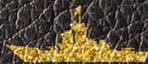

To the Pacific and Back



Jack Daniels

To the Pacific and Back

Memoirs of a Wartime Sailor

by

JACK DANIELS

Royal Navy (CKX 136471)



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Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

WILLIAM WHITING (1825-1878)

I should like to thank my son Michael for compiling this book, as without his help I am sure that it would not have been finished.

JACK DANIELS, NOVEMBER 1996

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Foreword

I was watching the VE celebrations on television in 1995 with Dad, and mentioned (not for the first time) that he should write his memoirs of the war — his war. Watching those television pictures must have evoked memories for him, both good and bad, because he started to talk about his experiences in more detail than he had in the past. What's more, he was coming round to the idea of setting it all out on paper.

His first effort, on a newly purchased word processor, was ... interesting! I soon realised that this was not going to work unless I quickly introduced Dad to new technology. With a PC installed in his upstairs room he got to work. He would be the first to admit that he was not a genius on a PC but, having said that, he had not seen one for the first 74 years of his life! He started with a 10-page book and was rightly proud

of what he had done, but both he and I knew that there was more to come.

Every few weeks some more pages arrived and most of my Sunday afternoons were spent going through Dad's story. The more pages he wrote, the more questions I asked. The more answers he gave, the more I asked him to expand upon them. We naturally disagreed at times — he tried to correct my English and I tried to tell him what had happened in the war! But even taking into account the Daniels' trait of stubbornness, which has obviously been passed from father to son, I think we just about got it right.

Each time I saw him a new chapter had been written and a fresh insight was given to a man that I had known all of my life, but in a funny kind of way it was describing someone that I hadn't known very well at all. I hadn't been aware of the hardship he had endured as a boy of 14 having to do a man's job for a pittance in pay. I hadn't known of the terror he had faced at the tender age of 18 in a war battle when being surrounded by death, and I hadn't known how close he had come to death himself on occasion.

For more years than I can remember, Dad had not talked about the war. I never knew whether this was because he hadn't wanted to talk about it, or just that he thought I wouldn't be interested. Now, at last, he was beginning to open up. What neither of us realised at the time was that his 10-page attempt at the beginning would end up being a 36,000-word story describing five years of someone's life that eventually told me more about my father than I could possibly have imagined.

I am tremendously proud of what Dad has said and the way he went about putting it down on paper. I am also extremely grateful to Mum for not only displaying her undoubted patience, but also having such a good memory so as to make sure he got various parts of it right (although I'm sure that there is more to tell about that flat in Sydney than he is letting on)! My Sunday afternoons will never quite be the same again.

I had enormous pleasure helping Dad write his book — I think almost as much as he did in writing it. I hope that you can enjoy some of that pleasure with him as you turn the pages that describe a five-year period in the life of my father — a wartime sailor.

MICHAEL DANIELS, NOVEMBER 1996

CHAPTER 1

Signing Up

It all started when my workmate Nick and I decided to join the armed forces. It was 17th January 1941; I was 18 years old and working as a bread roundsman.

At the age of 13 my mother asked me what I intended to do when I left school. Times were hard in the 1930s and thousands of people were out of work. All that families had to live on was a small allowance from the Labour Exchange which was never enough. If you didn't work you just went hungry. A lot of people tried to help themselves in whatever way they could and it was not uncommon to see a man walking along the gutter in the street singing with his cap in his hand hoping for a copper or two. Others would have a homemade barrow on which would be a small grindstone that was made to turn by using their feet on bits of a bicycle connected to the stone and with which they

used to sharpen knives and scissors. Totters were a regular sight around the streets with their call of “Rags! Bones! Lumber!”

I needed a job. To go for an apprenticeship would have been the best bet, but employers were the ones training you and they didn't pay much money. This didn't suit my mother who said that I should get an “ordinary job” — we needed the money. The foreman of the Co-operative bakery lived a couple of doors away and Mum had a word with him on my behalf. He suggested that I start as a Saturday boy which would help me get a job with them when I finally left school. So I got my first job at the age of 13. Little did I know that I would still be working 50 years later!

My day started at 5:00 a.m. and I had to be at the depot 30 minutes later. Whilst the driver was loading his van I would go to the stables to collect the horse and start to put on its harness, although I needed help from the horsekeeper on the first occasion. The horse was ready, but next I had to fill a nose bag for him and put some feed in a sack for a refill. I slung these over my shoulder and took the horse for a drink. By then the cart was loaded and I took him down to the yard and put him between the shafts. We made our way to the Woolwich free ferry and caught the 6:00 a.m. boat across the River Thames to the north side. Once there we made our way along the dock road to Silvertown (North Woolwich in East London) which was where the round started.

On our way round we used to stop at a working man's cafe and have a cup of tea and a slice of dripping toast. Back then it was just a matter of serving the customers throughout the

day. At about 1:00 p.m. the driver went for a beer in one of the local pubs and I sat on the cart and had my sandwiches. When he returned we were off again until the round was completed.

We used to finish at the same time each Saturday and park at the end of a street by a railway line, across from which was a clock on a building showing 7:30 p.m. The driver used to go and sup a couple more pints whilst I would pack any bread left over into baskets, remove all of the shelving and sweep the van clean. When he returned we made our way back to the ferry, and by the time we finished the journey we would be in time for the 8:30 p.m. boat.

Once on the south side of the river we returned to the depot where the first job was to return any bread left over and then put the cart away and remove the horse from the shafts and take him for a drink. I would remove the harness, take it to the tack room, put the horse in his correct stall and put his halter on. He was settled for the night. I then collected all of the baskets we had used. In the corner of the yard was a big tank of hot water in which the baskets were placed, then removed, scrubbed, rinsed and returned clean to the van.

I was at last finished and collected my day's pay — three shillings and sixpence in old money (or 17 ½ pence in new). I arrived home at about nine-thirty that night and all I wanted to do was to sit down and have a nice hot cup of tea. My last one had been just after six that morning.

Eventually the hard work had paid off and I got my job at the Co-operative bakery as soon as I left school at the age of 14. I was too young to be given a baker's round of my own so I worked as an assistant for two years before I was put to work

on the big delivery vans. At 16 I was too old to be an assistant, but too young to have a round of my own because at that age I was legally not considered to be responsible for any of the cash that was collected.

I remember my driver, a man called Harry, who I was told was a bit of a misery, but he wasn't too bad once I got to know him. I suppose it didn't help by the fact that he had a bad hip and to see him walk was a bit like watching a rocking horse going down the streets. This of course had its drawbacks, as a lot of the work was shifted onto me, but I didn't worry about it; it was all in a days work. The big vans were pulled by two very large horses. When driving along the road Harry had no problem, but when these two brutes had to be backed into an opening or put between two other vehicles it was a different matter. I used to wait for him to climb off of the van and I would hold the horse's heads and back them to wherever they were required to go. Sometimes they would show their anger by trying to take a lump out of my arm, and as there were two to watch, it was best to have very quick reactions!

Our job was to go to the main warehouse to load up with supplies to deliver to shops. Some of the supplies were very heavy, like whole pieces of cheese which came two to a wooden crate. Others included dried fruit (currants, sultanas, etc.) which were in tea chests filled to the top. I didn't use to mind this as they were only covered by a piece of white paper and I would help myself every so often. Another job we had was to go to the largest sugar manufacturer at the time, Tate and Lyle in Silvertown, to pick up bulk sugar. As Harry couldn't lift

heavy things I used to back up the horses and wait by the shoot for them to send down the sugar in two-hundredweight bags (224 pounds each). The shoot stopped a few feet from the ground so it gave me a chance to get the sacks on my back and then put them into the van. I certainly worked hard for my money in those days but at least I could stretch out on the top of the sacks and have a rest on the way back to the warehouse. I was still only 16 years old!

I had a few years on the vans with various drivers before being allowed to take over a baker's barrow of my own. The vans were very heavy when loaded with bread. I first filled the inside by careful stacking. I would build the bread into a pyramid which was covered with a sheet. The vans had two wheels with a pair of shafts, and to help these move along I would tie a rope to the van and pass it around my waist so as to use my body weight to move it and my arms to balance it. Who needed horses?

I had been working at the bakery as a barrow boy delivering bread for about 12 months when Nick joined the company. We got on well with each other from the very start. I introduced him to another barrow boy called Charlie, who was about 18 years old, and the three of us hit it off and stuck together after that. Nick and I used to go out and about in the evening but we never saw Charlie after work. He was a bit of a mystery lad and used to turn up for work each morning in a nice suit with just enough shirt cuff showing to look smart. Whilst we were filthy by the time we arrived back in the depot, Charlie would do his day's work and return just as clean and tidy as when he left. He used to drive to work in a big American car

and if you wanted anything he would get it for you. How did he do it? We didn't ask. Being older than Nick and me, Charlie was one of the first men to be called up for service in the Royal Navy. Sadly he was lost at sea.

