *Stangrove*, was arrested by an

Insurgent armed trawler off Punta Coin. She had an International Observer on board and made frantic S.O.S. signals protesting that she had been five miles outside territorial waters when captured. She was carrying about 600 refugees, whom she had embarked at Gijon during the night, though these included a good many fleeing Government troops.

Southampton closed the *Stangrove* and her captor at high speed to interrogate her, while *Almirante Cervera* circled round us. Both the ship's Master and the International Observer (who had been on the bridge with him at the time of capture) confirmed her position as 12 miles E.N.E. of Cape Torres (which would put her about five miles outside territorial waters), whereas the armed trawler swore she was only 2½ miles off Punta Coin. *Almirante Cervera* had not been present at the time of capture, but arrived on the scene with all haste and declared that when she had got there, both ships were within two miles of the shore. Our Admiral did not consider that this was good enough and he was faced with the dilemma of accepting one man's word against another's. If he gave in to the Spanish cruiser, he would be consigning hundreds of Asturian refugees to an appalling fate, whereas if he resisted the capture, he could well provoke a trial of strength between British and Spanish warships, and, at best, a serious international incident.

[But he did the right thing!]

Ordering the destroyer *Foxhound* to join us at full speed, the Admiral signalled the *Almirante Cervera* that he felt obliged to escort *Stangrove* to safety and ordered the British merchantman to follow *Southampton* to seaward. Not unnaturally, the Spaniard protested volubly: 'I strongly protest at your intervention in favour of ship captured inside territorial waters, having on board certain combatants ... who cannot be protected by invocation of humanitarian principles. I will inform my Government and will wireless it for general knowledge.'

[I say, 'high fives' – humanitarian principles triumphed over the 'serious international incident'.]

Meanwhile both the cruiser and the armed trawler increased speed and started manoeuvring round us in threatening fashion. At this juncture we were electrified by the bugle-call 'Action Stations' (the first time many of us had ever heard it - hitherto it had always been preceded by the call 'For Exercise...')

The result was a real 'eye-opener'. A tremendous cheer resounded through the ship as the sailors, many of them crowded on the upper deck watching the proceedings, scurried off to their various stations, all too aware that this might be the 'real thing'. In a matter of seconds all quarters had reported 'Closed up and cleared away'. I had never seen so much radiant good humour and enthusiasm in so many men at the same time. All guns were loaded with live ammunition, and turrets, torpedo tubes and guns trained and elevated through full arcs to show our adversary that we were ready for anything. The sense of crisis was hardly bearable.

[What an amazing description of a ship's company getting ready for battle! It is so vivid, my father must have felt this so keenly, and remembered it so clearly.]

Gradually the Spaniards fell astern as we drew *Stangrove* steadily towards Bordeaux and imperceptibly the tension ebbed away. After midnight we reverted to Night Defence Stations, left *Stangrove* to proceed independently, and returned at high speed to the Gijon area. The

town had fallen. Thousands of refugees were streaming out of the port in hundreds of small boats, drifters and trawlers, trying to reach the small cluster of British merchant-ships lying just outside the 3-mile limit. *Foxhound* and *Fearless* were standing by, and the sea was littered with abandoned vessels whose occupants had already reached the safety of our half-dozen off-lying merchantmen. Meanwhile the Spanish warships were weaving in and out between the desperate little craft, rounding them up, firing upon them when they resisted, capturing them and herding them off in batches. The minelayer *Jupiter* was charging around as though she had completely lost her head, asking us to remove our ships from the scene, and admitting that the situation was 'out of control'.

Thousands of refugees, many of them armed Asturian soldiers, had succeeded in rowing, paddling or swimming off to the British ships, which, when full up, headed off towards Bordeaux, though not without considerable harassment en route from the *Almirante Cervera*. (She, meanwhile, true to her word, had broadcast to the world her version of the *Stangrove* incident, with a stinging denunciation of *Southampton's* breach of neutrality!) As the tragic day drew to its close, with thousands rescued but many thousands more killed, drowned or captured, we withdrew from the scene and returned to St. Jean de Luz. It had been an enthralling week.

A storm blew up over the week-end, and we had little respite, finding it better to go to sea again and ride the storm than lie rolling heavily at anchor. Soon we were at work again, having encountered a small steamer packed with some 50 wretched refugees, stinking to high heaven, whom we hauled aboard (tending to their manifold needs) before sinking their ship by gunfire. Next day we sighted another craft, an open boat, riding the huge seas many miles from land, and containing another 30 refugees, nearly all soldiers, but including a girl of about 17 and an older woman. The boat was laden with rifles, machine-guns and pistols, most of them loaded, which we threw into the sea. They had been adrift without food or water for a full week, were in an advanced state of despair and exhaustion, and had intended to shoot themselves that night if help had not come to them. We went straight back to St. Jean de Luz to land this lot and next day put up one of our aircraft to search for more refugees, calling in *Electra* and *Escort* to assist.

Early on 26th October we sighted a small steamer of about 200 tons flying the Republican flag and crammed to the gunwales with about 300 Asturian soldiers, as well as a handful of women and children. Hauling this lot on board was a hazardous task but we managed it without mishap, although there was a number of wounded, sick and injured among them. Hundreds of small-arms were removed from them and unceremoniously consigned to the deep - after which we placed a depth-charge with a time-fuse in the steamer's bunker and blew her to smithereens (a highly spectacular event). Further systematic searching throughout the day revealed nothing more, so we steamed off to La Pallice to land our thankful passengers.



300 defeated Republicans adrift in the Bay of Biscay without food or water for a week, 1937. They were rescued by Southampton.

By the end of the month our 'Spain Patrol' was virtually over, and after a further visit to La Pallice we re-joined the Home Fleet at Portland. There followed a fortnight of intensive drills, exercises and inspections before we returned to Chatham, and there Michael Highton and I successfully passed our Promotion Exams and pushed off on Long Leave for the rest of the year. So ended our two years and three months as Midshipmen. It had been quite an experience!

[Such a compelling and fascinating description of the part my father played in the Spanish Civil War, rescuing prisoners and refugees – saving many lives.]

Chapter 4: Subs' Courses at Portsmouth; Sub-Lieutenant, H.M.S. Franklin, 1938, and H.M.S. Scarborough, 1939

On New Year's Day 1938 I was promoted to Acting Sub-Lieutenant and appointed to H.M.S. *Excellent*, the Gunnery School at Whale Island, Portsmouth. After a month's Foreign Service Leave with my parents at Tumbly Chase, I motored down there in my little red sports car and, on arrival, drove straight ahead across the Parade Ground. Halfway across, I became aware of shrill whistle-blasts from several directions, followed by the unnerving sight of an irate Gunner's Mate rushing towards me with his hand aloft. I stopped. 'Watcher thinkya doin' - sir?' he asked. 'Joining', I replied. 'Not that way, you don't - sir,' he answered, 'Dontcha know cars is not allowed on the Parade Ground?' 'Sorry,' I said, 'No, I didn't know'. Well, the upshot of that was that I was placed on a charge and ordered to double three times round the Island - my first taste of the notorious 'Whaley Discipline'!

We had embarked on the first round of our 'Subs' Courses'. These embraced all the main professional subjects in which we were required to qualify before we could be promoted to Lieutenant. They comprised a wide range, including Gunnery, Torpedo and Electrics, Mining and Minesweeping, Navigation and Pilotage, and Communications. Passes in these subjects, as the outcome of rigorous concluding examinations, were graded as 1sts, 2nds and 3rds. The grade achieved in a given subject determined whether the candidate would be allowed, or required, to specialise in that subject. Thus to become a specialist Gunnery Officer (not a prospect that attracted me), it would be essential to obtain a '1st' in Gunnery on completion of one's Sub's course in that subject, after which, in two or three years' time, one would be called back to Whale Island for the Long 'G' Course.

For our Subs' Course we were split into Groups of 15-20 young officers, a mixture of Dartmouth and ex-Special Entry, and we stayed in these Groups for all the courses. We were in 'U' Group. In general, we were appointed to, and accommodated in, the 'School' (or H.Q.) of the particular specialization responsible for our course of instruction. Thus for the first few months we were in H.M.S. *Excellent*, for the next period in H.M.S. *Vernon* (Torpedo and Electrics), and for the final months in H.M.S. *Dryad* (Navigation and Pilotage) - all these shore establishments at Portsmouth being known as 'stone frigates'.

At Whale Island our 'cabins' were in wooden huts, rather reminiscent of temporary barrack-blocks, but well-equipped, furnished, with all 'mod. cons.', and pleasantly warm. In comparison with the sea-going accommodation (Gunroom and slung hammocks) that we had been used to for three and a half years, it was really luxurious, particularly as during the day we lived in the quite 'splendiferous' Officers' Mess. There was a very special atmosphere about *Excellent* (Motto: '*Si vis pacem, para bellum*') - with a tangible 'Esprit de Corps'. The Gunnery fraternity certainly regarded themselves, not without reason, as the Navy's elite. After all, they felt themselves to be the 'cutting edge' of Britain's 'sure shield', the teeth to the British Lion.

The Gunnery Course was extremely interesting and also very strenuous. Quite apart from the technical complexities of the many different weapon systems and control systems and their munitions, and the theoretical and practical aspects of their use in different circumstances, we had to familiarise ourselves with the whole theory of ballistics and its applications. We also had to work the weapons themselves by participating in the repetitive

gun-drills associated with each. We also spent lengthy periods on ceremonial parade-ground drill, including taking full charge of the parades, arms drills and movements of men on the march - and woe betide us if any slip-up on parade could fairly be laid at our own door! Then there were the repeated practices for the 'Brickwood Trophy', involving competing teams of gun- and gun-carriage crews racing to man-handle their heavy artillery across imaginary chasms, a truly frantic, hair-raising, and utterly exhausting business, though tempered with a wonderful spirit of good humoured camaraderie.

We moved about the Island, from one activity to the next, as a Group, on the march and usually 'at the double'. I remember one alarming occasion, as we came to the Officers' Mess for dinner, when our Group was suddenly confronted by a full-grown African lion. "U' Group About Turn - Double March!" yelled the Sub in charge, and we reversed course and sped like lightning from the scene. ('Whaley' prided itself on its zoo, in which there were several lions. This one had escaped but was soon recaptured with the aid of a huge net).

Gunnery Officers were not a popular breed - though they were admired. Their special qualities of ruthlessness, assertiveness, self-assurance and leadership were not to everyone's taste, invaluable though they were to the profession and to the Senior Service itself. It was frequently said that the main reason why anyone chose to be a Gunnery Officer was that he would never have to serve with another one! Certainly it was not a specialisation that appealed to me, fascinating though its technicalities were. My heart was not really in it, and for that reason I feared I might well fail the final examination. I therefore put in an inordinate amount of study, and because marks were awarded for the quality, accuracy and neatness of one's illustrated notes, I produced a rather splendid, fully-typed volume of them. Far from failing the exam, when the time came to pass out, I found, to my horror, that I had achieved a '1st'. I was in line to specialise in Gunnery! (I managed somehow, however, to talk my way out of that!)

Though the discipline at Whale Island was notoriously severe, the conditions were civilised and the work generally interesting, so that all in all, we rather enjoyed our three months there. In April or May we moved to *Vernon* for our Torpedo and Electrics course, though except for meals, we were not accommodated there. In *Vernon* quite a different atmosphere prevailed; it was far more relaxed than in *Excellent*. As far as I can remember, I got a '2nd' in the exams at the end of this course.

We were next re-appointed to H.M.S. *Dryad*, the Navigation School, for further courses, including Navigation and Pilotage. Though particularly interested in Navigation, I was even more taken with the idea of specialising in Hydrography, which apparently required no pre-qualification other than a '2nd' in Navigation plus a successful interview with the Hydrographer of the Navy. The life-style of the Surveying Service appealed to my sense of adventure and exploration in far-flung quarters of the globe and away from the Fleet. However, during the courses at *Dryad* I kept a fairly open mind about these options. It would partly depend on how well I did in the 'N' Course and the subsequent exams. However, my mind was largely made up for me by a private invitation to visit one of our Survey Ships which was alongside in the Dockyard. Here I was enthralled to witness the actual process of drawing a Fair Chart.

As July drew to a close, I finally made up my mind to join the Surveying Service, subject to the approval of the Hydrographer of the Navy, who summoned me for an interview at the

Admiralty. First I had a long talk with his Assistant (Captain E.F.B. Law), who put me very much at ease and outlined the sort of life I should expect, saying 'We're a very friendly little Service, you know; we all know each other's wives and that sort of thing'. After this I was ushered into 'The Presence', the Great Man himself (Vice-Admiral Sir John Edgell), whose name was something of a byword. The interview seemed to go well and I was accepted.