Nick and I used to cycle to work most mornings. The fashion in those days was to have a very high saddle and very low handlebars. This might have looked a bit racy but it gave me a terrible crick in the neck. One dark morning I put my head down for a moment to ease my stiff neck and as I looked up I found myself hurtling straight into a milk float. In those days the only lights that horse-drawn vehicles had was a candle, so you couldn't see them until you were on top of them — literally in my case! The milkman asked one of his customers to look after my bike, which was rather bent, and I walked to work nursing my bruises.

On some occasions Nick and I used to use a tandem and it was amazing how fast we could make it go with two strong pairs of legs peddling. We used to like the look on the faces of car drivers as we passed them. Unfortunately, the trouble with overtaking cars was that you used to run into the tram lines. Once you were caught in those you were off of the bike and thrown right into the middle of the road. Talk about living dangerously.

The mention of danger reminds me of an attempt to save time on the bread round on a horse and cart. I would load a big basket full of bread and deliver in one road whilst the driver would deliver in the next, the idea being that we would meet at the bottom. My problem was that the driver never stopped at my road so I had to either jump off or wait until we got to his road and walk back. I devised a cunning plan. The iron

wheels had a hub sticking out at the centre and I would put my right foot on the hub, hold on to the cart with my right hand, and pull the basket off with my left hand. Now my right hand was gripping tight and my right foot was getting hot on the protruding spinning hub but if my timing was good I could jump off at my road. I did this many times and always landed on my feet, although I apparently mistimed one attempt as when I got home I took off my heavy boots and both my ankles had blown up like balloons. I had to wait for days for them to go down to normal size. No one thought of health and safety at work in those days!

Nick and I had been thinking about joining up for a few days and eventually decided that we would go and do something about it that afternoon. So off we went to our nearest recruitment centre which was situated in Lee High Road, Lewisham in South London. I wanted to join the Royal Navy and Nick wanted to go into the Royal Air Force. As neither of us were going to change our minds, we both went our separate ways.

I remember that it was a dull, wet day as we made our way to the centre. What struck me immediately about the place was how dark it was inside the room when we entered. Just a few wooden benches around the side and a bit of scruffy linoleum, and that was it. There was nobody else there except for an army sergeant who showed us each to the right room. I settled down with a petty officer who told me about life in the Royal Navy which, needless to say, sounded very exciting, but then it was meant to wasn't it? His job was to get me to join his mob and not go the same direction as Nick.

After he told me that I would make a fine sailor there was only one decision I could make — I told him to get the papers out for me to sign. Then came the next question: “What do you want to be?” After my answer he told me that nobody could start as a captain and that I had to go through the ranks! I decided that I would be a stoker, given my liking for mechanics. Also, if I ended up on Russian convoys, I would at least be warm next to those roaring fires. As it happened we went in the opposite direction and I ended up in the tropics, the first of many variations my next few weeks were to take me.

Joining the navy was quite easy at that time. They just asked your age and what work you were currently doing. This was important because it might help to steer you to which part of the navy you would be best suited. Why should I pick the navy and not either the army or air force? When asked I said that I thought the navy was a cut above the other two. This brought a big smile to the man’s face and out came the papers for me to sign and that was that.

Nick and I met outside the recruitment office after all the paperwork had been done and chattered excitedly. We wondered how long we would have to wait before we knew whether our applications had been successful. We returned to our respective homes to await the arrival of the brown envelope marked “O.H.M.S.” (On His Majesty’s Service). It was quite some time before my letter finally dropped through the letterbox. Now was the time for the butterflies to start and I quickly ripped open the envelope. I was successful and it contained all of my posting instructions and a warrant to travel by train to Great Malvern,

near Worcester. I didn't even know where Worcester was, let alone Great Malvern!

The excitement was mounting and I needed to talk to someone so I went straight across to Nick, but he hadn't yet received his news. In our excitement we decided to say our goodbyes there and then, and shook hands and wished each other the best of luck. What neither of us could possibly know was that this was to be the last time we would ever see each other. Nick did not return.

Back at the house I packed a few things into a small suitcase. I just took the essentials with me: underwear, socks, handkerchiefs, a spare pair of trousers, the usual toiletries, and finally some boot cleaning gear. I had left school at the age of 14, and when eventually I told my parents that I had volunteered for the navy it did not bring a lot of response, but it was as expected as my family had always been very quiet. They seldom talked, but that was just their way. Come the day to leave for Malvern, my uncle was waiting with his car and my mum was crying on the doorstep so I thought it was best for a quick goodbye and set off for the station.

Meanwhile across the water, word had reached the Nazi sympathisers that their worst fears had materialised. Many worried glances were made towards the sea and it was clear that nothing could stop it now. Yes, Jack Daniels was coming.

CHAPTER 2

Shore Life at Butlin's Holiday Camp

The train arrived at Malvern station. It was a rather old looking station with a canopy that came to the edge of the platform which made the whole station seem rather dark. My first job was to find the shore patrol (navy police). They checked my papers and told me to join the other lads who were waiting at the end of the platform, about 10 of them I think, and they came in all sorts and sizes. A motley crew indeed.

Some time later a couple of lorries arrived (no coaches in those days) and we all jumped in the back. Not a lot was said on the journey as I suppose we were all a bit nervous. We didn't see much of the journey either, as the back of the lorry was covered with a brown tarpaulin drape. When we arrived we discovered to our surprise that our base was in fact an

evacuated Butlin's holiday camp that had been converted for navy use, but I suspected that this was to be no holiday.

Our short journey had finished, and when we emerged from the back of the lorry we were installed in large rooms that were full of bunk beds, some metal lockers against the wall, plus the obligatory linoleum on the floor. That was it — all the modern conveniences you could ask for! This was a small training camp, about 80 of us, and we were to be here for only a few weeks. It was called HMS Duke. It was a navy tradition to name its depots in that fashion. For example, Portsmouth was HMS Nelson and Chatham was HMS Penfold. This applied to all of its establishments.

Malvern was one of those quiet country places in those days and was not built up at all. It just had a few rows of houses surrounded by plenty of lovely countryside, together with the usual country pub and a cinema. On our nights off we used to go for walks and mooch about the town. I had not been there long when I met young Joyce, a quiet country girl, and we spent a few evenings together. She even took me home to see her parents who used to make me very welcome. When it was time for me to move on she became quite upset. She shed a few tears and we promised to write to one another, which we did, but alas a few months later I got a "Dear John" letter. She had worded it quite well and wrote of meeting somebody who she loved even more than me. Ah well, another one had bitten the dust. However, some time later I heard from her again when she said that she had made a mistake and should have stopped with me and asked if we could start again. I put her letter in the bin.

It was by now late afternoon and the petty officer, who was a tubby little man, said that we should call him Jim, but only when nobody else was about. He told us that it would be morning before we would start our induction process, so we were given the evening to relax. He promised to return later to take us to the dining area.

Grub time soon arrived and we were taken to the dining room in which there were six tables together, nearly all of which were full, with one long table in the corner, which was ours, reserved for the new boys. After we had collected our meal we sat down, all still dressed in our civvies, whilst the rest of the boys were already in uniform. Although they were also new lads, the guys in uniform acted like old salts, so consequently a lot of looks and smirks came our way. But never mind, tomorrow we would have our own uniforms and no one would be able to tell us apart.

That evening, our first, we were nearly all sitting around chatting. Some were very quiet though, as it was a strange experience for us all. For most of us it was the first time that we had been away from home by ourselves and it felt a bit lonely. We eventually climbed into our bunks but I was restless, not knowing what the next day was going to have in store for me.

We were aroused from our bunks at six o'clock the next morning by the sound of the bugle (how many times would I hear that in the weeks to come?). We watched from our windows as the more experienced lads fell in and stood to attention as the white ensign flag was raised, after which they were assigned jobs around the camp. Meanwhile, we waited for our breakfast — life was easy at the moment.

With the meal over, we returned to our quarters and waited for our petty officer, a three-striper (12 years of service) who was a nice chap who gave us a lot of useful, comforting advice. He took us to the supply unit where we were issued an enormous kit bag as well as numerous articles of clothing, essential for the journeys ahead, including:

- two pairs of boots
- three uniforms (one white)
- a large round metal box containing two hats
- a pith helmet
- a PT uniform
- tropical wear (as you travel to all parts of the globe)
- arctic wear (in case of Russian convoy duty)
- two hammocks
- a mattress
- a pillow
- a blanket
- a suspension rope
- clews (the cords by which a hammock is suspended)
- a lashing rope

In the navy it was recognised that you couldn't say "I've forgotten it, I'll have to go back and get it." Everything was in that kit bag, which was getting heavier by the minute!

We headed back to our quarters, making sure that we didn't drop anything on the way. As soon as we were there, the petty officer bellowed "Tip all your gear out on the floor!" after which

he brought in a load of marking letters to be used on every item of clothing, including the hammock. They were all to be clearly marked with my name and number:

R.J. DANIELS: CKX 136471

Only when the marking was finished could we put on our uniforms (after we were shown how to do it of course — it wasn't easy the first time). I was really in the navy now.

When I first saw my uniform laid out on the bunk it looked a bit of a mess. The fastening of the trousers was entirely different from what I was used to, with two pieces joining at the waist and covered by a lift-up flap. However, it looked neat and we had a collar to fit round the neck which was tied at the waist, a black silk to go round the collar, followed by a lanyard, which was like a thin white rope that usually had a knife attached to its end, that tucked into the uniform.