As it turned out, I was awarded a '2nd' in Navigation, so fate had confirmed my choice. However, I managed several '1sts' in the other courses and was awarded three months' seniority, meaning that I had only another nine months to do as a confirmed Sub-Lieutenant.

After a lovely spell of summer leave, I was appointed as a Surveying Assistant 4th-Class (H4) to H.M.S. *Franklin*, then lying at Chatham. *Franklin* was the first of a new class of Surveying Ship, just commissioned for service in Home Waters. She was painted white with a buff-coloured funnel. I was her junior officer, referred to and addressed by my messmates as 'Sub'. I was expected to learn my new profession 'on the job'.

We spent that autumn surveying in the southern North Sea, charting the sandbanks and channels off East Anglia and Kent, mapping the coast of Norfolk, measuring the tidal streams north of the Dover Strait and monitoring the changes in the sea-bed of the Thames Estuary. I learnt how to erect and level tide-gauges, to coastline with sextant and ten-foot pole, to measure currents with log-ship and compass, to boat-sound with sextants and station-pointers, and to observe accurate angles with theodolites. We based ourselves at Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Sheerness and Dover, and often anchored for the night off Margate, Ramsgate, Deal or Southend. *Franklin* was commanded by a Lieutenant-Commander Charles Sabine, who was a 'Charge' Surveyor. Our First Lieutenant was a Lieutenant-Commander 'Bill' Dickinson, a Surveying Assistant 1st Class (H1). The Navigator was Lieutenant Robin Bill, and the Senior Watch-keeper was Lieutenant 'Egg' Irving (later to become Hydrographer of the Navy). We also carried a Paymaster-Lieutenant-Commander, a Commissioned Engineer and a Boatswain. The Ship's Company numbered about 120.

We worked very long hours and got little shore-leave, but the work was extremely interesting both 'in the field' and in the Chartroom, where we worked up the results of our day's labours and portrayed them in graphic form. It was not long, however, before I realised that our Wardroom contained both 'sheep' and 'goats', and that the latter were - not to put too fine a point on it - partial to more than a drop or two. This was later to cause problems.

[Interesting that my father referred to 'sheep' and 'goats' – definitely a Biblical allusion, drawn from Matthew 25.]

One night we were anchored somewhere well off the Belgian coast, occupying an important Tidal Stream Station and observing and measuring the direction and rate of the stream every half hour over a continuous period of 25 hours. I had the Morning Watch and before turning in that night, I had left instruction with the Quartermaster that I was to be called at 0345. In fact I woke up on my own, realised it was about 0400, and rushed up on deck, where I gave the Q.M. a piece of my mind for not calling me.

'Oh,' he replied, 'we've stopped observing, sir. The Officer said to pack up observations two or three hours ago.'

I could hardly believe it. We were more than halfway through the series and to have broken off at this stage would have been to waste the past 16 hours' work. I glanced at the Tidal Stream Logbooks (in which the half-hourly readings were recorded) and saw that from about 0230 the entries were either illegible or non-existent. My suspicions were aroused. One of our 'goats' had had the First Watch and another the Middle. Both had been drinking and chatting happily when I turned in. As I walked aft to the Quarterdeck, I noticed that the Wardroom lights were still on and a glance through the windows confirmed my suspicions: the two goats, each with a glass in his hand, were sprawled over their armchairs barely conscious and fully dressed.

I yelled to the Quartermaster to veer the log-ship, and with his help I took the 0400 readings - several minutes late. I then went to the Chartroom and started drawing the curves through the earlier readings as far as they went. Between my half-hourly observations, I spent the whole of that morning plotting the past readings together with my subsequent ones, drawing the curves through them, extrapolating the curves through the obviously unreliable or missing ones, reading off the 'proper' observations from these curves, erasing the 'phoney' or illegible entries in the logbooks and substituting for them what were probably the correct readings. It was a 'fudge' but a reasonable one.

I was still engaged on this work when, shortly after 0730, the Captain entered the Chartroom. 'Morning, Sub - how's it going?' he asked. 'Er ... all right, I think, sir,' I replied as the Captain advanced and, leaving the newly-drawn curves in the Tidal Log for his inspection, I hastily flipped back the pages of the rough record-book to the previous observations of some days earlier - so that there met the Captain's eyes an unbroken list of readings. While my pulse raced and my heart thumped within me, the Captain cast a somewhat bleary and superficial eye over the records, grunted a few cheery words of encouragement and walked out again. Whew! Well, I'd certainly saved the bacon of our two senior officers (little did they realise it!), but what had I compromised in the process? The accuracy of the survey or just my own professional integrity? I have sometimes wondered if I did the right thing. I'd acted on impulse. The thought of what would befall my two superior officers if the truth emerged was enough - and I had to act as I did. My conscience has not troubled me unduly.

[No, indeed. He covered for his friends, and did not 'betray' them or dob them in. I think this shows compassion, strength of character, and integrity.]

In December *Franklin* returned to Chatham Dockyard for her winter 'lie-up' -to refit, give leave and draw up the Fair Chart and other results and reports of her surveys.

The great thing about the Surveying Service's traditional annual winter 'lie-ups' was that one could count on at least a month's leave - relatively little leave being possible during the active surveying 'season'. I suddenly realised what a golden opportunity this offered for me to go off to Switzerland and try my hand at winter sports, and I started making plans to do so. The upshot was that I spent one of the most memorable fortnights of my life in Davos with a winter-sports party, meeting a glorious girl, Pat Hussey, with whom I got on 'like a house on fire'.

When I returned to *Franklin* in February, I heard that she was scheduled to spend the coming 'season' charting the coast of Labrador, in the wake of *Challenger's* work of five

years earlier. This appealed to me greatly, and I was very downcast when informed that I was to be re-appointed in March to H.M.S. *Scarborough*, a newly converted sloop about to re-commission for surveys in the Far East. I immediately asked to see the Captain with a view to remaining in the ship, but though he was obviously pleased that I wished to do so, he replied that I had been hand-picked by the Assistant Hydrographer to commission *Scarborough*, which he himself was to command! Though perhaps a little flattered, I was still despondent about not going to Labrador. However, there was really nothing my Captain could do about it, and he thought it might be 'undiplomatic' to forward my request.

After a spell of leave between appointments, therefore, I joined *Scarborough* at Devonport early in April. All the executive officers had been hand-picked by the Assistant Hydrographer, Captain E.F.B. Law, who was to command her. This, he reckoned, would be his last sea-going command and he was determined that it should be a happy one. Our First Lieutenant was a splendid extrovert called Michael Beach-Thomas, our Navigator a Lt. Cdr. Billy Petch, our Boatswain a delightful man known as 'Bo' Leader, and there was a most congenial Lieutenant called Phil Hocking. It looked like being a first-rate commission. Pat Hussey came down to Plymouth over the Easter week-end and was introduced to my brother officers, after which we had a rather emotional farewell.

We sailed for a brief visit to Portland. There, unless my memory fails me, I met my brother Roger, who had recently recovered from a severe nervous breakdown and was serving with the Royal Tank Corps at Bovington nearby. The following evening he watched from Portland Bill as *Scarborough* finally sailed off for the Far East. As she did so, I shipped my second stripe. I was no longer 'The Sub'. As I took a long, lingering look at England fading into the haze on our starboard quarter, I felt a new sense of responsibility.

We were bound, ultimately, for the East Indies Station, to progress major surveys off Sarawak and British North Borneo, but there were several tasks to be undertaken on the way. We stopped briefly at Gibraltar and spent a week-end at Malta (where we were impressed by the loyalty of the Maltese and the contempt in which they held Mussolini), before continuing to Port Said and the Suez Canal.

At Port Said we got a new Sub-Lieutenant, one Bryan O'Neill, who had transferred to the Surveying Service from one of the Mediterranean Fleet's destroyer flotillas. I was no longer the junior (H) officer, and felt slightly superior (with my two stripes) when addressing him as 'Sub'. We were now breaking new ground, as far as I was concerned, having never before been to Egypt or beyond. I found the Canal, in particular, an eye-opener. It seemed almost incredible that a hundred miles of wide waterway could have been sliced straight through the sandy desert - by hand. As one looked along it from the ship's bridge, one could actually discern (from the convergence of the banks) the curvature of the earth.

I remember one night in the Red Sea when I had the Morning Watch, I sighted the lights of a ship approaching fine on the starboard bow. We exchanged identities and she turned out to be one of our Persian Gulf sloops homeward bound. I called the Captain and gave him the name of the sloop. As she passed us a cable's length to starboard, she signalled with her Aldis lamp: 'Are you manned by naval personnel?' The Captain, who by this time was on the bridge in his pyjamas and consulting the Navy List, swore. 'Tell her to heave to!' he yelled to the signalman. The signal was passed and acknowledged but the sloop steamed on. We called her again and said: 'Stop! Send boat for despatches.' By this time she was several

miles away and no doubt her Captain (a Lieutenant-Commander) had been called to the bridge. She stopped, letting off clouds of steam. We relished the probable scene on her bridge. Her C.O., realising he was dealing with a Post-Captain commanding a 'Major War Vessel', and having bawled out his O.O.W. [Officer of the Watch] was in process of rousing the Watch and calling away his sea boat's crew - half an hour before dawn. By the time *Scarborough* had stopped, they had about an hour's pull ahead of them - each way. Quite what the 'despatches' were, I never knew - but they included a personal letter from our Captain to theirs. Henceforth, we felt, he'd have a healthy respect for H.M. Survey Ships!

Having called briefly at Aden to re-fuel, we set course across the Gulf of Aden to Berbera in British Somaliland. We had instructions to consult the local authorities before undertaking our first survey further along the coast. With the Italians in occupation of Abyssinia, British Somaliland was now hemmed in by them on every side, and such was the defeatism that permeated our Government at that time, it was assumed that if war came, they would push our forces into the sea. Our job was to carry out a coastal and hydrographic survey of a place called Karin, a possible site from which British forces, such as they were (the Somaliland Camel Corps!), could be evacuated. It was a depressing prospect.

That survey completed, we moved out into the Indian Ocean and reached Ceylon in June - with the S.W. monsoon. We put into Colombo for a while, having a job to do in the approaches to the port, and I found myself surveying the coastline southward towards Mount Lavinia. Resting in the shade of coconut palms at the head of the beach as I plotted some of my field-work, I was joined by an affable and well-spoken Sinhalese, who sat down beside me and showed an interest in my work. 'Do you think there's going to be a war?' he asked with a worried expression. 'No,' I replied without hesitation, 'No, I'm sure there won't be.' I often held that against myself in later years, but at the time I simply couldn't believe that it was beyond the powers of world statesmen to prevent such a catastrophe as had occurred between 1914 and 1918, and which had been recognised everywhere as 'the War to end all wars'. I still couldn't quite face the fact that the forces of innate Evil were at large.

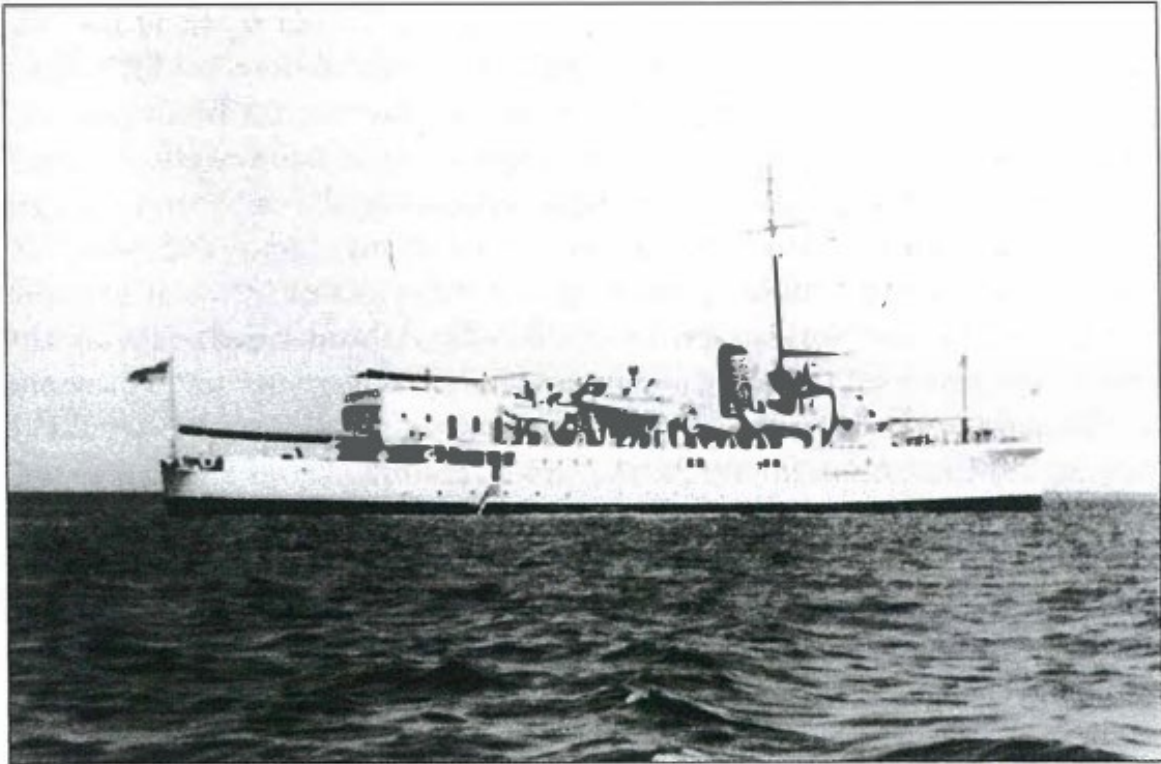
[This is quite understandable – it was an almost universally held view at the time, that there was not be another world war.]

We went round to the east side of Ceylon to set up our advanced base at Trincomalee, and then started to put in hand our first major survey, between Point Pedro and Mullaitivu on the north-east coast. This was to be one of those 'classic' hydrographic surveys based on an extensive floating triangulation. The form and techniques of such surveys had changed very little over the years.

The island stood between us and the steady force of the S.W. monsoon, so that inshore the sea was as calm as a millpond, but as one moved out to seaward, it became increasingly rough. The terminal points of the survey were about 50 miles apart, and we were to work out to some 15 miles offshore, so that we had around 750 square miles of sea to sound.

From a professional point of view it was an interesting survey, and for us junior surveyors a highly educative one. But so far as the coastal and submarine topography were concerned, it was somewhat featureless. Behind the long, steeply sloping beaches of white sand lay flat grassy islets studded with tall toddy palms.

Our Captain had a relaxed personality with a rather dry sense of humour, and was not noted for overwork. He was no martinet. Regarding his ship more or less as a private yacht, he was determined that we should all enjoy the two months ahead. This outlook was reflected through the ship without in any way affecting her efficiency or discipline, and the general ambience of cheerfulness and good humour was compounded, for us, by an exceptionally congenial Wardroom. Thus, although we worked hard, often well into the night, it was never too onerous, and we frequently stopped altogether at week-ends. Now and again we would return to Trincomalee for fuel -and to relax.



Scarborough, surveying off north east Ceylon, 1939

Setting up the floating triangulation was an exacting task, which involved all available hands and called for a high standard of seamanship. We carried 30 beacons and up to 12 of these would usually be in use at any one time. We laid them about five miles apart to form a network of equilateral triangles, each one moored with two heavy anchors and carrying a 12x8ft. flag on a 30ft. bamboo pole. They could be seen up to a distance of 10 miles. As each beacon was laid, the ship would move carefully up to it, placing her stem close alongside it, while perhaps half a dozen of us, each with a sextant, would observe the angles between the other beacons and any visible shore marks simultaneously at the order 'Fix!' All those angles would be used in the Chartroom to calculate and plot the beacon's precise position. The inshore row of beacons would be fixed first, by observing the angles subtended by previously co-ordinated shore marks, and by theodolite 'rays' observed to them from the shore marks. For identification purposes, each mark would be given a short name, and traditionally the beacons were always named after girls in alphabetical order, e.g. 'Ada', 'Beth', 'Cath', 'Dot', 'Eve', etc.

The inshore waters, out to about four miles, were surveyed by the two surveying motor-boats (S.M.B.s), using continuous echo-soundings fixed frequently by two simultaneously

observed sextant angles between three shore marks, samples of the sea-bed being obtained by hand-lead at intervals along the sounding-lines. This work was normally allocated to the Lieutenants and the 'Sub', and I spent most of my days doing just that. Meanwhile the ship would be working in similar fashion (though in much greater comfort) in the deeper waters offshore. At sunset each evening the ship would break off sounding and come to anchor close inshore, where the S.M.B.s would rejoin her for the night. From then on all surveyors would be busy in the Chartroom inking in the day's soundings.

As the wind blew steadily off the land by day and night, and the sandy sea-bed seemed smooth and featureless, the ship took to anchoring ever closer inshore, where she lay head-to-wind in calm water with the boats at her booms. On the very last day of the survey, as the ship weighed anchor at 0700 and the boats got away, and as the ship was turning to port, there was suddenly a tremendous crash and she shuddered from stem to stern. The Captain uttered a loud obscenity, the Navigator shouted 'Get a fix!' and jumped on the chart-table with a sextant, and the Boatswain on the fo'c'sle bellowed 'Close all watertight doors!' I was O.O.W. on the bridge, and had just written in the Deck Log: '0700. Weighed and proceeded', when my pencil went through the paper.

At first I thought we'd hit one of the boats, but soon realised we'd struck a rock (in fact, as was proved later, it was the only rock in the entire survey area - and we'd found it the hard way!). So I wrote in the Log: '0702. Struck rock'. Afterwards, while we were anchored and assessing the damage (which involved the loss of our Asdic-dome and little more), I was sent for by the Captain and found him in his cabin examining the Deck Log. 'Did you write this?' he asked, indicating my second entry. 'Yes, sir,' I replied. 'Why?' he asked. 'Well, didn't we, sir?' I ventured. He said nothing but took up an india-rubber and erased the entry, substituting for it the words: '0702. Came in contact with submerged obstruction.' 'What makes you think it was a rock?' he asked, dismissing me.

[Unbelievable!]

We finished the survey a week ahead of schedule, and in mid-August set course across the Bay of Bengal to Penang and finally to Singapore. Here we had our first real taste of the fabulous 'Far East' and we lost no time in making the most of it, spending the first few days in exploring its delights.

However, the scent of impending war was in the air, and plans were in a state of flux. Two other Survey Ships joined *Scarborough* at the Naval Base, *Herald* from the East Indies and *Endeavour* from the Pacific. They arrived in a state of uncertainty and apprehension, but there was a great 'get-together' of their officers as the three ships lay alongside the same wall. Under the local War Plan, our Captain was designated 'Extended Defence Officer' for the Port of Singapore and O'Neill and I were to be his Assistants. All three ships were to pay off, we heard, but as August drew to a close, nothing happened. We were told to take local leave and await developments. Phil Hocking and I put ourselves up at the Sea View Hotel to enjoy the flesh-pots while we could. What luxury, what bliss, what freedom! Next morning we got a phone call: 'Return to the ship'. Germany had invaded Poland.

That week-end we listened avidly to every news bulletin, to the BBC's Overseas News broadcasts and to Singapore Radio. Britain and France had previously warned Hitler that if he attacked Poland, they would come to her assistance with every means in their power.

Why, then, were we not already at war? Saturday went - and still we had heard nothing. It was exasperating. But on the Sunday (3rd September) the Prime Minister was to make an important broadcast, and we crowded round the Wardroom wireless to listen. We were at war with Germany!

Chapter 5: Lieutenant H.M.S. Derby, 1939

It was in sombre mood that we listened to Neville Chamberlain's broadcast announcing that we were now in a state of war with Germany. In a way it was a relief. After five years of vacillation and procrastination we had at last taken the right decision. Now at last 'the chips were down', and we felt we could hold our heads higher. Life seemed to have taken on a new meaning, and we certainly felt a new sense of purpose in all that we did.

The rumours of the past few days turned out to be partly correct. The three Survey Ships were to pay off. Their officers and crews were to commission a flotilla of eight Fleet Minesweepers that had been lying in Reserve at Singapore since the end of the 1914-18 War. *Scarborough* was to be re-converted to an A/S Escort Vessel and her Captain was to assume the post of X.D.O. for the Port of Singapore. I felt sorry for Captain Law - sorry too that such a promising commission should have been so abruptly aborted. He had been an excellent C.O. and a popular one too, who had enjoyed the company of his officers.

Our Navigator, Lt. Cdr. 'Billy' Petch, was appointed to command H.M.S. *Derby*, one of the old Fleet Minesweepers to be brought out of reserve, and I was to be his First Lieutenant. It was a big step for me - with a sudden access of heavier responsibility than I had ever shouldered before. Bryan O'Neill, our 'Sub', was to be our only other officer, with responsibility for navigation and other duties. *Derby's* crew - of between 40 and 50 all told - was to be drawn entirely from *Scarborough's* complement, so at least we knew them reasonably well. It was quite a challenge for us all. The general organisation of the ship, her watch-bills, duty-rosters and standing orders etc., fell to me to work out and promulgate, as did most of the arrangements for our minesweeping role. Within about a week, however, *Derby* was ready for sea, as were most of the other ships of the newly constituted 'Second Minesweeping Flotilla'.

The general idea at that time was that 'the Enemy' would start with an all-out assault on our maritime trade - a strategy that had brought Germany very close to victory in the 1914-18 War. It was also thought that in Far Eastern waters, Japan (with whom we were not at war) would perform a surrogate role in this strategy by mining the focal points of our trade-routes.

The approaches to Singapore were, of course, one of the most important of these focal points, and the role of the newly constituted Minesweeping Flotilla was to keep open the swept channels leading to and from the Port and the Naval Base on the Johore Strait. At the same time that our 'Swept Channels' scheme was being brought into force, a major operation was mounted to lay our own, submerged minefields in secret areas elsewhere, to block access by enemy submarines, which, it was assumed, would be the vessels they would use as mine-layers.

Although our Minesweeping Flotilla was manned by professional naval officers and ratings drawn directly from the three Survey Ships, and although they were all reasonably conversant with the theoretical techniques involved in single and double Oropesa minesweeping, few, if any, had had actual operational experience of it. There was therefore a great need for each of the eight ships to work up, individually, to a satisfactory standard, and a subsequent need for the Flotilla as a whole to work together, in formation. Some of the narrower channels could best be swept by a single ship running a double Oropesa sweep,

whereas wider areas were more suited to formation sweeping by four ships (sometimes all eight of them), each running a single sweep. All these variations in operational procedure had to be exercised and practised before we could regard ourselves as efficient.

On the quayside at the Naval base lay a huge pile of coal. It had been there for twenty years and had been eroded by wind and weather to little more than coal-dust. It was the fuel stock for the minesweepers, which were all coal-burning. They were affectionately known as 'Smoky Joes', but never had they belched forth such clouds of ash-laden black smoke as they did while steaming on this stuff. The ships were capable of speeds of around 18 knots at full power, but such was the quality of the coal they were burning that any attempts of that sort rapidly became a First Lieutenant's nightmare. The funnels would become red-hot and all the paint on them would melt and flow down to the decks, while a continuous rain of unburnt coal-ash would descend on all exposed parts of the ship. As we seldom spent long enough in harbour to do a proper 'paint ship', the upper-works, screens and bulkheads used to get painted as opportunity offered, so that 'Wet Paint' on many of the external surfaces was the norm rather than the exception. Moreover, as with ships in any fleet or flotilla, these minesweepers would vie with one another to present the smartest appearance. The effect of such rivalry in our circumstances was that prominent parts of the upper deck structure were often treated with high-gloss paints and enamels. The result, of course, was that when the inevitable rain of ash descended, these 'tiddly' surfaces, far from presenting a brilliant shine, took on the appearance (and feel) of emery paper.

It was my responsibility to supervise and take charge of operations on the sweep-deck, rigging the kite, otters and float, reeving the special sweep-wires through their appropriate blocks, streaming the sweeps, veering them out to the required depth, and then monitoring the tension in the wires as the ship worked up to optimum speed - as well as keeping the Bridge informed as we went along.

Apart from the actual sweeping, there was also the need to mark the areas swept, and one or two ships would be assigned to this task, which involved the laying of clan-buoys at intervals along the edge of the swept areas. There were well-rehearsed 'drills' for all these jobs, but things could - and sometimes did - go wrong.

I recall one horrific incident when one of our consorts was clan-laying. The mooring wires were 'stopped up' in a series of loops along the after guard-rails, ready to be released as the strain came on while the clan-buoy was streamed. Somehow or other some of the loops were released prematurely, fell into the water and fouled the ship's starboard propeller, which was turning. This put a sudden irresistible strain on the rest of the mooring wire, much of which was lying in coils on the deck. By a tragic mischance, one of the seamen was standing with one leg inside one of these coils and before anyone realised what was happening, it pulled tight and amputated his leg below the knee. There was an immediate alarm. The ship was stopped and a signal was flashed to *Derby* for assistance, we being the nearest to the scene. We placed ourselves alongside our helpless consort and the wretched seaman, with a sick-bay attendant at his side, was transferred to our quarterdeck on a stretcher. Leaving the other ship immobile to cope with her badly fouled propeller, we opened up all power and belted up the Johore Strait to the Naval Base, where an ambulance had been alerted to meet us, while morphine and other first-aid treatment were administered to our deathly-pale patient. It was only after he had been safely transferred to hospital that

the enormity of the accident really sank in on us, but the whole Flotilla had learned a very salutary lesson. Henceforward extreme vigilance was observed on all the sweep-decks.