Next to come was the hammock. We learned how to put it all together and how to lash it in a neat roll when not being used. We were now nearly sailors.

In the afternoon we went outside, resplendent in our new uniforms. "Let's have a look at the new blokes coming in wearing their civvies ... what a load of rubbish! Wait 'till you get a bit of time in before you look at us lads!" After a few days we had all settled down, with the exception of one young boy from the Salvation Army who we used to hear crying in the night. We used to talk to him, but it is one of those things — only time would help him. He was a bit of

a loner, more shy than anything else, but we decided to get him involved in everything we were doing. On shore leave we used to drag him along at times, and in a few days he was chatting away to all of us. I was glad to see him settled and beginning to enjoy himself.

Meanwhile, it was back to navy routine. Out of our bunk at bugle call, nip straight down to the washroom with 20 other blokes and only half a dozen sinks between them. Try washing and shaving in that lot — not the best way to start a day! Having always been an early riser due to my previous work as a bread salesman, I had been rising early since I left school, so this came easy for me. I decided to rise beforehand and have my wash and shave in comfort before returning to my bunk to watch the others scramble for the sinks. I decided to stick to that routine from then on.

After clean up, the first duty of the day was parade for raising the white ensign, after which it was work allocation. This could be anything from sweeping the roads on the camp to cleaning the toilets, helping in the kitchen, gardening, or grass cutting. You never knew what job would come your way. I remember my first work parade, the petty officer called out “Any of you lads ride a bike?” Up go a few hands, mine included. “Step forward the first three ... you can clean the toilets today.” That was lesson number one, and we quickly learnt that you never volunteered for anything in the navy. The rules of the day were simple: you didn't know anything; whoever did it, it wasn't you; and you only swear at the officers when you were sure that they couldn't hear you!

Time for breakfast. Meals were issued in different ways; it all depended at which station you were based. At this camp all of the grub was prepared and then placed on plates which were kept in heated containers. You entered the mess, went to the counter, grabbed a plate and a slice of bread and that was that. Every person got the same; if you didn't like it, that was tough. We all ate what we were given because we were all hungry. Back home my mum had given me very plain food, but there was always plenty of it and I was beginning to feel the effects now. As we didn't have the luxury of a telephone, I wrote to my mum and asked her to send me something to eat — her son was starving!

True to form, a few days later a shoe box arrived, postmarked "Plumstead" (where I lived in South East London) which contained some cheese and pickle sandwiches and a large piece of homemade cake. What more could I have asked for? I wondered if the others were hungry. I was to find that out at a later date. Anyway, they didn't get any of my grub at that time as I had a lot to feed, weighing in as I did at just over 16 stone.

Life at the camp was very much routine. We had to learn how to parade, how to march, and how to rifle drill. When not doing that, it was classwork covering all aspects of navy life, including what part we were going to play in it.

I think one of the most important things that the navy taught me was discipline; when you were told to do something you did it, and did it quickly. On board, a fast response could help save you from sinking. For example, if a ship had a hole on one side and was listing over, a chief would order the pump to be started so as to flood the vessel, but on the opposite side to the

hole as this would have pulled it level. It would have sat lower in the water but that would have given the crew a chance to make repairs. Without discipline someone might have started to argue, and by the time you finished your argument the ship would have rolled over and it would have been too late, it would have been lost. It was so important to obey orders without question.

Most of our other time was classroom work; all the different types of boilers, turbines, steering gear, refrigerating machinery, and diesels. There was a lot to learn so we had to keep at it.

We spent a couple of months at HMS Duke before we had to move on. Looking back, I suspect that the officers and the NCOs (non-commissioned officers) were being a bit easy on us young lads, seeing as it was our first time away from home. If we did anything wrong they explained why, but we still had to do it again until we got it right. If I were to sum up what I achieved from my few weeks at the base, it was that I had some idea of how to behave on parade, I knew how to march and handle a rifle, and I learnt how to obey orders without question. I had also been given a good insight into navy life and told what to expect as we progressed.

Those weeks went by at a rapid rate, or so it seemed, and it didn't come as too much of a surprise when we heard that our class was up for draft. Soon a notice went up that told each rating to which depot he was to be posted. I was going to Chatham in Kent, which was about 30 minutes on the train from my home. When I eventually got leave, my mum was going to have a heap of dirty washing to clean which had been mounting up in my kit bag. She could do it better than me anyway, at the moment at least!

So I was leaving HMS Duke, former Butlin's holiday camp, and on to a new base at Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham. Was I nervous? I don't think so, but then I didn't know. Did my hand always shake when I drank a cup of tea?

A few days later and it was time to move on; kit bags packed and hammock tightly lashed. Two lorries were waiting, into one of which went all of our equipment, and we all piled into the other. Both lorries then headed for Malvern station. It was only a few months ago that we had arrived, and we were now leaving to start phase two of navy life. What would it hold for me?

We split up at the station as not all of my mates were going to the same depot. When it came time for us to move on we said our goodbyes and wished the best of luck to each of the other lads. It was just a casual thing as I don't think any of us had got very close in the short time we were there. What with being the first time away from home and sampling navy life, we just had not found time to strike up any strong friendships.

Twelve of us left for Chatham. I can't remember much about the journey, but when we arrived it was the same routine outside. One lorry waiting; everybody on board, and off we went. My first impressions of the barracks was that I was amazed at the sheer size of the place. I knew there would be a lot of sailors but I saw hundreds of them, and the noise that came from all of those raised voices was almost deafening. "Don't stand there with your mouth open lad, grab your kit and follow me!" shouted a petty officer. This was going to be different from before!

Off we went, kit bag on the left shoulder, hammock under the right arm, small case in my hand and followed as told.

The sweat was dripping off of me by the time we arrived at the mess. It had been a long walk followed by climbing up several flights of stairs and now it was time to wait for a leading hand who would take us through our routine. Our leading hand was one of the ranks in the navy, others in the stoker branch being:

- Second Class
- First Class
- Leading Hand
- Chief
- Petty Officer

A leading hand lived with the crew in his mess; those above that rank had their own areas. Life could be difficult for a leading hand because one day he might be chatting over dinner to a colleague, whereas the next he might have to put that person on a charge for some reason. Leading hands in the navy were always referred to as killicks because they wore a small anchor on their sleeve to show their rank, and that small anchor was known as a killick.

I had a feeling that I was not going to like barracks life but only time would tell whether I was right or not. Our senior arrived, and as it was near dinner time he started to organise the food. In HMS Duke you collected a plate of food from the counter, but here you reported to the galley cook who had a list of how many ratings there were in the mess and distributed large trays of food to feed that amount of hungry mouths. Back in the mess, 12 plates were laid out with the theory that

you gave everyone the same amount of each piece of food, no argument. If you wanted to swap any of your grub with a mate after issue, that was up to you.

I mentioned earlier that my mum was sending me food parcels and I wondered at the time if the other guys were hungry. Well, I was about to find out. After we had finished dinner, the leading hand said he would go to the galley to see what else we had to come. He returned about fifteen minutes later and I was standing by the door when he came in and he brushed passed me with this big tray of bread pudding. It smelt and looked delicious. Before it reached the table one of the lads rushed forward and snatched a piece which was the signal the others wanted and in an instant all them were going mad, grabbing at the food like animals. I had never seen anything like it before. The tray ended up on the floor as clean as a whistle and all I got was a look and a smell. It was obvious that they were very hungry, but thanks to Mum's food parcel I wasn't, and what was more I wasn't going to be part of that scramble. If I hadn't had received my extra rations I wondered whether I would have acted the same. The result of that fiasco meant that we all got a severe warning about future conduct.

We finished the day getting to know our new base and discussed the further training ahead of us, which basically consisted of parades, rifle drill and shooting, route marching, physical training, boxing, swimming, and mechanical knowledge. We had about three months to absorb all of that, and get it right. It was surprising how much you had to know when on parade. You had to make all of the different moves and still keep a

straight line, even when on the move. The rifle came into this, all adding up to complicated manoeuvres which hopefully all came right in the end. I enjoyed using the rifle most when out on the range shooting at targets. The kick of the gun surprised me the first time I used it, but it was something you soon got used to. Route marching was no problem to me as my previous job was all about walking, whilst I think we all liked the idea of leaving the barracks for a while. On our way out through town we used to think we were the cat's whiskers but, being a naval port, the inhabitants had seen it all before. At times we had the band with us which made such a difference in that people would stop and look. To march behind a band was something to experience. It gave me a great feeling, almost as if I could march all day.

Back inside the barracks there were the men everyone loved to hate — the physical trainers. We would assemble in the hall and await their entrance. We didn't have to wait too long before they arrived, jumping in the air, turning somersaults, anything to show us how fit they were, and a promise of what we had to come. Four of them used to take the session: one on the raised platform performing the exercises, with the other three running around us to make sure we did it right. During those sessions I stretched some muscles that I never knew I had and the next day all you heard were men complaining about how sore they were. I suppose it must have done me some good although I still felt like pissing in their cocoa!