Other tragedies were to follow. One of our Boom Defence Vessels blundered into one of our own minefields, and two officers were quick to board her in the hope of guiding her out of it. One of these was Scarborough's erstwhile First Lieutenant, Michael Beach-Thomas, a delightful man, whom we all held in great affection. Tragically, the B.D.V. struck a mine, capsized and sank with all hands.

Meanwhile our minesweeping operations continued unabated, though they had now become a matter of routine. The fact that no mines were swept, while certainly taking the edge off our initial zeal, at least gave us the satisfaction of proving the safety of the vital shipping lanes and did much to set the minds of the Port Authorities at rest. Gradually, as the weeks passed, a trickle of Naval Reservists arrived in Singapore -both officers and ratings -and some of these were assigned to the minesweepers to relieve R.N. personnel who were needed elsewhere. Bryan O'Neill was the first to go from *Derby*, having somehow 'wangled' his way back to destroyers, but during the month of November more and more of the original 'ex-Survey' crews were replaced. By mid-December the Flotilla had become largely manned by reservists, with R.N.V.R. officers actually in command of some of the ships. Eventually the day came when it was announced that all (H) officers were to be withdrawn, as their services were required in the war-zone.

If by the 'war-zone' was meant Home Waters, who were we to complain? Thoughts of 'England, home and beauty' had never been far from our minds since we had left Portland eight months before. But in fact the war-zone might be anywhere, for the War, to date, had been rather conspicuous by its absence. We were living through what came to be known as the 'Phoney War', with little hostile activity anywhere, except on the high seas. Indeed, in one of her letters to me about this time, my mother had remarked: 'The war continues peacefully!' All in all, I cannot pretend that we shed any tears over leaving the 2nd Minesweeping Flotilla.

We were to fly home by Imperial Airways in their recently introduced 'Empire' flying-boats. I suppose there were about a dozen of us (from the three Survey ships), the others having already been re-appointed. We had a choice as to which flight we should take - half our number to embark next day, and the others two days later - so we drew lots. I drew against Phil Hocking - and lost. We were at the Seaview Hotel again, and Phil reckoned that an extra two days in Singapore would suit him very nicely, so he opted for the second flight. (It was to prove a tragic decision for him).

Air travel (as distinct from just flying) was something quite new to us, and the prospect of a 10,000-mile journey across Asia and Europe was really exciting. Instead of the five-week sea voyage, we were expected to be home within ten days, so there was an even chance that we'd be back by Christmas! Quite what 'Their Lordships' had in mind for us that warranted such urgency was an open question - but it added an extra element of drama to the whole venture.

The 'Empire' flying-boat, with its spacious interior, its armchairs, tables and settees -and its bar -was the acme of comfort. As our four Rolls-Royce engines thundered into life and we roared down the Singapore Strait in a great flurry of spume and spray (which completely

obliterated the view from the cabin windows), and as we lifted up and up over the lush tropical islets and swung gracefully round to a northern heading, we put all thoughts of Singapore and minesweeping behind us and settled down to enjoy the fascinating journey ahead.

It was a truly epic flight, all the more memorable because in those days it was the custom to fly relatively low (at about 3,000 feet), so that we had amazing views of the terrain reeling away beneath us, first the vivid green jungles of Malaya, then the marvellously blue waters of the Gulf of Siam, before we glided down, in the late afternoon, to the Bay of Bangkok, where we stayed overnight at a sumptuous hotel.

After a brief glimpse of the countryside, we rejoined our aircraft and were off again, this time over the jungles of Siam and Burma, then on across India, putting down gently for the night on a calm and silvery lake. Where that lake was I have no idea, but it was evidently one of Imperial Airways' regular fuelling stops. For our next landing we flew on to Karachi, where we changed planes to a Handley-Page biplane. In this we continued our flight across Baluchistan and Southern Persia, crossing the Strait of Hormuz, where the landscape of the Musandam Peninsula looming up on the Arabian side was truly breath-taking: great jagged peaks rising sheer from the sea, dark brown, bare and rocky, with numerous fjords penetrating inland. This was the northern promontory of Oman. The following morning, after spending a night at the desert fort of Sharjah, we made a short hop over the Trucial coast and up to Bahrain, pressing on from there to Basra and another overnight stop in Baghdad. After miles of flying across these arid regions, we were astonished to find the landscape beneath us suddenly and completely transformed from desert into green hills covered with vast acres of orange-groves and vineyards, trees, streams and lakes. We had crossed over into Palestine. No wonder the biblical authors had called it 'a land flowing with milk and honey'!

[My father was definitely well versed in the Scriptures, and sensitive to the fact that 'Palestine' – which was to become Israel some 8 years later – was blessed as a 'land flowing with milk and honey'.]

From here we flew to Cairo and stayed the night at the prestigious Shepheard's Hotel before changing aircraft again. The new plane carried us first to Sollum on the North African coast, and then on a long hop down the length of the Mediterranean to Marseilles, where we spent the night before flying on to Bordeaux. It had been a memorable flight indeed! For most of the journey, as the landscape reeled past beneath us, all had been novel and absorbingly interesting but as we drew nearer to England, we found ourselves becoming somewhat bored with air travel and longing to be home.

As we flew into Bordeaux from Marseilles, we encountered fog and learned that it was thick over northern France, the Channel and the south of England. Air traffic was at a standstill. We were fog-bound and had to make the best of it. It was still frustrating in the extreme. We were so nearly home, yet not near enough. Eventually a decision was taken. Our pilot had a girl-friend in London and was determined to get there that night - and after a wager with another British plane, both of them decided to make a dash for it.

We headed north, above the fog, and, on crossing the French coast, descended virtually to sea level. We could just see the wave-tops a few feet below us as we scudded across the

Channel, and feeling pretty apprehensive, decided to take our minds off the problem by gathering round and forming a poker-school with a pack of cards. Halfway through the game, the aircraft pulled up into a steep climb and banked violently to port, hurling the cards on to the deck. I looked out of the window and caught a fleeting glimpse of white cliffs rearing up to starboard with a lighthouse at their foot. It was Beachy Head - and we'd missed it by a whisker! A few moments later our pilot walked into the passenger cabin pouring with perspiration and said: 'God - I could do with a drink!', a wish which was immediately gratified. We saw nothing more till the orange flood-lights of the Heathrow runway loomed into sight, and then we were down and safe. An enormous sense of relief overwhelmed us. It had been a marvellous journey, but that last flight would remain with us forever.

We went straight to the Admiralty to report back for duty. I was to be appointed to H.M.S. *Challenger* and, after Christmas leave, was to join her in Scapa Flow early in the New Year. I hurried home. It was Friday, 22nd December and I got there late that night - to the delight and astonishment of my parents (who thought I was still in Singapore!). It was a wonderful home-coming for me - but it was to be blackened by the next day's news.

I had promised Phil Hocking that I would ring his fiancée as soon as I got home to tell her that Phil was on his way - and this I did. Next morning we heard that a passenger plane had ditched in the Mediterranean and that there were few survivors. I immediately rang the Airline in London. Was it our follow-up flight? Yes it was. Who were the survivors? One was Bill Ashton (one of our colleagues), who had been picked up by an Italian schooner - but there were few others. The rest, including Phil Hocking, had perished. I felt his loss keenly, and wished to God I had never rung his fiancée. The blow to her must have been unbearable - and I had compounded it. And what if I had won the toss at the Sea View Hotel? Fate or luck had decreed that in this tragedy I was not to be the victim.

[No, it was definitely not fate or luck! This was God's intervention, sparing my father's life – that His purposes might be fulfilled – both for my father and his family, and for the future generations that would come after him. Things like this don't happen by accident! See Ephesians 1 v 4, and Psalm 119 v 90.]

Chapter 6: Lieutenant H.M.S. Challenger, 1940-41

Although we were still in the period of the 'Phoney War' there had, in fact, been quite a lot of action at sea. An unmitigated disaster of this period was the torpedoing of H.M.S. *Royal Oak* at her moorings in Scapa Flow by a German submarine commanded by the redoubtable Lieutenant-Commander Prien, who had somehow manoeuvred his vessel through one or other of the supposedly blocked entrance-channels to the Flow, and, undetected, had made his escape by the same means. This was a major blow to the Fleet in what was thought to be an impregnable base - the loss of a capital ship with some 800 of her crew.

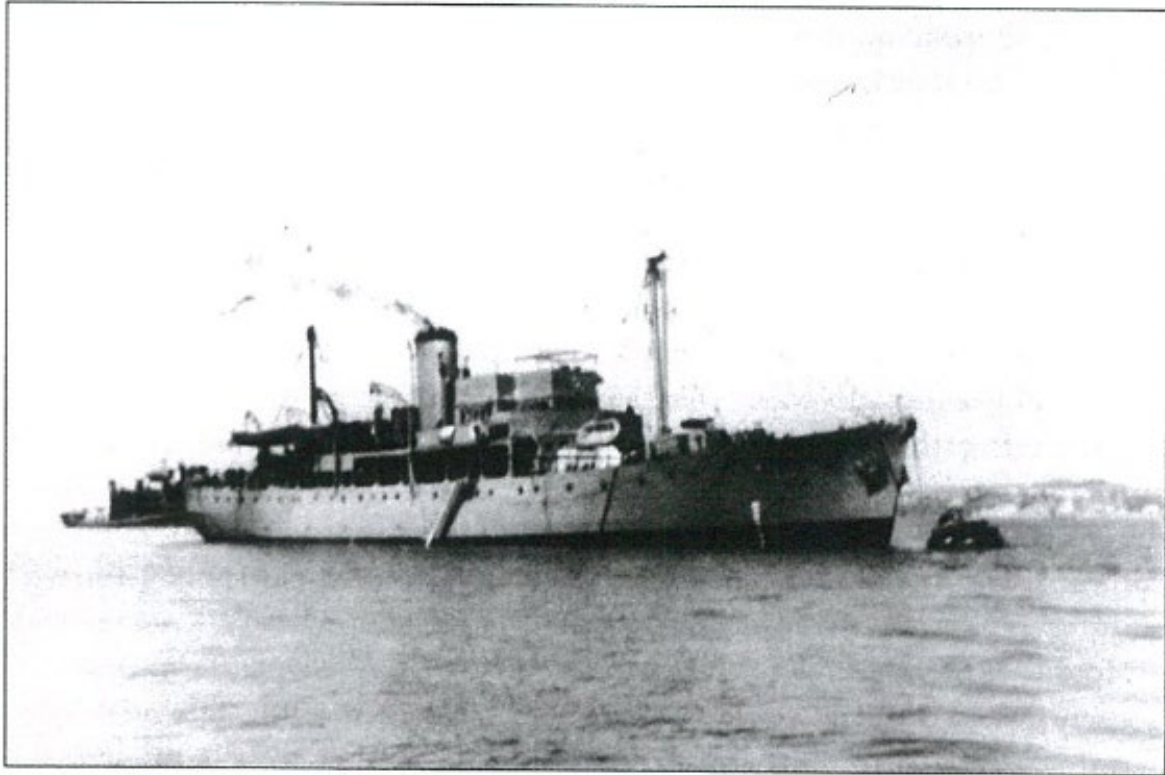
It was this episode that was responsible for bringing me to Scapa Flow to join H.M.S. *Challenger*. Her Captain, Commander W.C. Jenks, had been assigned the task of carrying out a number of large-scale hydrographic surveys of areas in which it was intended to lay controlled minefields and associated detector-loops - to ensure that such a disaster could never be repeated. *Challenger*, in her grey war-paint and with one pom-pom gun for'ard and another right aft, and Lewis-guns on each bridge-wing, looked much more business-like than when I'd last seen her (in the floating dock at Bermuda, with her boilers ripped out), and the rows of Carley floats along her superstructure were evidence of the war-risks she'd be facing. But for the moment, as far as I was concerned, the risks were almost entirely from the elements, which seemed extremely hostile. When boat-sounding, Orcadian waters in mid-winter are no joke!

I soon found out too that Commander Jenks was cast in a different mould from previous C.O.s under whom I had served. He was an excellent seaman, a competent surveyor and ambitious. He was also rather shy and anti-social, an introvert and also a martinet. To him, the survey was everything. Nothing could take precedence over that. However, he was an excellent teacher, demanding a high degree of professionalism as well as extraordinary standards of human endurance. He spared neither himself nor his officers - nor his crew. He was admired but not liked. In the circumstances, however, he was the right man for the job: he got things done. He also kept a careful eye on morale, recognising the limits beyond which ordinary mortals could not be pushed.