Boxing was something we all had to try. Although none of us knew anything about the sport, it was simply a matter of

getting in the ring and knocking the stuffing out of one another. Being over 16 stone I didn't have many opponents so I ended up being the only heavyweight in the camp. They were looking for future champions, but not this sailor — keep looking pal! Swimming was an obvious priority in case you were dumped at sea, and I for one would rather stay on top of that water. Before you were allowed to pass your test you had to dress in a soaking wet uniform (and being November it was also a *freezing*, soaking wet uniform) and get into the water and try to swim. The drag from the uniform made it very hard going, like trying to swim through mud. It was only the instructor who decided when you were capable of staying afloat, and if you got a nasty one he would leave you there until you were nearing exhaustion. Another cocoa job!

Most of our other time was spent on classroom work studying things such as types of boilers, brick laying for repair, steam pumps, turbines, prop shaft bearings, steering gears, distilling plants, generators (both steam and diesel), and refrigerating machinery. It was going to be a lot of hard work but, having said that, we all knew what was expected of us. When you joined a ship you would be expected to carry out any task given to you. There was no room for passengers on board a warship; it was simply head down and absorb as much as you could.

A break from training soon came up and I had a pass for weekend leave. Walking towards the main gate there was a wide road with a pavement on the right, together with a low wall which you could look over and see the parade ground below. Being the nosey type I thought that I would look over the wall

to see what was going on, but no sooner had I stepped on to the pavement then I heard whistles blowing and running feet. I was grabbed from behind and marched to the gate where a red-faced chief was waiting. Did he think that I was a terrorist in disguise? No, my crime was to dare to walk on the pavement which was reserved solely for the officers. After a lecture (why did they always have to shout all of the time?) I was allowed to go, but I knew I wasn't going to like it here. Never mind, I was going home. Get that boiler going Mum, I'm on my way home with a load of smelly washing!

It was nice to be home and be able to relax for a while, even if it wasn't to be for too long. On a weekend pass you were allowed to get away at lunchtime on Saturday but had to return by seven-thirty the following Monday morning. Even so, it gave me time to take it easy for a while, enjoy a bit of homemade cooking and see a few folk, most of whom thought that I looked good in my uniform. I was rather proud of it myself. There were others who didn't know that I had joined up and were quite surprised. They all wanted to know what navy life was like, but I couldn't tell them any sea stories as I hadn't been there yet! No doubt I would have plenty to tell at a later date.

On Monday morning I was ready with my case full of clean and better smelling clothes, and off to the station, back to my favourite place! It was time to return to Chatham depot. Although I didn't like the place, I didn't mind going back because I knew that I had to get the training programme finished before there was any chance to move on.

The next few months were physically very hard but I soon got into shape and felt better about myself, coming to the conclusion that it was something that did not harm me, although I hadn't thought that when we started. It was hard absorbing all of the knowledge that we had been given in the classroom, especially having to know about all the machinery that was aboard a ship.

As usual in any group, there was always one person who thought that he had all of the answers — the one who just couldn't stop talking. When speaking to an instructor one day, he told me "These talkers cut no ice with me. They are so busy thinking about what they are going to say next that they are not listening to me." The message to us all was clear, "Listen and you will learn." When you joined a ship you were a part of a unit. On smaller ships especially, as there were no passengers, everyone had a specific job to do and that was why the initial training was so important, and why we had to listen and learn.

The time had finally come for my training to be put to the test. My name was called over the Tannoy system to report to the embarkation shed which was a large building, like a warehouse, with the floor marked with numbered squares. On one side were small windows. Over the top of these were a few letters of the alphabet and I went to the one with my initial. This was the moment when you held your breath; the moment when you were told where you were to be posted. "Where am I going?" It could be a battleship, which would be like a floating barracks, or something smaller. Then came my draft notice: "Report to HMS Folkestone." A frigate, nearly as big as a destroyer — that would do nicely, thank you.

I went back to the mess to pack my kit bag, check that my hammock was lashed tight and then take them to the shed and place them in the numbered square. Next I was to report back to collect my travel warrant and all of my necessary papers and then have transport to the station. It was at this moment that I found out that the ship was to be docked at Londonderry. Once I got there, who knew what part of the world I would end up in?

CHAPTER 3

Londonderry and Beyond

I don't remember too much of the first part of the journey, just that I watched the scenery and dozed as we headed for Liverpool from where I boarded the ferry to cross to Belfast. It was a bit choppy going across the sea but that didn't stop a wander around the deck to get a bit of fresh air.

Standing on the upper deck I began to realise that I had never been this far from home before. It was also the first time that I had travelled without my family. I think that all of the lads were getting a little bit nervous at this stage. Most of us were standing close together with just a bit of idle chatter going on. I think what we all wondered was "What was the ship like? What will life be like on board?" We would soon find out. Although there were a lot of civilians on the ferry we didn't talk to them. We all kept to ourselves, engrossed on what lay ahead for us.

When I arrived in Belfast I had to find the station and a train to Derry. Once this was done it was just a question of getting both my kitbag and hammock into the guard's van. It was a bit of a drag having to take these everywhere, but it was my bed and my possessions so we had to stick together.

It was only a few miles to my destination but the train just never got going and it took as long to do that journey as it had taken to go from Chatham to Liverpool. As soon as it started to reach a respectable speed it stopped again. I had never seen so many stations in so short a journey, and Anglo-Irish relations were certainly a bit strained by the time my travelling was over! I collected my gear and reported to the naval police who made a phone call to the ship and informed them that their replacement stoker had arrived, soon after which a van appeared and I was off to the docks.

At last, there she stood — HMS Folkestone. The town of Folkestone to me had always been a coastal resort and I never knew there was a ship of the same name, but there she was. Although she had obviously seen a lot of service, she still looked immaculate and was going to be my home for the next couple of years. This was also to be the first time I would step aboard a ship.

Being a bit smaller than a destroyer she was a comfortable size, which was especially welcome because whereas discipline on a small ship was enough to cope with, on a big ship it was essential. Being one for discipline, I was quite happy with my posting. The only thing I noticed was the close confinement. Plenty of space was something that you didn't have, but there was still enough

aboard this ship and I was sure that we would soon all get used to our new quarters.

As I made my way up the gangplank to present myself to the officer of the watch, I saw that the decks had been well cared for. The officer called for a leading hand to show me to the stokers' mess, of which there were two. I was in Mess No. 1 and a couple of off-duty men showed me where to stow my hammock.

As with the training base, the lockers in the mess ran alongside a long table and were also used as seats. I was made very welcome by some off-duty stokers who told me that we had a good crew in our mess, whom I would meet later, and said it was a good ship to be on. It was used for convoy work and they also told me it was "a flat-bottomed bastard." This is what sailors call a ship that rolled a lot, and I was soon going to find out the hard way how this ship performed!

The mess was situated on the starboard side of the ship — the right-hand side when facing forward. Whilst on the subject, port was on the left, walls were bulkheads, floors were decks, ceilings were deckheads, and you didn't go up the stairs, you went up a ladder or gangway.

The bulkhead made up one side of the mess and a metal partition the other. In the middle was a bolted down table with a raised lip around its edge. There were wooden lockers on each side of the mess which had a couple of long cushions over them for a bit more comfort. There was not a lot of room, as was the norm with such ships, and you could just squeeze through to get your legs under the table.

Higher up on the partitions we had shelves that sloped to the rear which held our metal hat boxes, the idea being that the slope would stop the boxes from sliding off in rough weather. I soon discovered that this didn't work, and I had the bumps on my head to prove it!

The deckhead was a mass of pipework and electric wiring, and had square trunking running the entire length of the ship, blowing fresh air below decks. Unfortunately, another use for it was as a playground for the many rats that also called HMS Folkestone their home. Down at bulkhead level we had a veritable vermin area, chiefly made up of cockroaches — thousands of them — everywhere you looked. We used to watch them dashing up and down the partitions but there was nothing we could do so we learnt to live with our unwelcome guests.

A little further along was a similar set up that housed the stokers of Mess No. 2. There were about 15 men to a mess but due to watchkeeping a few were always missing and this gave the rest a bit more room to manoeuvre.

Once you boarded a ship it was a complete change of lifestyle in that you no longer thought of weekdays and weekends — it all revolved around watches. The whole of the ship's company was split into port and starboard watches, which was mainly to allow people to go on leave but still have the ship's duties covered. Port would go on leave whilst starboard remained on duty, that way we had half a ship's company on board at all times.

The sea watches were set out as follows:

8:00 a.m.	to	12:00 noon	Forenoon
12:00 noon	to	4:00 p.m.	Afternoon
4:00 p.m.	to	6:00 p.m.	1st Dog
6:00 p.m.	to	8:00 p.m.	2nd Dog
8:00 p.m.	to	12:00 midnight	First
12:00 midnight	to	4:00 a.m.	Middle
4:00 a.m.	to	8:00 a.m.	Morning

The “dogs” were two-hour spells each. In this way we broke the pattern of four-hour watches, otherwise we would be doing the same hours all of the time. I would carry out my duties starting, for example, at 8.00 a.m. and the pattern would be as follows:

8:00 a.m.	to	12:00 noon	Forenoon
6:00 p.m.	to	8:00 p.m.	2nd Dog
4:00 a.m.	to	8:00 a.m.	Morning
4:00 p.m.	to	6:00 p.m.	1st Dog
12:00 midnight	to	4:00 a.m.	Middle
12:00 noon	to	4:00 p.m.	Afternoon
8:00 p.m.	to	12:00 midnight	First

This way you ended up back where you started and the cycle started over again and continued all of the time you were at sea.

Another thing you had to get used to was the fact that it was a do-it-yourself lifestyle. For example: cleaning and scrubbing the mess (which had to be kept spotless at all times), keeping all the bedding clean, washing your clothes, ironing them, as well as preparing meals.

I originally thought that it would be easy getting a meal ready, but there was a catch in that the meal you prepared was for 15 men. Every man in the mess had to take his turn for a week at a time, and he was given a set allowance of money whereby food was drawn from the store and charged to the mess. There was always a problem of what to give 15 hungry matelots for breakfast, dinner, and tea, and do it for seven consecutive days without them moaning!

Once a meal was prepared in its raw state it was taken to the galley for cooking. No matter what you gave the cook you would be guaranteed that he would moan about it, but his moans were confined to your lack of imagination, or worse, the raw material that you had chosen and with which he had to work. Many comments flew around the table when you served up your meal. You couldn't please everyone, and I didn't.

However, the process didn't end there. When you had finished your stint as the cook of the mess you had to go to the store and see how much you had spent. This was the time to worry, "Please don't let me be over budget." The storeman would usually arrive shaking his head (this was always a bad sign), but most times it was all right and on my occasions I was usually underspent and given some money back. This was then taken back to the mess where it was shared out amongst the other stokers.

Sometimes, if you were not careful, it could be £20 over the top and that was when you had to go back to the mess and tell the lads how much extra you wanted from each of them to square the bill. I would not dare repeat the language that asking for extra money evoked. “How much? For that load of rubbish you have been giving us?” Nevertheless you still had to collect the money, and you were given no time to pay. Everyone was pleased to see the end of that job as it was a no-win situation, but at least you always had your own turn to see what your shipmates had dreamt up for you. “Hey, you don’t expect us to eat this muck, do you?” Revenge was sweet, even if the food wasn’t.

HMS Folkestone was a heavily armed ship which was equipped for war. On the upper deck of the foredeck we carried a 4.7 inch gun, at midships there were two pom-poms (a multi-barrel gun that fired shells in quick succession and gave a distinctive “pom-pom-pom” sound — hence the name). A little further aft were two Oerlikons (heavy twin-barrelled machine guns) which had two D-cups at the breech end that the gunner put his shoulders in. He then passed a strap around his back and hooked himself to the gun which enabled him to swing it anywhere just by using his bodyweight. This was a big advantage when the ship was being attacked by low-flying aircraft as he could keep firing as it approached, follow it overhead, and keep it in his sight as it passed. On a little further was the quarterdeck which was the area which was full of depth charges. There were two throwers and two tracks for rolling them over. During action, to surround a submarine, we would

roll two depth charges off of the stern, fire two more from each side, then two more over the stern. That was eight explosive charges over a wide area and all the charges were dropped whilst we travelled at full speed. Once that lot went off it was time to be somewhere else! You can imagine the noise below decks where I was working. Foremost was the boiler room, going aft came the engine room which was followed by space for the distilling plant and the largest diesel generator I had ever seen. Right aft was the tiller flat, which contained a steam generator and steering gear. It was also where the driving shafts passed through the stern bulkhead, so this was a place which was prone to leakage and one which had to be kept pumped out at all times.

Back to the mess to find out which watch I had been given. There was a lot of activity on the upper deck as the word was out that we were embarking on the evening tide. This was going to be my first taste of real navy life. What was to lie ahead for me?

CHAPTER 4

HMS Folkestone Into Battle

We slowly made our way down through the Irish Sea and headed for Liverpool where 20 or 30 merchant ships had gathered, accompanied by escort ships. We were moving to the Atlantic at dawn and the first job was to have all of the ships on their correct station. Only once that was achieved could we move off. All of the merchant ships had to remain in their positions until we reached our destination. The speed at which the convoy travelled was determined by how fast the slowest ship could go, and it had to stay in position. The escorts were all around the outside keeping watch.

Each convoy was accompanied by a commodore of the fleet who usually travelled in the ship that offered him the most comfort. His word was law and no ship, navy or otherwise,

could do anything without first having his permission, even in action. If a submarine was seen you could not make a move towards it until he gave the go ahead, even though sometimes it was too late. Things were quiet to start with but it was a long way to go. The ship was heading for Bathurst in Gambia and then on to Freetown in Sierra Leone, whereas I was heading to sling my hammock and get some kip, seeing as I had the forenoon watch.

At that time I was still a Stoker 2nd Class and worked in the boiler room. The furnace that I looked after had four oil sprayers, but at convoy speeds you only needed one going to keep up the steam pressure. A petty officer and myself did the watch, and his job was to maintain the correct steam pressure and make sure no smoke came out the stack. Checks were made by a system of mirrors, and control was possible by the amount of air fed into the furnace. The oil sprayers were centred in a circular opening made of fire bricks with a large fan forcing air past the sprayers causing a swirling motion. The effect was a tunnel of white-hot heat which could only be viewed by using very dark glasses. My job was to keep the fire bricks clear of any build up of carbon which would stop the smooth flow. This was steady going until the ship started manoeuvring. Then you had to watch the ship's telegraph and try to anticipate what the engine room was going to do. Were they going to apply more steam to the turbines? Were they going to ease off?

Back in the boiler room, the petty officer was yelling for more steam. I was lighting more sprayers and being careful about it. If you opened the air to these at the wrong moment

you soon lost your eyebrows. A nice head of steam had been built up, but unfortunately it was building up too fast and I had to shut one or two of them off. This routine went on until we were steady on course.

In the quiet periods, and to pass the time, everything had to be polished. We used brass polish, wire brushes and emery paper. The standing joke at the time concerned a friend who went to a fancy-dress ball and wrapped a piece of this paper around his member and went as Dick Emery! Typical ship humour. The boiler rooms used to sparkle and all the watchkeepers took part in this exercise. As I polished I thought that after I had completed this trip I would apply for the Stoker 1st Class examination and then be able to pass on to engine room duties.

As we headed slowly south we had to cross the Bay of Biscay, an area which was known for its rough seas. I wasn't to be disappointed as the ship started to pitch and roll wildly and I began to feel very ill. I had not given a thought to seasickness back home on terra ferma. Because of the seasickness I didn't wash for about three days — it wasn't worth it! It was also pointless trying to eat or drink anything substantial so I just used to sit on the upper deck. It was very cold up there but I found a sheltered corner and tried to chew a bit of dry toast. Was I sorry I joined the navy or what? Eventually the rough weather started to ease and that was recovery time for me. The first thing to do was to have a good wash and a cup of tea. It was a case of kill or cure but it worked because however rough the seas were after that, I was never seasick again.

It was on one of these journeys that I first saw a torpedo track heading for the ship. My first thought was to run, and I

actually turned from the rail to do so until I thought, “Where are you going to run to?” Fortunately for all concerned, the lookout on the bridge had seen the track long before I had, and although the ship was in a tight turn, our luck held as it went by. I saw many ships go down. Those were sights not easily forgotten, but more of that later.

We did many runs to Africa before returning to the ports of Londonderry, Grimsby, Cardiff and Liverpool. Most of these runs were of the same pattern in that we got beyond the Bay of Biscay and then found the U-boats waiting. We battled our way to the African coast, had a few days ashore, and then the same thing again, but in reverse! Whilst ashore we used to pick up little items off of the stalls; just something that was a bit different to take back home.

The part of Londonderry in which we were in was just a working class area with terraced houses, most in need of repair. It was down one of these streets that we found this little pub that had one room. As you stepped in the door the bar was on the left. It was so small that there was only room for one person to walk about behind it. There were a few tables and chairs but not much room. It was not much bigger than an ordinary room at home, and just had bare floorboards and that was it.

As I started supping a pint I spotted an Irish whisky and thought that I would sample the local delicacy — a pint with a local whisky chaser. I said to the barman that the whisky hadn’t got much of a kick, shortly after which both of my hands started to slide along the bar. I had no sooner pulled myself straight, when off I went again! The problem was aggravated

because I could not get my feet to move. It was hard work pulling yourself straight just by your hands!

The barman arranged for someone to take me back to my ship, and the next thing I remembered was that he had my back to a wall for support and said "That's your ship over there." "Which one?" I thought. I could see two! I managed to make my way up the gangplank on to the deck where I laid down, and that was how I found myself the next morning, needless to say with a terrible hangover.