We spent two strenuous months in the Orkneys, where the elements seldom let up, followed by further surveys of a similar kind in the approaches to the Kyle of Lochalsh, Plymouth Sound (where, to my delight, Bryan O'Neill joined us), Milford Haven and the Shetlands (where the Admiralty had its eye on the great firth of Sullom Voe as a possible Fleet Base or strategic anchorage). After this we returned to Scapa Flow, where we received orders to sail for a destination as yet undisclosed. It was not until after we had sailed that we heard where we were bound for: Iceland. Remembering the marvellous summer I had spent there six years before, my spirits soared. I would be returning to the 'land of my dreams'.

The 'pink charts' were laid out on the Chart Room table. Our immediate task was to survey Hvalfjord - the head of the fjord on a scale of 1:12,500 (6 inches to the mile) and the rest of it on half that scale (1:25,000). As the only man in the ship with first-hand experience of those parts, my comments and advice were somewhat at a premium - and were even sought by our Captain! As we plunged into the Atlantic, I was in the 'seventh heaven'.

The area had been chosen by the Admiralty as a major Fleet Base, capable of replacing Scapa Flow if that became untenable. The choice proved an inspired one, not only because of its strategic position, but also - as our survey gradually revealed - because its hydrographic and topographic features were ideally suited to our purpose. It was an extensive stretch of almost land-locked water, of adequate depth, virtually devoid of reefs, and surrounded by protective mountains.



Challenger at Milford Haven, 1940

After arriving at Reykjavik and 'making our number' with the newly installed Naval Authority there, we lost no time in pressing on to Hvalfjord itself. The task before us was to sound the entire area and map the surrounding countryside with particular thoroughness. Since no maps or charts of it existed on anything like a '6-inch' scale, we would be working from scratch. In such circumstances Commander Jenks was in his element, as we were soon to learn.

We came to anchor just short of the upper reach of the fjord and more or less in the middle of our survey-ground. This berth was to be our centre of operations for the next six weeks as the boats and shore-parties pressed on with the survey of the 'Head of Hvalfjord'.

The normal routine was for boats and field parties to return to the ship, after completing the day's work, about 6.30 p.m. Early in the proceedings I had just spent a long and particularly arduous day establishing, marking and occupying a Main Triangulation Station. Having accomplished the task, apart from one or two minor sounding-marks, I returned to the ship with my small party about 7.30 p.m. At the top of the gangway I was met by the Captain and asked why I had returned. When I gave my reasons, he replied that with plenty of daylight left, I was to return to the Station until I had finished the observation work down to the last detail. By the time we finally got back to the ship, it was 10.30 p.m.!

On another occasion a gale was blowing so fiercely that the glasses of our sounding-sextants were constantly being rendered opaque by the salt spray enveloping us. We returned to the ship with our boats' crews wet, cold and miserable, to report that conditions precluded further sounding. Since there was plenty of work outstanding in the Chartroom, this action seemed eminently reasonable. The Captain, however, thought otherwise. 'Can't see through your sextants?' he queried, 'Well, take a spare handkerchief with you - and get on with it!'

Interesting though the boat-sounding operations were, what I most enjoyed was the topographical surveying. This required me to traverse up the streams and valleys with compass and rangefinder, sketching in the contours with the aid of an aneroid barometer. Scrambling through this wild and peaceful countryside amid the sounds and sights of nature was a truly profound experience. The vivid green of valleys studded with vast fields of golden buttercups, the cold, crystal-clear rivulets cascading down through great outcrops of reddish-black rocks, the masses of little wild flowers, coupled with the calling and twittering of birds of all kinds, including eagles and ravens as they circled round the mountains - all this seemed to carry me into a world of romantic fantasy a million miles away from the down-to-earth urgency of the ship's task and a far cry indeed from the war raging in Europe.

[What an amazing, and unusual description – the rugged and romantic beauty of Iceland, 'untouched' it would seem from the ravages of war taking place in Europe: the invasion of Belgium, Holland and France, Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain! Yet my father's account was an honest one – and his turn for the sufferings and deprivations of war would come his way soon enough.]

Very occasionally, as a boost to morale, Jenks would take the ship down to Reykjavik for the week-end. One evening at a dance there Bryan O'Neill and I met two particularly charming and attractive girls. Having such delightful damsels in tow gave an added spur to our work and provided much to look forward to on our next visit to Reykjavik - whenever that might be. We fixed firm dates to meet them next time we came in.

Meanwhile in July we moved down the fjord to take in hand the much more extensive survey further seaward - including a large area in Faxafloi covering the approaches to the fjord - all on a '3-inch' scale. In general this was fairly straightforward but included in the area was another controlled minefield survey on a much larger scale than usual and calling for special techniques. The task was entrusted to Bryan and me and took us several days of hard, painstaking work, culminating in a huge sheet of densely packed soundings to be plotted and inked in. A great deal of adjustments were required to harmonise the sets of soundings involved, and one night we were kept hard at work in the Chartroom until about 3 a.m. Knowing that we would have to resume field work at 7 a.m., we decided to call it a day and turn in.

Next morning we were sent for by the Captain. Not only that, but the First Lieutenant (Lt. Cdr. 'Moss' Monk - a kindly soul if ever there was one) was ordered to bring us to him as 'defaulters'. We were even told to 'Off Caps'. The Captain demanded to know why the inking-in had not been finished. We explained that after a long and arduous day of boat-sounding, followed by six or seven hours' work in the Chartroom, we simply couldn't keep awake any longer. The Captain stared at us and said: 'When I was your age, there was no such word as

'can't.' With that he dismissed us. We held our peace but for days afterwards we seethed with indignation.

On our next visit to Reykjavik we hired a car for the day and took the girls out to Thingvellir [*which I remember from our family holiday in August 1964*]. In the evening we dined and danced with them back at the Hotel Borg. While sipping wine together by candle-light, and listening dreamily to the dance-music, we were rudely interrupted by a messenger. Would I please step outside for a moment as the Port Captain wished to see me urgently? (Consternation on all our faces.) In the hotel foyer the Captain handed me a sealed brown envelope and said: 'Operational priority - take this out to your Captain immediately - get hold of a boat!' I took the envelope and looked at my watch. The last boat off was at midnight - in a quarter of an hour. I turned to go back to the dining room and, lowering his voice, the Port Captain, almost whispering, said: 'A German invasion force is approaching Iceland, and is expected to get here by noon tomorrow.' 'Jesus Christ!' I thought as I returned to our table - to find all eyes turned upon me (even at the neighbouring tables). Thinking how dramatic this all seemed (like something out of a Viennese opera), I apologised to the girls and hustled Bryan out of the room and down to the quay.

As soon as the boat came in, we shoved off (if some of the others missed it - too bad!) and reached the ship, which was anchored some way out in the roads, about 12.15 a.m. I went straight to the Captain's cabin and found him asleep. He was far from pleased to be woken, but drowsily swung himself on to the edge of the bunk as I explained the urgency of my mission. Tearing open the envelope and holding the pink cypher-message in front of him, he read it out to me. The preamble repeated what I had already been told and it then went on to order the action to be taken by the various units of the Occupation Force: 'HMS *Challenger* is to continue her surveys'. 'Bloody Hell!' grunted the Captain, 'damned if I will. They can think again on that one.' Then turning to me, 'All right, Hall - you'd better get some sleep.'

I turned in with my heart thumping in my chest, wondering what the hell *Challenger*, with her puny armament, could do to resist a full-blooded enemy invasion. Flashing through my mind were mental pictures of the ship going down with colours flying and all guns spitting defiance to the last. I don't think I got much sleep that night. But when I woke up in the morning, things were strangely quiet. 'That's a bit odd,' I thought as I stumbled up on deck, 'surely we should be preparing for action?' Then I met the First Lieutenant, who was grinning sardonically. 'Relax, man,' he said, 'panic averted. We've just had another signal. Last night's was 'For exercise'.' Our Captain, however, who had been up all night, was 'Not Amused'. Despite the anti-climax, it was a dramatic episode, and one which I'm unlikely to forget.

By this time autumn was upon us and as the survey of Hvalfjord progressed seaward, our visits to Reykjavik became more frequent. One week-end the ship was at anchor outside the harbour when an exceptionally fierce gale struck us, causing us to set anchor watch. A second anchor was let go, we came to immediate notice for steam, and veered several more shackles of cable. During the night we 'steamed to the cables', the second anchor, underfoot, helping to reduce a dangerous yaw, which could lead to dragging. The aircraft carrier *Eagle* was anchored not far away and as the storm grew in ferocity, we could discern her lights moving slowly down wind. We held our position through the night (there were no flies on Commander Jenks when it came to seamanship), but when dawn broke, there was *Eagle* broadside on to the rocks of the outer breakwater. When the storm subsided, she

eventually got off (spurning our assistance) largely through parading her ship's company on the flight-deck and having them jump up and down to the beat of her Royal Marine band!

One week-end Bryan and I had accompanied the girls to a village dance out in the country. At the time some Icelanders resented the British occupation of their country and British sailors were by no means universally popular. Wearing uniform, we were inevitably conspicuous, and not all the glances that followed us to our table were particularly friendly. There must have been 40 or 50 young Icelanders present and though we merged as best we could in the general dancing, singing, smoking and drinking, we became conscious of a certain hostility. When several burly young men moved over to the next table and started a conversation in their native tongue, we realised that a confrontation was brewing - particularly when some of them started removing their jackets and rolling up their sleeves. The two girls urged us to leave, but we were at the far end of the hall and our way was barred. There seemed to be nothing for it but to defend ourselves - and our girl-friends - though the outcome looked anything but hopeful. Suddenly at that moment the door was flung open and in walked a sergeant of the Military Police and two corporals, red bands on the sleeves of their khaki battle-dress. They came straight across to us and escorted all four of us out of the building. Then they whisked us back to Reykjavik in their truck. How they got wind of our predicament I shall never know, but we understood that they had been tipped off either by our taxi-driver when he returned to the city, or by a phone call from someone inside the hall. Whoever it was, we certainly thanked our lucky stars that night for the British Military Police!

As the Hvalfjörður surveys drew to a close and our thoughts turned towards home, we received orders to survey several other fjords, among them Seyðisfjörður [*on the east coast of Iceland*]. This is a relatively steep-sided and narrow fjord with its little port nestling between high mountains at its innermost extremity. One Saturday afternoon, when we had been encouraged to take some exercise ashore, Bryan and I decided to climb a 3,400 ft. mountain called Strandatindur. It rose steeply from the south side of the fjord and was partly snow-covered. It took us several hours to reach the summit and by the time we arrived there, the sun had set and a mist was gathering in the valleys below. We rested awhile to take in the marvellous view, but decided we'd better get down before it became too dark. The gulleys on the north side of the mountain, facing the fjord, were filled with snow, and I found that by digging my heels into it, I could descend quite quickly. 'This is the best way down,' I called to Bryan, who was some way above me. They were very nearly my last words! Hardly had I uttered them when my heel struck ice and I was hurtling downhill on my back, totally out of control.

[Seyðisfjörður is a town in the Eastern Region of Iceland at the innermost point of the fjord of the same name. The town is located in the municipality of Múlaþing. A road over Fjarðarheiði mountain pass (600 metres (2,000 ft)) connects Seyðisfjörður to the rest of Iceland; 27 kilometres (17 miles) to the ring road and Egilsstaðir. Seyðisfjörður is surrounded by mountains with the most prominent Mt. Bjölfur to the west (1085m) and Strandartindur (1010 m) to the east. The fjord itself is accessible on each side from the town, by following the main road that leads through the town. Further out the fjord is fairly remote but rich with natural interests including puffin colonies and ruins of former activity such as nearby Vestdalseyri from where the local church was transported. Source: Wikipedia 2022]

The mountain was steep, bare of vegetation, and composed largely of loose rock and scree. I was gathering speed down the ice-filled gully, trying vainly to arrest my fall by clutching at snow and ice. By the time I emerged on to the rocky scree, my speed was terrific and growing ever faster. Still clutching madly at anything within reach, I dislodged masses of stones and boulders, which slithered and bounced and roared down beside me in a veritable avalanche. It seemed to go on forever, and knowing how precipitous the middle parts of the mountain were, I was convinced that it was the end of me. I had just about given up hope when suddenly I stopped. The crashing and rattling of the avalanche continued all about me and my ears were filled with the roar of rocks and boulders. Then a boulder struck me on the head and I blacked out. When I came to, the noise had stopped. It was pitch dark and I was lying on a ledge bleeding freely. From way up in the sky above me I heard a distant call. It must have been Bryan. 'Are you all right?' he seemed to be yelling. When I tried to answer, all I could manage was a croak.

[Again, I believe God intervened, and spared my father's life – for His purposes.]