Another painful occasion was after we had returned to the same dock and we were due to leave harbour that afternoon. I had developed a raging toothache and had arranged to visit the local dentist. He sat me in his chair, had a look in my mouth and said that if he took the tooth out it would spoil the look of my face. He said he would remove the nerve from the tooth and I would have no more trouble. Unfortunately in those days we did not have pain killing drugs that are now in use. This was not going to be good. Imagine the scene, this madman trying to put a drill through the top of my head whilst my feet beat a tattoo on the footboard. I didn't think he would stop, and the pain was agonising, but when it was over he assured me that there would be no more trouble from the tooth.

Back at the ship we sailed that evening and I turned in for a good night's sleep, but on waking I knew something was wrong. After leaving my hammock and getting on my feet, it became obvious that my cheek was actually hanging on my shoulder. I was in extreme pain and went to the sick bay rating, who was more like a first aid man (doctors were for bigger ships).

I told him the tooth would have to go. He said he would pull it for me but that there was nothing he could give me to deaden the pain. I had no choice so he sat me on a chair and called another chap who was told to hold my head while he started pulling. After he struggled for a while I heard this crack and I thought, "At last, that's it." but he said that the pincers had slipped off and he would have to start pulling again. After much pulling and tugging he eventually got it out. It was not something I would recommend anyone to go through. I wondered how many people I knew had had a tooth pulled like that?

My first convoy run set the pattern for what I had in store for the next few years. Once past the Bay of Biscay the submarines of the German fleet would be laying in wait for us. Merchant ships were lost on every run.

Back in port the petty officer said that it was time for some boiler repairs. The heat from the oil sprayers and the constant cleaning of the fire made the bricks break or come loose so they had to be replaced. With the sprayers and the steel plate removed, it exposed a circle of bricks and I asked how we were to get through the gap to do the repair work. When I was told that I was going through the opening I could not believe it. "My body won't go through there!" I pleaded. I was about to have another lesson on navy life.

The petty officer disappeared but returned a few minutes later and dumped a load of women's dresses on the deck. He ordered me to take off all of my clothes and find a dress to fit into. Needless to say I did this and had a good laugh at the same time. "Now to get through that hole" the petty officer ordered.

He explained how I would have to stretch my hands above my head as if diving, hunch up my shoulders and then he would push me in. As my body started to slide by the fire bricks, the use of the dress became clear. If I had any more clothes on it would catch on the bricks, but the silky material I had on was more slippery, making it easier to move, so there was a method in all this madness after all. Once inside the hole I could carry out the repair job. I must confess that this was one place I did not like to be and used to think if anything went wrong I might panic and not be able to squeeze out. As it was I had difficulty. Coming out it was arms first as before. Two stokers had an arm each and pulled. Unable to hunch my shoulders because of the pull, it was like getting a cork out of a bottle and I had scraped shoulders and a torn dress to prove it. Damn, I wouldn't be able to wear that tonight now!

Shortly after that incident my new rate came through and I was finally a Stoker 1st Class, which allowed me to move to the engine room for watchkeeping. It was much cleaner in the engine room and we had room to move around in this area, even though most of it was taken up by the turbines, two on each side. There were two stokers on watch to look after them and between us we had 16 valves to operate. Not too bad whilst cruising, but a bit hectic when manoeuvring.

In charge was an ERA (Engine Room Artificer) who was one step up from the Chief Stoker. They carried out repairs that needed more technical knowledge, as well as normal engine room duties.

Whilst on watch the ERA had several things to look after:

- Two main controls: a large wheel for ahead and a smaller one for reverse.
- Two large dials: one showing the vacuum in the system (the higher it was the more efficient the turbines were).
- Revolution counter: unlike a car, this had two hands, one of which indicated the revolutions. The other constantly adjusted this hand by returning to the twelve o'clock position and then came down to reposition as necessary.

At sea, the term “miles per hour” (as with a car) was not used. The officer of the watch knew how many revolutions of the propeller shaft it took to produce a certain speed, so when he had decided on the speed required he would call, “Maintain 180 revs!” or whatever was needed, which made for a much steadier reading.

If you liked organised panic, the best time was when the ship's telegraph rang “astern” (reverse) just as you were sailing full ahead. It took miles to stop a big ship. The process was laborious in that you had to shut down the steam pressure to the turbines, the reason being that the turbines turned the propeller on the end of the prop shaft which in turn drove the ship. When the turbines had almost stopped you had to reintroduce the steam, but this time from the opposite direction so as to reverse the rotation of the turbine, the result of which meant that you now had the ship going astern.

All actions, including instructions given in the engine room, had to be recorded in the logbook. Communication was by way of a voice pipe and it surprised me how clear you could hear through

them. Once every hour we took turns to check all of the machinery in the ship for temperature; a rise could be trouble. All readings were logged so that a constant comparison was always available. Apart from this we didn't do a lot, which was due in part to the intense heat. There were fans on each side of us bringing fresh air in from outside, but once you moved from the fans your clothes became soaked with sweat.

The way we knew time on board was through the use of bells. Two bells were rung to start each watch and then one bell was rung each subsequent half hour, so if your watch was 8:00 a.m. till midday and you heard five bells then the time would be 10:30 a.m. Simple wasn't it?

Eight bells sounded and I was pleased to see my relief coming down the ladder. I was off for a good wash and a cup of tea. We had no showers on board so I simply stripped off and used a bucket. I'd have used anything after those sessions.

Up top we had completed several trips, always the same run; a convoy to West Africa and then one back to England. We did our best to protect the ships, but we were fighting a losing battle. The U-boats were waiting for us in packs and as fast as we chased one of them another one attacked from a different point. If they managed to get to the middle of the convoy that we were protecting they had their pick.

At this time all of the off-watch stokers became part of the damage control party at what were called action stations. One day we were standing by awaiting instructions when we heard a crash and a shudder went through the ship. That meant trouble. Next came the call, "Damage control! Party to the

fo’c’sle (forecastle, or forward part of the ship) at the double!” When we arrived we found a scene of utter devastation. The main gun had taken a direct hit and was lying on its side, off of its mounting, and clearly of no further use. The deck was strewn with the bodies of my shipmates, some with arms or legs missing. The first sight of both the damage and the broken bodies was a terrible shock. What I remember most was the silence, although the battle was still raging. I heard nothing; it was as if the world had stood still.

I was suffering from the effects of the shock, but after a few minutes we got down to the work of freeing our shipmates from the debris. We could see it was too late for them because of the terrible wounds they had suffered. The decks were awash with blood. Just a few hours ago they were enjoying life. That was the evil of war.

One lad had been blown across the ship and was hanging over the side, motionless. We dashed to pull him back on board and two of us grabbed a leg each and pulled him up on to the deck. To our horror we saw that his head was not there. I made a rapid dash to the nearest rail and promptly lost my dinner. None of the gunners survived that explosion. One bang and they were all gone — husbands, fathers, brothers, sons. Their war was over.

On board we were welcomed by the pipe we loved to hear; “up spirits” — a daily call for rum at 11.00 a.m. Talking of spirits, I suppose that the most commonly used toast associated with the navy is to “Splice the mainbrace.” Few people know of the others that were regularly used, for example:

- Monday “Our ships at sea.”
- Tuesday “Our men.”
- Wednesday “Ourselves.” (as no one else was likely to concern themselves with our welfare)
- Thursday “A bloody war and quick promotion.”
- Friday “A willing soul and sea room.”
- Saturday “Sweethearts and wives, may they never meet.”
- Sunday “Absent friends and those at sea.”

But the standing toast that always pleased us the most was “The wind that blows, the ship that goes, and the lass that loved a sailor!”

Every mess had a Rum Bosun, and his job was to draw the rum ration and issue it. This took a while and by the time he got back it was usually about 11.30 a.m. Even so everybody got their tot and anybody not there at the time would find his tot waiting for him when he returned. It could stand there all day but nobody would touch another man’s tot. That was also treated as payback time if you had asked a person for a favour. The reward was “sippers” — a sip of your own rum.

When your birthday came round everyone in the mess offered you sippers, and as navy rum was very, very strong your legs would soon start to go. The tot was usually drunk on an empty stomach so by the time we sat down for dinner people were beginning to feel the effects. This was the time when discussions became arguments and sometimes it was a fight that settled it. I never found this to be a problem personally, and didn’t get challenged too much. I think being six foot one and 16 stone helped considerably.

I do, however, recall one incident. I had been talking to a stoker in the next mess who must have been about 18 stone, although a lot of it was fat. He was telling me that before he joined the navy he was a wrestler. I said that I preferred boxing and asked whether he had tried it. He said that he couldn't box because he couldn't stand any blows to his ears.

It was months later when he and I had an argument (about what I can't now remember) and after a few words he went to his mess and I to mine. I started to read my book but he was one of those chaps who didn't know when to stop and he kept calling across from his mess. I put up with it for a little while but then asked him to shut up. He refused and I told him that if he didn't shut up we'd better go outside.

Off we went. I took up my boxing stance and he was leaning forward swinging his arms and I thought that if he ever got hold of me he was going to crack my ribs. Just then he made a lunge for me. I jumped to one side and, as he was up close, I gave him one mighty crack on the ear. He yelled like an Apache on the war path and dashed off to his mess where I found him later sitting at the table crying. I apologised and explained that I had forgotten all about his bad ears. I knew what he was thinking, but could he prove it?