For a long time I lay there bruised, battered and bleeding and with a splitting headache. All was quiet but the moon had risen. I took stock of my surroundings and got painfully to my feet. Just in front of me was a precipice. In the moonlight I could see well enough to traverse slowly across to another slope and gradually hobble and stumble down it. Still far below me I could see the fjord and the lights of the ship at anchor. It seemed to take hours to get down to where the grass and bushes began and I was feeling awful. At last the slopes became more gentle and I slowly traversed towards the head of the fjord. All of a sudden I was aware of a figure approaching and a voice hailed me: 'Are you one of the search party?' I was still confused. 'No. What search party?' I replied. 'One of our officers has fallen down a mountain. They reckon he's a gonner, but we've been told to search for him.' By this time I could discern several other shadowy figures strung out on the slopes. Next a torch blazed in my face. With my matted hair, face and hands covered in blood and clothes in tatters, I must have looked quite a sight. 'Oh my God!' exclaimed the man behind the torch, Lootenant 'All? You still alive, then? - Give me quite a turn, you did!'

By the time they got me back to the ship and into the Sick Bay, it was well after midnight. It all caused quite a stir. We had to fit the story together. I was still a bit hazy about my side of it, though it was beginning to come back. I remembered Bryan's last shout (after failing to get any response to his question as to whether I was all right), and I relished it: 'I think I'll try some other way down' (!). Apparently he'd gone back to the ship about an hour later and reported the accident to the Captain, saying he didn't think I could have survived. According to the Captain his words were: 'Im afraid Hall's had it.' We subsequently worked out that I must have fallen nearly 900 feet. I was lucky indeed to have fetched up on that ledge!

Several other fjords were surveyed, but by mid-November *Challenger* had completed all her surveys in Iceland and we sailed for Scapa Flow. Here we joined a south-bound convoy heading down the War Channel through the North Sea. One of my duties was the custody of confidential books, cyphers and classified signals, and one of those signals which I took to the Captain contained a directive to merchant ships in convoy. They were not to open fire on enemy aircraft unless they themselves were actually attacked. Did this apply to us? Though not a merchant ship, *Challenger* was in the convoy and not part of the escort. In these circumstances one assumed that we were required to obey the directive like any other ship in the convoy.

Next afternoon the convoy was attacked. A solitary Heinkel seaplane came in from the east, skirted the flank of the convoy, and was fired on by an outlying cruiser, though without much effect. It banked, dived, and came in low across our port quarter. I was in charge of the after pom-pom. Should I open fire? It was not attacking us. I hesitated. The Heinkel glided quietly past our stern -and suddenly dropped a torpedo. 'Open fire!' I yelled and a shattering stream of 2-pdr. shells poured out in an arc towards it. Too late! It opened up full throttle and zoomed away to the north. An enormous spout of white water reared up against the port bow of the merchant ship on our starboard quarter, followed by a deep thud. She had been squarely hit.

'That bloody signal!' I thought. 'But for that I'd have opened fire a few seconds earlier and we might have averted the strike!' It was the first time in my life that I'd ever been in action and I felt both excited and frightened. I remember actually feeling my knees knocking together as we waited for the Heinkel to return and attack us. But it did not. Meanwhile the merchant ship had lost way and was settling by the head. *Challenger* was ordered to assist her. We lowered a sea boat and sent Bryan O'Neill and the Engineer Officer over to her. Two of her crew had been killed but the damaged forepart had been sealed off. The engines and boilers were unscathed and the Master reckoned he could limp into Tynemouth stern first. We left the ship to her fate and re-joined the convoy.

Our next surveying assignment took us to Ireland, where we were directed to survey Lough Foyle. The decision of the Irish Free State to remain neutral had, in effect, denied us the use of Bere Haven in the south and Lough Swilly in the north of Ireland, both of which would have been invaluable as bases for our convoy escort forces. In default of these, we were forced to rely on Londonderry, the approach to which lay through the whole length of Lough Foyle with its shallow and dangerous waters, in which ships frequently went aground. As the Admiralty Chart of Lough Foyle was hopelessly out of date, our first task in that spring of 1941 was to carry out a complete re-survey of the Lough on a fairly large scale.

It was an interesting survey, partly because the high ground bordering the Lough on the north-western side lay in the Free State and was therefore barred to us. Under normal circumstances the whole survey would have been controlled from this side, as all the other shores were low-lying and flat. Thus a good deal of improvisation was called for.

Chapter 7: The Anselm Disaster and the Surveys in Gambia, 1941-2

Towards the end of June 1941 we received our sailing orders. We were to assume charge of a convoy consisting of the troop ship *Anselm*, carrying about 2,000 soldiers, with two escorting corvettes of the 'Flower' Class. It was a pretty puny escort, particularly as *Challenger* had no asdic or A/S armament, but the best that could be afforded in the circumstances. Nevertheless, it was a heavy responsibility for Commander Jenks. He placed *Challenger* in the van of the convoy, about five cables ahead of the *Anselm*, and one corvette on each flank, about five cables on either side of her. The whole formation advanced on a standard A/S zigzag, all ships turning together at predetermined times. Thus we headed out around Ireland and set our course southward through the Atlantic towards the Azores.

Each day we received the 'Daily U-Boat Situation Report'. It was broadcast in cypher by the Admiralty and gave the latest informed assessment of the positions of enemy U-Boats (based, we assumed, on D/F bearings of their routine radio-transmissions). These positions were at once plotted on the Atlantic Ocean chart in our Chartroom and marked by little red flag-pins. When our little convoy was about a week out from home, it became clear that at least two of these flags were getting uncomfortably close to us, and every now and again one or other of our corvettes would break off on an investigation of an asdic 'contact', only to report later: 'Non-Sub'. Doubtless we were all getting a bit jittery.

It was a beautiful moonlit night in July, with a slight sea, and I had the Middle Watch. We were making about 10 knots and *Anselm* was plunging along lazily astern of us with the corvettes spread out on either wing and easily visible in the moonlight. We were zigzagging 20° either side of a mean course, holding each leg of the zigzag for 10 or 20 minutes, and all was peace and quiet. But at the back of our minds were those little red flags inexorably closing in. I had steaming hot mugs of thick sweet cocoa ready for my relief, Jack Paisley, when he came up at 0355 to take over the Watch. Having briefed him and got him to sign the Captain's Night Order Book, I took my departure with the words: 'And for Christ's sake don't get us torpedoed!' Fully clothed, I lay down on my bunk and in no time was out like a light. Hardly had I lost consciousness when all hell broke loose. Alarm rattlers throughout the ship were making a continuous and appalling din, and a long succession of short blasts on the ship's siren roused every man from his slumbers, while the stamping and rattling of hundreds of feet on the iron ladders to the upper deck emphasised the sense of emergency. I was back on the bridge in a flash and arrived there just after the Captain.

Jack Paisley's face was white as a sheet and the Captain looked drawn and grey. It was 0415 and out on the starboard quarter *Anselm* was down by the head, stopped and listing to port. She had been hit on the port bow. The corvettes were careering off at full speed and dropping depth-charges. We increased to full speed too and started circling round the crippled troop-ship, expecting another attack at any minute - perhaps on ourselves. *Anselm's* decks were crowded with troops and frantic efforts were being made to lower her boats. Her bows were sinking lower and lower in the water, great clouds of steam belching from her funnel, and her rudder and screws were beginning to show. 'Up all hammocks - on the fo'c'sle!' came the order, and in a few minutes the foredeck was buried by lashed-up hammocks. 'Out all fenders, starboard side for'ard. Prepare to go alongside!' came the next pipe. Commander Jenks lost no more time. He placed *Challenger* close under *Anselm's* port

quarter, twenty feet below her upper deck, which was steadily rising. 'Jump for it!' he bellowed through his megaphone, and swarms of soldiers leapt down on to the hammocks, landing in heaps, spraining ankles and breaking legs, and being shepherded aft to make room for more. They came down in hundreds, many writhing in agony as they landed from 30 feet above. It had become too dangerous. Anselm was beginning to stand on end, her stern rising ever more swiftly. 'Cut the ropes! - Full speed astern!' shouted the Captain, and Challenger backed off to a safe distance. Anselm's stern reared up into the air and she stood vertical, her funnel awash, for several minutes. A tremendous crashing mingled with the shouts and screams as every piece of loose gear on her decks swept down into the sea, and every soldier without a foothold or handhold was carried down with it. It was a horrifying sight. A cluster of men still stood on her stern, 200 feet above the sea.

The ship stood vertical with half her length in the air. Sea water was pouring in through her funnel and we expected her boilers to explode. There came a succession of dull thunderclaps as her bulkheads collapsed one after the other and she started to dive. The soldiers still clustered high up on her stern, sensing that they would be sucked down with her, started throwing themselves into the sea. From that height, almost 200 feet, they had no chance. They hit the water with sickening force, throwing up huge splashes, and were killed instantly. With horrible swiftness the ship went down and disappeared completely, leaving a mass of flotsam and wreckage heaving and plunging in a vast pool of oily turbulence. We watched it all at close quarters, almost paralysed with horror. *Anselm* had gone. It was scarcely credible. Many men were swimming in the oily water, some clinging to floating planks and gratings, others crammed into the lifeboats or else swimming towards them, while yet others clung to them for dear life. We had to act quickly. Our sea-boat was lowered and the two corvettes closed in with their scrambling nets down. I had to do something and got the Captain's permission to take away the skiff with one man on the oars. Several heads were bobbing about within a cable's length of us and we hauled them aboard covered with oil and gasping for air. As we paddled about among the drowned corpses and the wreckage, I was so overcome by the enormity of what had happened, and so resentful and indignant at the brutality that the Germans had inflicted on these men, that I found myself saying aloud, over and over again, 'The bastards!... the bastards!... the bastards!'

[What a terrible experience, enough to give anyone PTSD. Clearly my father remembered this vividly, and in a letter for my 25th birthday in August 1980, he wrote: "Many Happy Returns of the Day! And congratulations on your first quarter-century (and how does that feel?) At the same age I was off the Azores escorting a troopship which was attacked by a U-boat and sunk with much loss of life – so was not feeling too hilariously happy..."]

As there seemed to be no more survivors anywhere near us, we pulled back to the ship with the few wretches whom we had rescued. God knows, it was little enough in all conscience, but at least I'd done something to help. *Challenger* rescued no fewer than 900 men, and the two corvettes another 600 between them. All the while we were expecting another attack, though the corvettes had found no trace of the U-Boat despite all their depth-charging. 1,500 had been rescued. That meant that at least 500 had perished, and we heard afterwards from some of the survivors that about 400 of these had been trapped in the for'ard mess-decks, unable to reach safety due to the destruction of the ladders when the torpedo exploded.

[The rescue of so many survivors must have afforded some consolation, and compensation, for the horrors my father endured that night.]

With our own crew, we now had over 1,000 men aboard our small ship and, not unnaturally, the survivors were loath to go below. The upper deck and superstructure were absolutely packed with them and *Challenger* had become unstable due to the topweight. The ship's motion had become alarming, and there was no alternative but to arm our own men and force most of the soldiers below decks. All cabins and other accommodation were given over to them and the Sick Bay and passageways were crammed with the injured and dying. We had a major problem on our hands. The Medical Officer and the Supply Officer, with their small staffs, worked like Trojans to alleviate suffering and to sustain bodies and souls, but it was First Aid and couldn't be more than temporary. Meanwhile others had heard of our plight and the Armed Merchant Cruiser *Cathay* arranged to rendezvous with us next morning. So for another 24 hours the three little ships pressed on southwards with their huge burdens of suffering humanity.

Next morning the great bulk of A.M.C. *Cathay* (an ex-P. & O. liner) hove into sight. Oh what a relief! All three of our ships berthed alongside her in turn. She readily took every one of our 1,500 survivors (including the dead). Then we formed up to carry out a combined A/S sweep together. *Cathay* was now in charge (she had a Captain, R.N. in command), and disposing the ships in line abreast, she ordered a speed of 14 knots for the sweep.

The utmost *Challenger* could do was 13 knots, flat out. There was nothing for it but to spread our sails. We had a large mainsail with boom and gaff, which we used to set from time to time. It could give us an extra half knot and could reduce rolling. We also carried a large foresail - which was seldom, if ever, used. In the International Code of Signals there was a group of flags which meant 'Request permission to make plain sail'. This seemed appropriate, so we hoisted it at the yard-arm. *Cathay* was obviously a bit puzzled by this, as she kept her answering-pendant at the dip for some time.

After a while she hoisted it close up – and then broke out another signal in International Code. *Cathay* was clearly having fun, for this one was translated 'Affirmative. Do you intend to "Up Screw"?' (Much merriment all round). So we set our sails and just managed to keep up.

[Historical note: SS Anselm was a British turbine steamship of the Booth Steamship Company. She was built as a cargo and passenger liner in 1935 and requisitioned and converted into a troop ship in 1940. Toward the end of June 1941 Anselm left Britain for Freetown again. She was heavily overloaded with about 1,200 British Army, Royal Marines and Royal Air Force personnel: more than twice the 500 she had been converted to carry. There were 175 RAF personnel, posted to serve in the North African Campaign. Sources agree that she was escorted by the survey vessel HMS Challenger and Flower-class corvettes Lavender, Petunia and Starwort.]

In the early hours of 5 July 1941 Anselm and her escorts were in mid-Atlantic, proceeding south through fog about 300 nautical miles (560 km) north of the Azores. Challenger was leading the troop ship in line ahead; Starwort was stationed in line astern because her ASDIC was out of order. Lavender and Petunia were in screening positions ahead, either side of Challenger's bow. At about 0350 hours the fog cleared, and the convoy began to zigzag as evasive action against possible attack. However, a Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor patrol had reported the convoy's position and at 0426 hours the German Type VIIC submarine U-96, commanded by Kptlt Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock, fired a spread of

four torpedoes at Challenger and Anselm. None hit Challenger but one struck Anselm's port side amidships, causing extensive damage and momentarily lifting the troop ship in the water. U-96 dived and the corvettes counter-attacked, Lavender firing six depth charges and Petunia firing 20. When the attack drew too close to the survivors it was broken off, but the submarine was seriously damaged and broke off her patrol to return to Saint-Nazaire submarine base in occupied France for repairs.

Anselm launched all her lifeboats except no. 6, which had been damaged by the explosion. Challenger had been 1/2 nautical mile (930 m) ahead but manoeuvred close to Anselm's port quarter and took off 60 or more survivors as the troop ship's bow settled in the water. Officers from the passenger accommodation were able to reach the boat deck, but the impact caused extensive damage below decks, where collapsed overheads and wrecked ladders injured or trapped many of the men in one of the converted holds. One survivor states that officers got away in boats from Anselm's stern without waiting to help their men.

The ship sank 22 minutes after being hit, and four crew and about 250 troops were killed. The armed merchant cruiser HMS Cathay took survivors from Anselm's overloaded escorts and landed them at Freetown. Most men aboard, including the majority of other ranks, did survive. Anselm's Master, Andrew Elliot, 92 of her crew, three DEMS gunners and 965 troops were rescued. Many were at first in the water, but were picked up by Challenger, Starwort or the ship's own lifeboats and rafts. Most of the survivors in the boats and rafts were transferred to the escort ships, ascending the sides by scramble nets. This left Challenger and the corvettes badly overloaded, so the survivors were transferred again to HMS Cathay which landed them at Freetown. Source: Wikipedia 2017]

We were now bound for the western extremity of the African Continent and specifically for the mouth of the Gambia River. Here a Convoy Assembly Point was to be established, vitally important to shipping to and from the Far East, which at this time was routed round the Cape. Existing charts and maps of the area were virtually useless and we would have to start from scratch, surveying not only the hydrography of the river, but the topography of the surrounding countryside as well. In the end we found ourselves surveying the river as far up as it was navigable, but when we began we were unaware of this extra task to come. In all, the work was to take us seven months.

On my first sight of the low-lying, steamy and unhealthy-looking coast, the phrase that rose to my mind was 'the white man's grave'. The work itself, however, though arduous, was engrossing and challenging as well as being punctuated by many lighter moments.

We started by measuring a mile-and-a-half long 'Base' (with a dog-leg in it), laid out along the beach west of Bathurst. It was alleged to be the longest base-measurement in hydrographic history and, since it had to be done with meticulous accuracy, it took us well over a week.

We then had to work out the scale, position and orientation of the survey. The exact geographical position of one end of the Base had first to be established, and this was done by observing the transit, through an altitude of exactly 45°, of a series of pre-selected stars and planets. The observations (and there were up to 50 of them made by several officers working independently one of another) were taken with a 45° prismatic astrolabe with a

mercury 'horizon' and the exact time of each transit was established by means of a chronograph - with a known error on G.M.T. Protracted preparations and subsequent calculations were needed, but by the end of a week or so a mean geographical position, in terms of latitude and longitude (to fractions of a second of arc), had been established.

We could now define the scale and position of the survey, and our next task would be to establish its orientation. A theodolite was set up exactly over the Observation Point (one end of the Base) and a True Bearing was observed by zero-ing the instrument on a relatively distant 'Main Station' and accurately measuring the horizontal angle between it and the sun (or a planet). This procedure was repeated a number of times on both 'faces' of the theodolite and on different parts of its azimuth circle. As the true bearing of each heavenly body at the time of observation could be precisely calculated, and the horizontal angles between them and the distant survey mark had been measured, a mean True Bearing could be deduced.

Even while this was being done, a number of other officers were already out in the field, setting up huge tripodial survey-marks as 'Main Stations' and proceeding with the main triangulation. Once all this had been accomplished, the master Plotting Sheet could be brought out and all marks meticulously positioned and 'pricked through' on to it. Thus the framework of the survey was established.

About the end of July I was assigned the task of tackling the coastline and topography. For this I followed a road leading westward over the mangrove swamps to Cape St. Mary. It was 'macadamised' and the heat thrown up from it not only tried me sorely in a physical sense, but very often created a mirage effect strong enough to prevent the use of any optical instrument. By the time I reached Cape St. Mary, I was heartily sick of that road!

I was next required to map the hinterland further up country. The method used was known as a 'Pacing Traverse'. In fact it consisted of a whole series of 'closed traverses', each starting at a fixed point and eventually returning to that same point. In this work I was accompanied by one faithful Able Seaman, a cheerful companion who shared the heat and burden of the day, carrying my equipment without complaint. He became quietly impressed by what he regarded as my uncanny ability to find my way back, after several days - in one case about a week - of apparently aimless 'safari' through jungle and parkland to my starting point. After one particularly long and convoluted 'safari', when we had duly arrived back at the peg marking our point of departure, he said: 'You know, sir, I reckon there's no one who knows Africa like what you do!' That day I truly felt my cup was full!

The lower reaches of the Gambia River are fringed with extensive mangrove swamps intersected with a maze of serpentine 'creeks'. The mudbanks, which dry out at low tide and are flooded at high tide, are infested with large crocodiles. I now had to start exploring and mapping this rather sinister area. I had with me a 16-ft. motor skiff and a 10-ft. dory in tow, with a crew of four sailors. The work took me practically a month. Sounding along each line, using a hand-bearing compass and a 'Leitz' range-finder for measuring distances, and making a series of zigzag traverses, we advanced steadily upstream, charting the shape, course, width and depth of each creek as we went. We had to be careful never to get completely lost, which in such a maze would have been all too easy.

One day as we chugged our way forward along a steadily narrowing creek with very high mangroves on either side, I was idly trailing my hand in the cool water at the side of the skiff when I noticed a group of objects a short distance ahead. It was the eyes and nostrils of a submerged crocodile. Suddenly out came its head and it lunged at me with wide-open jaws. I withdrew my hand in the nick of time just as the serrated rows of yellowish teeth snapped shut with a sickening crunch a mere foot from the side of the boat.

Working parallel with us, but further up-river, was another party using similar techniques. The officer in charge was our senior Lieutenant (he may even have shipped his half-stripe as a Lt. Cdr.) and I refer to him as 'Sharpey' for short, as that is what we called him. We were steadily progressing our respective surveys towards each other, and would eventually meet. One day while we were working up our results in the Chartroom, I noticed that our work had overlapped at one point, covering the same ground but showing minor discrepancies in our findings. In effect we had a classic mutual misclosure and the orthodox solution was to accept the mean of the two positions and re-adjust the traverses leading to them. But I had not yet got the measure of Sharpey. Whereas I could adjust my traverse while transferring it to the fair tracing, Sharpey had already traced his work and would have to re-draw it. 'My position is correct,' he said, 'Adjust yours to agree with it.' 'Certainly not,' I replied, 'What makes you think your position is more correct than mine?' 'I am more experienced than you,' he answered. 'That may be,' I countered, 'but we've both used the same techniques and our final traverses are roughly the same length, so there's nothing to choose between them.' 'Well I'm senior to you, so do as I say,' he replied. In the end the Captain had to arbitrate and I'm glad to say that he stood no nonsense from that other officer. (That was the first of many disputes I was to have with him in future years).

It must have been late November by the time we'd finished the main survey, and Commander Jenks then decided to extend it further up-river. A new triangulation was required to cover the broad lower reaches, which were fringed on both sides with high mangrove trees. It was decided that a chain of full-size tripodial survey-marks should be established in the water, along the edge of the mangroves, to mark the Main Stations. This was easier said than done, and the problems fell to us to solve.

Consider the circumstances and the conditions. The ledge fringing the mangrove trees on each side of the river was of deep slimy mud. Most of the time it was under water but at low tide a foot or two of it was exposed to the sun. The tidal range was about six or seven feet, so that at high tide there were four or five feet of water above the mudbanks. A full-size Main Survey mark could be 45 ft. high, being constructed of three 30 ft. 'barlings' (similar to telegraph poles) lashed together at their apex to form a strong tripod with a 30 ft. bamboo flag-pole protruding from the top. For extra rigidity, wooden planks would be fixed across the barlings halfway up on all three sides, and the spaces above would be filled with wood-and-canvas triangles. Wire guys would be led from the bamboo pole to heavy iron stakes driven well into the ground, and a 12-by-8 ft. flag would be laced to the top of the bamboo. The whole contraption would be painted white for maximum visibility. These marks were extremely heavy and usually required at least eight men to erect them.

Now what might be practical on dry land was not necessarily so on soft submerged mud. We decided that we would have to compromise, making do with marks of about two-thirds full

size and using 20 ft. hop-poles instead of the barlings, and 12 ft. boathook staves instead of the bamboos. But we had to prevent the heels of the tripod from sinking into the mud and also from floating out of it at high water. This was achieved by fixing 3 ft. square boards just above each heel and shackling on to the heel a 1/2 cwt. iron sinker. To prevent the heels of the tripod from 'splaying', the three legs were linked by steel-wire rope at ground level, while the wire guys from the flag-pole were led well out to boats' anchors buried in the mud.

Four of these marks were to be erected on the first day, to provide an initial quadrilateral from which the triangulation could be carried further up-river. One of these, on the south side, was assigned to me to erect and observe from. I had a party of six and the 27-ft. whaler. Laden down as it was with all this heavy gear (and a good deal more), we found it easier to sail than to pull. We reached the selected site at low water, anchored the boat and leapt out on to the mud, sinking into it to our knees. It took us all morning to set up the mark and secure it, by which time we were floundering about not only in eighteen inches of slimy mud, but in a further eighteen inches of steadily rising water. Several crocodiles, which had been snoozing a short way off when we arrived, had now been submerged, and were watching our progress with baleful eyes as they circled round within twenty yards of us.

Now came the difficult part. Sending my party off to have lunch in the boat, and with the help of my S.R., I began the task of positioning the theodolite. To observe accurate angles, the instrument has to be firmly mounted and levelled, with its baseplate absolutely horizontal and its axis plumbed vertically below the flagstaff. To provide a reasonably firm platform for the legs of the theodolite-tripod, we made a large triangle of weighted planks and sank it into the mud as centrally as possible below the apex of the mark. We then placed the feet of the tripod on the submerged planks and screwed on the theodolite, which by this time was about two feet clear of the water. Levelling a theodolite is an intricate process at the best of times, and in these highly unusual circumstances it was well nigh impossible. Once levelled, the slightest knock or pressure on the tripod is sufficient to upset it, and with this unstable ground-platform, and the waves lapping against the tripod, one could only do one's best. To provide something to grip and lean on while peering into the theodolite and moving carefully round it, we drove a large heavy spade into the mud vertically below it. I was able to hold on to this as I started to observe.

By this time the water was above my waist and one or two of the crocodiles seemed appreciably nearer. Getting four rounds of angles is a time-consuming process and requires intense concentration on the part of the observer. I was apprehensive about the crocodiles and realised that as things stood, I would not be able to devote my whole attention to the job in hand. I therefore ordered one of my sailors to scramble up the mark with a rifle and ammunition and perch on the crossbar just above and behind me. I gave him instructions to shoot any croc which approached us. Thus protected, I got on with the business of observing, though every movement of my feet in the mud as I shifted position required a re-check on the level of the theodolite. I got my last angle just as the waves were beginning to lap the baseplate. It was quite the 'hairiest' bit of observing I'd ever done and I was more than thankful when it was over!