We resumed our convoy work but our big gun had not been replaced after its damage and we had two Hedgehogs instead. These had a square firing base in which 20 bombs were fitted, the noses of which stuck out, hence their name. They could be fired ahead of the ship, all 20 going at the same time and landing in a circle, which was another weapon to help get the U-boats.

I had seen so many ships go down in my time and it was an awesome sight; they rear up then start to slide back to the bottom of the ocean. If a tanker was blown carrying crude oil not many men could struggle through it. It would either catch fire or choke you, and if it was carrying aviation fuel it would just blow the ship to pieces. Some men would be blown off the ship into the water, but there was no escape as the fuel would be ablaze and spread whilst they were swimming away from the wreck. Unfortunately, the flames were faster than the men and you could hear their screams as the flames caught them.

Seeing a merchant ship blown up is something that was hard to forget. Some just disappeared in a massive explosion whilst the bow of others would rise slowly in the air and even more slowly slide backwards into the water. I always gave a thought to the crew and wondered how many had survived. It was very hard when I saw them in the water as we sailed past with their bodies floating head down, almost as if they were looking for their lost ship. The worst time of all was when those alive in the water looked up at us in despair. We could not stop to pick them up as enemy submarines would be circling us. We would become a sitting target and almost certainly be hit and suffer the loss of the crew. Some had to be sacrificed to protect others; that was the hardship of war.

In the meantime, we were still chasing the U-boats and plenty of depth charges had been dropped. This was our main weapon at sea. Our usual method was to have eight of these very heavy explosives and drop two at a time off the stern. Shortly after that, two more were thrown from either side of

the ship (these throwers could send a depth charge quite a way out to sea) and finally another two off the stern. By the time we had moved away this had created a circle of charges and, if we were lucky, a U-boat would be in the middle of the circle.

One of the problems we had with the throwers was the weight of the charges. Each one had to be hoisted onto the thrower by block and tackle, the trouble being that the ship was invariably dipping and rolling in a heavy sea. The charges would swing in all directions whilst we were trying to seat them and they always proved extremely difficult to control. Many a time I saw crushed, bloody hands and the occasional lost finger.

The charges were set to explode at a pre-determined depth, and the first time I saw one explode I was amazed at the great column of water that seemed to erupt from the sea. I thought that someone had just hit the soles of my shoes with a hammer, and I could hear the sound of light bulbs being shattered in their holders. I couldn't imagine what the experience was like under water, neither did I want to find out! After the explosion the sea was covered with dead fish, hundreds of them, resting like a carpet on the surface of the sea. We had often seen an oil slick come up after an attack but couldn't be sure whether or not it was a hit. An oil slick was only counted as a "probable." We had to blow the U-boat to the surface in order to claim a hit to be a total success.

We had been doing convoy work for a few years and it had been the same routine all the time, one convoy out and one convoy back. We were doing our best to keep the submarines

at bay, hoping to get the merchant ships to their destination as well as staying on top of the water ourselves. Back in the U.K. we managed to get leave each time we docked, but sometimes it was not long enough for us to go home.

One spell of home leave that was not too pleasant was when my grandfather died. We used to get on very well. He had been a coalman travelling the streets with his horse and cart, and I always went with him in the evening to help him bed down the horse for the night. In his will he left his business to me but for a variety of reasons that was something that didn't happen. He wanted horses at his funeral and that was what he got — four lovely black horses pulling the coach. It really made a grand sight.

It was during these years that I decided to follow navy tradition and grow a beard. To do this I had to first put in an application to see the captain so I could ask for his permission to cease shaving. This was given to all who applied, but you had to report back after three months. You would line up in front of the captain who would scrutinise the beard and say whether you could carry on or revert to being clean-shaven. Only a nice full beard was allowed. After a while, if you wanted to get rid of the beard, you again had to ask permission to resume shaving.

It was while we were on the African coast that a newspaper reporter came aboard. He had a seaman tie a rope to a deck bolt after which he picked out the men who had good beards. I was one of them and we took the rope and stood there pulling on it while he took our photograph. The picture appeared on the front page of the London Evening News and carried the heading which said "Some of the Finest Beards in the Royal Navy."

I had acquired a new rank as a Leading Stoker and moved from the engine room to the evaporator room. Here you watchkeep on your own. It was a large space holding several steam pumps, a diesel generator and an evaporator, which was the distilling plant for the ship's water supply. The evaporator was a massive drum in which we took in sea water. Inside the drum were coils through which steam was fed, thus making boiling water. Due to the sea water, the coils soon got caked with salt which had to be removed by blowing down the evaporator. Before doing this the engine room had to be notified as we would be tinkering about with the steam supply which affected the turbines.

We blew the evaporator clear with a system of pressure valves. The steam heat was turned off and we filled the evaporator with cold sea water. This caused our heating coils to contract and after a while I would call the engine room to say "Blowing!" This was the part they didn't like because I then quickly opened my steam valves to the heating coils. This did two things: firstly, howls of rage because I had taken steam from their turbines and secondly, the sudden expansion of the coils which caused all of the salt deposits to fall off.

Constant checks were made by an electric monitor and hand testing to make sure good quality water was fed to the ship. In the centre of the room stood the big diesel generator which was only put to use when we were in harbour. This was because, with the boilers shut down, there was no steam to drive the ones we normally used. It stood 10 feet high and 15 feet long and had four massive cylinders firing it. When it was running you heard its slow "chug, chug, chug" but it was powerful enough to supply

all of the electricity that the ship needed. The only way to start this big machine was by compressed air, and we had two big bottles with 300 lb pressure in them so we had two chances to get it going. Fortunately it always fired by the second attempt.

Many times I used to be on duty on my own in the evap room and used to pass the time by singing to myself, as loud as I wanted to — nobody was going to hear me with all of the noise. It was thirsty work and time to make a cup of a sailors' favourite brew whilst on night watch — kai (rhymes with "pie"). To make this I used large blocks of chocolate about two inches thick. I would cut off pieces and put them into a metal cup, or "fanny" as we called it, and then follow this up with brown sugar topped up with cold water. There were no gas rings or electric for heating, but we couldn't drink that cold could we? All of the steam pumps had drain off tubes which ran off any water collecting in the pump, and every so often I would open the valve to run off the water so that the steam could flow clearly. All I had to do then would be to put my cold mug of kai in the tube, turn on the valve and the steam would boil the drink in a couple of minutes, and it was a lovely piping hot drink as well.

Back in Liverpool from more trips to West Africa and we received word that we were moving to Cardiff to await a convoy. When we got there we found ourselves waiting for more ships to arrive, so we were allowed shore leave and decided to visit the famous Tiger Bay.

As we were in a strange city we thought it was best to keep together, so six of us went off and spent the evening supping a few pints. We returned through the bay and found a late-

night cafe open. The tables were partitioned off, each unit in a U-shape, in which sat two girls, so we joined them. Jock, the mad Scotsman, sat next to one girl at the bottom of the U and I sat on the end which gave me more legroom. We had been there for about half an hour and I was busy talking to Chas opposite me when I happened to look down the end of the table and saw that Jock had a most peculiar look on his face. His eyes were glazed and he looked to be in a different world. I told Chas to look over. "Do you think he is all right? He doesn't look well to me." Chas had a rough idea what was going on and intentionally dropped his hat on the floor to look under the table only to find that the lady was ... er ... busy. That certainly explained the look on Jock's face! Why didn't I ask Jock to change places?

Jock was only a little chap, just a featherweight, and that was what he used to fight. He was well known in Scotland for his wins, although I only saw him in action once and that was at tot time when he got into an argument in the mess with a couple of the other lads. I tried to be peacemaker and told one of the lads not to get involved in a fight as Jock was a boxer, but with a drop of rum (or Nelson's blood as we called it) under his belt, there was no stopping him. When they returned I could see Jock had not lost his skills. The first thing that stood out was the horrible gap in the young lad's mouth where he once had a nice row of teeth! Perhaps next time he would listen to some free advice. Chas was a different type of bloke altogether, a big fellow who could be a bit of a pain at times given that once he started talking he forgot to stop. But it takes all sorts to make a crew.

Like anywhere else, nicknames were picked up in the navy. Some were found from the surname, such as mine — I was always known as “Danny” Daniels. Because of that my mother knitted me a blue jumper with “Danny” in red across the front. A trio from my old ship were “Dutchy” Holland, “Dusty” Rhodes (the best man at my wedding) and there was also a chap called Nickolson who should have picked up the name of “Nick”, but everybody called him “Nig-Bo”. This no doubt came about because he was partly black. He was also a gypsy; strange bedfellows you might think.

He was older than me but he was a great character and he and I used to go ashore together quite a lot. He had rather staring eyes and a large mouthful of teeth. I don’t think I would have called him handsome, in fact at times he looked really evil, but if you wanted to be kept on the straight and narrow, take Nig-Bo with you — the girls would run a mile!