By December 1941 the United States had entered the War, the Japanese had treacherously attacked, and almost destroyed, the American fleet at Pearl Harbour and Germany had declared war on the United States. The War had entered a totally new phase and Commander Jenks decided that the classical style of our survey was too slow. He had set

his sights on a new record: to survey the Gambia River as far inland as it was navigable. By normal methods that would take years, so we'd do what was known as a Running Survey. I won't describe the technique in detail, but it meant three parallel lines of soundings - by the ship, with an S.M.B. each side of her - while fixing by Taut Wire Measuring Gear and 'shooting up' features on both banks from each fix as the formation advanced up-river. Our goal was a place called Kuntur, about 200 miles inland. We covered 20 miles a day and moored up to the river-bank each evening, where we established a tide-pole. I had become the ship's Tidal Officer, so it fell to me to plot the many tidal curves obtained from the different poles, and to deduce the appropriate reductions to apply to the previous day's soundings. These reductions had to be 'smoothed out' as we advanced, and as the tidal range steadily diminished.

We reached Kuntur and spent Christmas there - a rather subdued Christmas as I recall - and we observed a Geographical Position on which to tie in our long traverse. The misclosure turned out to be much smaller than Jenks had expected and he was like a dog with two tails, dispensing 'seasonal cheer' to all the officers in the 'cuddy'. In all the two years we'd served with him, we'd never seen him so completely relaxed. Not only had we successfully completed the major survey assigned to us, but we'd also - off our own bat - done this tremendous running survey into the very heart of the colony.

It must have been mid-January when we finally left the Gambia, and few of us were sorry to see the last of it. None of us had been consigned to 'The White Man's Grave' and none had succumbed to the bite of the deadly Black Mamba (the local snake we'd been repeatedly warned about, against which we always carried a razor-blade and antidote). During the seven months we had spent there, it is true, several of our number had been invalided home with other forms of sickness.

We joined a north-bound convoy from the Cape and wished we'd been routed independently. One evening, just after dark, the convoy was attacked. One of our Escorts, H.M.S. *Culver*, was sunk with all hands. I was on the bridge of our ship when it happened, and we were all shattered by the catastrophe. Those 'lend-lease' cutters were not designed as warships. Having very little watertight subdivision, they were widely regarded as 'floating coffins'.

We arrived in Home Waters in early February and put into the Foyle to embark fresh provisions. Then we went round to Sheerness to re-fit and lie-up, and were welcomed home by the Hydrographer of the Navy (Vice-Admiral Sir John Edgell), who formally congratulated us all on our efforts and, in my case, at last agreed to release me to General Service.

Chapter 8: Lieutenant, H.M.S. Fraserburgh (M/S 15), 1942

Having - to my delight - been released for General Service, I was sent to H.M.S. *Dryad*, the Navigation School, for an N* course which, under the exigencies of war, had been reduced to six weeks. It was designed to fit us as Navigating Officers of cruisers and destroyer and minesweeping flotillas, and I found it pretty straightforward.

At the end of the course I was appointed Navigating Officer of the 15th Minesweeping Flotilla based at Granton on the Forth. The Flotilla was manned almost entirely by Reservists and the Leader, H.M.S. *Fraserburgh*, in which I was to serve, was commanded by a 'dug-out' R.N. Commander named Claude Plumer. Thus I was the only Active Service R.N. officer in the entire Flotilla.

Our initial task was the routine sweeping of the North Sea War Channel, which ran from Duncansby Head to the Thames Estuary. On one occasion, while working in the North Sea, we were suddenly enveloped in thick fog. With many inevitable uncertainties in our D.R. (Dead Reckoning), we had no means of fixing our position. 'Well now, Pilot,' asked Commander Plumer, pushing his head over the chart table, 'Where are we?' 'Well, sir,' I replied, indicating a vague position on the chart, 'We might be anywhere within three miles of this D.R.' I suggested that it might be prudent to anchor and wait for the fog to clear. 'No,' decided the Old Man, 'Let's go back to Harwich, Pilot. You'll have to do the best you can.'

Our 60-mile course for Harwich was beset by sandbanks and other hazards, including a strong southwards-flowing flood-stream. This was in the days before radar (at least as far as we were concerned) and we were absolutely 'blind'. I took the rates and directions of the tidal streams from the relevant data on the chart and, to the extent that I could assess their effect over a six-hour period, laid off a 'safe' course to the outer bell-buoy off Harwich, using my slide rule to assess probable 'speed made good' along the way. I was far from confident as to the outcome, but I'd done the best I could.

Doing about ten knots on a south-westerly course, and giving the regulation long blast on our siren every two minutes, we forged ahead even though we could scarcely see our own jackstaff. As evening drew on I said to the Captain, 'We should be within five miles of the bell-buoy now, sir.' We strained our ears - and carried on. By this time I was growing apprehensive. At least the echo-sounder was giving the right depths - more or less. The minutes ticked by and we listened. Not a sound in the still air! Surely we should be able to hear the bell-buoy by now? Of course, it was a flat calm. Since the bell was wave-operated, perhaps that was why it wasn't ringing. Just as I was saying to myself, 'Oh Lord, we should be altering course by now,' a sudden shout came from the bow look-out: 'Object on the starboard bow!' There it was, ten yards away, its name as clear as daylight and with the bell just audible! 'Oh joy!' I thought. 'Bang on! Well done, Pilot!' said the Captain as we ordered 'Starboard 20' and swung round for Harwich. 'Whew, that was quite something - my first navigational achievement,' I thought to myself.

All that spring the flotilla was in process of forming up. We were formed into two Divisions with *Fraserburgh* leading the first and (if I remember rightly) *Eastbourne* the second, with an R.N.R. Commander as her C.O. In July the whole flotilla steamed round the North of Scotland through the Pentland Firth to join up with the Deep Sea Minelaying Squadron in

Loch Aish on the west coast. We were required to sweep up a large minefield in which the Minelaying Squadron had laid all the mines at the wrong depth. This was the first time that a deep minefield had been swept and there were no obvious means of position-fixing or marking the swept areas. A plan of action was drawn up, but then every conceivable difficulty arose, and though we did work out a method of operation of sorts, the errors and uncertainties entailed were far too great for comfort. To make matters worse, weather conditions in the North Atlantic were surprisingly bad for August, and in September became almost prohibitive. Fixing and plotting our painful progress, we pressed doggedly on, often through mountainous seas. Although we managed to sweep up a few of our mines and sink them by gunfire, both the weather and the mounting beacon casualties were against us. Finally by mid-September, with the onset of the equinoctial gales, the operation was called off.

On one occasion off the north coast of Scotland we were caught by a sudden easterly gale and decided to seek shelter. With the flotilla following in line ahead, we set course to pass close under the lee of Cape Wrath and round into the Minches. Hunting through the chart folios for a suitable night anchorage, I discovered a delightful old 19th-century chart of Loch Laxford, which seemed to fit the bill nicely. I found that by drawing in the swinging circles of each of our eight ships, the whole flotilla could anchor safely in line ahead, 1½ cables apart, just clearing the rocks on either side of the loch - provided they kept perfect station while doing so.



Fraserburgh at anchor off Reykjavik, 1942

We entered with the setting sun behind us and a superb scene opened ahead. The loch was completely sheltered and was surrounded by wild, rock-strewn country, apparently devoid of any human habitation. All went according to plan: we anchored in formation by signal, all ships 'letting go' together when ordered.

Towards the end of September we were assigned a new minesweeping task, this time off the east coast of Iceland. We had to clear part of the route followed by the Arctic convoys taking war materials to Murmansk for our Russian allies. This route took them close eastward of Iceland through water sufficiently shallow for minelaying, and several ships had been lost as a result. Our task, therefore, was to keep this area mine-free. Once again I was intrigued that we were to re-visit this fascinating land, and that we were to be based at Seydisfjord (which *Challenger* had surveyed two years previously, and where I had made my epic descent of Strandatindur!) Not only was I reasonably familiar with the coastal topography - the peaks and headlands - but my surveying experience of accurate position-fixing by simultaneous horizontal sextant angles was going to stand me in good stead for this particular operation.

Seydisfjord proved an ideal base for the 15th Minesweeping Flotilla, being spacious, fully protected and conveniently situated for our daily operations. As we set out each morning, the dawn landscape was enthralling, with the rising sun directly ahead turning the snow-covered mountains on either side into a fantasy of pink and gold while the clear air of early morning provided a stimulus for the day's work.

The area to be swept lay roughly parallel to, and about 15 miles off, the east coast, and I was able to keep an accurate plot of our progress. Before long we started encountering mines, which, to our surprise, exploded with dramatic effect beneath the surface as we swept them up. We soon realised that these were the latest type of German 'S' mines, moored to float a few fathoms below the surface and designed to explode as soon as their mooring wires were cut. I felt absolutely elated at the key role I was playing in helping to clear what was obviously a major enemy minefield .

It was fairly certain that some of the mines had been laid by U- Boats, while we knew that magnetic and acoustic mines in our own waters had been laid from the air. We were therefore intrigued to observe, at times, one or more German aircraft circling us at a fairly low altitude and just out of range of our guns. We concluded that the areas we had cleared during the day had been observed by these planes and that a U-Boat acting on information from them had been re-laying fresh strings of mines in the areas we had just cleared. We decided that though there seemed to be no end to this cat-and-mouse game, if we persevered, they would be the first to give up. In fact it became rather amusing, each side knowing what the other was up to, and we actually reached the point of exchanging banter - by Aldis lamp - with the German aircraft circling outside our range.



15th Minesweeping Flotilla leaving Seydisfjord to continue work off-shore, 1942

In mid-November we were ordered to steam round to the north to carry out a series of searching sweeps in the Denmark Strait, between Iceland and Greenland. Weather conditions here were so atrocious that often there was nothing for it but to order 'In sweeps' and run for shelter. On one such occasion, in thick, blinding snow driven by a north-easterly gale, I had had little chance to fix our position for several hours. 'Well, where do you think we are?' asked the Old Man. I could only suggest steering south-eastward until I could get a fix.

I estimated that the nearest shelter would be Isafjord - if we could get there! With the rest of the flotilla wallowing astern of us, we headed blindly towards that fearsome, iron-bound north-west coast of Iceland, peering intently through binoculars in the hope of seeing something before we hit it. Suddenly, right ahead, I saw looming through the murk, snow-covered horizontal terraces and, by the grace of God, a white light flashing. As we swung round to port parallel to the land, by counting and timing the flashes, I was able to identify it beyond doubt and get a running fix. Though by this time it was dark, I reckoned we could make Isafjord for the night and we pressed on into the teeth of the gale. Eventually we got a lee and the appalling motion of those stubby little ships subsided. We were inside the mouth of Isafjord. With the moon rising and visibility improving, I reckoned that our best shelter would be in one of the north-easterly arms called Hesteyri fjord. Drawing on our experience at Laxford, we made a perfect approach in formation and, shortly before midnight, anchored the flotilla in complete calm. As we rang off engines and prepared to turn in, a boat came alongside with a message for me from the Captain of *Lyme Regis*: 'Congratulations, Pilot - but which fjord are we in?'

For our next series of searching sweeps we were based at Hvalfjord, where we arrived in late December. It was immensely satisfying to me to realise the use to which *Challenger's* 1940 survey had been put and to see the large number of warships now moored there.

We had quite a happy little Wardroom and I developed a close friendship with our Gunnery Control Officer ('Guns'). He was an R.N.VR. Lieutenant called Stephen Pyke, in private life a solicitor. He was a congenial character, as was Sub-Lieutenant Griffin R.N.VR. The latter was horribly prone to seasickness but, to my great admiration, would never allow himself to succumb to it and would always bring a bucket up to the bridge when he was Officer of the Watch.

A few days after Christmas the whole flotilla sailed home. Up to this point nearly all my navigation had been of a coastal nature and, except for our passage up from Scotland in the autumn, I had had little occasion to practise any astro-navigation. This, however, was to be a longer passage, which lent itself to routine sun-sights and star-sights, in which all the ships participated. As we approached Scotland, conditions deteriorated and I was anxious about our landfall. That night, however, I managed to get a good fix from the moon and one planet. Since there is no means of checking a fix based on only two position lines, it has, of course, to be treated with considerable reserve. Three P.L.s are regarded as the minimum on which one can rely. Notwithstanding this, I felt pretty confident of my sights, and anyway, that night nothing else was visible. So I laid off a course from that fix direct for Skerryvore. Sure enough, in the small hours we sighted it fine on the starboard bow. There could be no mistaking the flashing light, bright and clear and about twenty miles off. My spirits soared. I felt a great sense of achievement, not only on that score, but over the fact that I had succeeded in navigating the flotilla safely in all sorts of conditions throughout the year. My morale and self-confidence were sky-high.

We berthed at Greenock on the Clyde and took leave in two watches. I was to take second leave and most of the others had already pushed off when a pleasant-looking, dark-haired Lieutenant came aboard. 'Hall? Good morning, my name's Lyne - Geoffrey Lyne,' he said, 'I'm your relief.' 'I don't want to be relieved - what's all this about?' I asked, genuinely puzzled. 'Let's go for a walk and I'll explain,' he replied, and we drifted off together along the dockyard wall. He had an extraordinary story to tell.

[And at this point my father's war began in earnest...]