Apart from that he made a good drinking companion and he and I sank many a pint together. There was just one little snag though, and that was towards the end of the evening he tended to get a bit aggressive. This was where I had to take the roll of peacemaker to try and keep him out of trouble. Most of the time I succeeded, but whilst trying to keep him quiet one evening he turned on me and threatened to give me a bashing. I told him I would not fight him now because he was drunk, but I would fight him the next day. The following morning he was having his breakfast and I said to him, “Right come on, let’s go on deck if you still think you can bash me.” All I got was a silly grin. He knew himself what he was like, but he was a great guy.

A couple of nights later, in the same area, we found another cafe with the same set up as the other, this time with just one lady who looked Italian. We piled in and sat there drinking. I was on the end of the table when all of a sudden this woman screamed and shouted at the top of her voice telling us to get out and calling for somebody from the kitchen. Moments later the kitchen door was flung open and out came this foreign gent with a knife in his hand. Talk about a sharp exit! I had the honour of being the first one out of that door and nobody would say what happened. It did come out later in a conversation with one of the lads who explained it thus: "I was going to put my hand into my pocket and it slipped and went up this lady's skirt. It was an accident, I didn't do it on purpose." Was he lying? We gave him the benefit of the doubt but had our own idea as to whether he was guilty or not. That was our experience of Tiger Bay. Time to get back to the Folkestone — it was safer there.

The day after we sailed I had the middle watch. As it started at midnight it was not worth slinging a hammock so I used to lay on the lockers where we sat during the day. Two of us slept there feet to feet, and one night I was laying there waiting to doze off, watching the cockroaches run up and down the bulkhead. I was also listening to the rats on the air trunking; that was when I heard a couple of them coming. They started from the far end and dashed along the trunk towards our mess. They were just over our table when I heard a squeal and a bloody great big rat fell on our table and jumped for the lockers, right where we were laying! It landed between my feet and my legs immediately shot skywards, sending the rat the other way.

Unfortunately this was where my mate Dusty was laying. As I lay there, looking through my upward-pointing legs, I saw it run up his legs, along his body, straight over his face (which offered only the slightest of twitches) and then it scuttled off along the passage. Dusty didn't know anything about it, least not till I had the pleasure of telling him when he woke up.

What would be waiting for us on our next journey? What sort of seas would we meet? The sea had many moods and I had seen most of them. At times it was just like a pond with no movement at all, and a beautiful sight when the sun set behind it. On the other hand it could have 30-foot waves, something that had to be seen to be appreciated — the sheer power of the sea.

On occasion you could stand on the deck and look skywards and towering above you, as far as you could see, would be this great wall of water. Mere words just can't describe it, but if you didn't know the sea it would terrify you. The wave would pass under the ship and lift it to the crest, and if you looked over the side you would think the ship was in the air because it was on the crest of that mighty wave and you were looking down into the trough.

The vicious waves were those that were out to get you; they battered the ship from all directions. If you were sitting in the mess as it went on you heard the waves hit the side of the ship, which was like a gun going off, and you hoped the plates withstood the onslaught. The force was so strong it would take the ship over onto its side. I had seen a ship roll to such an extent that I had thought to myself that it was gone. It wouldn't have been able to get back up, but get back up is just what it

used to do, to all our relief. When a ship keeled over badly our crew would let out a nervous cheer. It wasn't for pleasure, it was just a way of relieving the tension.

I had become used to aircraft and U-boats trying to blow me out of the water, and accepted that as part of the war, but to be caught in an overturned ship really frightened me. Fortunately, it rarely happened because the build of a warship like HMS Folkestone was such that half of the ship was under the water, thus giving us good stability.

After the sea had given us a sound thrashing we found calmer weather and went up top to stand by the rail and look at the water. At times I had felt it drawing me, as though to say "Come on, come in." I had to shake my head and step away from the rail, such was the power of the sea. But spare a thought for life below decks in rough weather.

Work in the kitchen continued, but with the resultant bruises and burns from being buffeted around. It was impossible for the chef to keep anything on his stove, and quite often we had to exist on a sandwich until the weather abated. We got used to this and it was OK, just as long as they didn't spill our tot!

One convoy we were protecting was 28 ships strong. We had cleared the Bay of Biscay and were heading for the danger area where we knew the dreaded German Wolf Packs were waiting. Wolf Packs were fleets of German U-boats that used mass-attack tactics against convoys. As soon as we were clear of the rough waters of the bay, the packs could be waiting anywhere. They preferred calmer waters in which to attack as they could see much better, and once the call went through the ship of "action

stations” we all had a job to do and the mind concentrated on just that. Off watch I moved around the upper deck and never gave any thought to personal danger. When I was on watch I must admit I hoped not to see a torpedo come through the bulkhead, especially as we were below the water level.

This was why it was so important not to let any smoke out of the funnel. Sadly, the merchant ships let us down on more than one occasion and created danger for everyone by emitting a column of smoke which could be seen hundreds of miles away. The one thing we dreaded to hear was the spotter plane overhead because as soon as he saw us we knew that he would send our position to the waiting U-boats. Due to the smoke from the merchant ships, there was one such occasion.

We tried a zigzag course as an evasive tactic, but it was of no avail and the U-boats were coming. How many this time? Twenty? Thirty? Who knew? We heard that the first ship had gone; its fore-end went up in the air and it slid backwards into the sea. Another two went that way and it was clearly going to be a bad one as the U-boats were all around us.

The next move they made was to get in amongst the ships to hide from us. We were under full steam, chasing any contact we could make. The Hedgehogs’ bombs were being thrown forward of the ship leaving a pattern of depth charges behind. This went on for many days but we were still losing ships. It was the worst attack we had suffered.

It was not unusual for those attacks to go on for days. It was an experience that I would never forget. There was no proper sleep, and we had to exist on a sandwich as there was no time

for a sit down meal. I presume the attack stopped when they ran out of torpedoes or they received news of a more important convoy. When they left us, things soon got back to normal, but we were all tired, dirty and hungry. How many of those submarines were sunk by our attacks was unknown as some went to the bottom with no trace. To see lots of air bubbles and oil rise to the surface meant that we could claim a success. I gave no thought to the men trapped inside these submarines because I had been watching our ships blown out of the water, and those were the men that I felt sorry for. Some of those ships just disappeared in one great explosion. Even though we did our best to protect them, we still felt great despair at the loss of any ship as we felt that we should have done more, but I am afraid there was no more that we could do.

When we finally sighted the African coast we had five ships with us out of an original convoy of 28. What I didn't know at the time was that my brother was aboard one of the remaining five ships. His name was Bill and he was an army man and one of the first to be called up. Our family had done their share in this war, and at least I had done my bit to get him home safely.

The ships' company felt a bit down and exhausted from lack of sleep. Although doing our best to defend the convoy, we had still lost a lot of the ships. The skipper must have sensed this because soon after we anchored we were told we could go swimming if we wanted, which was not normally allowed. It was also suggested that we had a boat race between the stokers and the seamen, which we quickly agreed to — any

opportunity to prove that we were better than them. By tea time the temperature had dropped enough so that the competition could start. The race was on.

Lifeboats were hung and we just moved the supporting hooks (davits) outboard, lowered the boat and waited for the right moment to hit the quick-release lever. The stokers started to climb aboard the lifeboat (I missed out as I had a dog watch) and one of them sat in the stern where he had a bit of a backrest. The rest piled in the centre of the boat. Suddenly, whether by accident or design, somebody touched the forward release lever and the nose of the boat plunged straight towards the sea, tipping out both men and equipment, but the boat was still hanging by its rear support. Panic started in the water as the men were pelted by missiles falling from the boat. Then we heard a voice crying out in pain which came from a man sitting right in the stern of the hanging lifeboat. What happened was that as the front of the boat had dropped, the rear came up and, like a giant pair of pincers, the seaman was crushed between the boat and the davit. We knew where he was but how could we get him out?

A doctor who was visiting the ship crawled along the davit and gave the man a pain-killing shot. The only way we could get him loose was to tie him to the davit arm, get the motorboat to pull on the hanging lifeboat and try to open the pincer grip so we could then hit the release button. Eventually this manoeuvre worked and he was immediately rushed off to the shore hospital with a crushed chest. When we had shore leave a few of us made a visit to him where the hospital staff had made him as comfortable as possible. He was not fit enough to leave with the

ship so we had to leave him behind. After that we just lost touch. The ship had gone quiet again. Our luck was still out.

We decided to move alongside the dock so that we could get out for a ramble around the town, what there was of it. We were in Bathhurst in Gambia, which at the time was just a small port with no roads but simply hard-packed dirt everywhere. We knew it quite well as we had now made many visits to look at the small shops and stalls selling African-made goods. I had picked up one or two things, just something different to take home. We also found where we could buy some bottled beer to help us on our way.

It seemed a very short time we had spent in dock before another convoy was ready, this time heading for England. After the thrashing we had on the way out, we hoped that it would not be the same going back. We would soon find out. This time we had a couple of destroyers with us. We would have liked to have seen more, but when you considered the vast size of the sea we just did not have enough ships. The destroyers were the greyhound of the sea. U-boats didn't like these ships as they were too quick for them. We didn't have to wait too long for a confrontation, as another attack soon started. With the help of our two friends we had more success holding them off, but even so one merchant ship was sunk.

Then more disaster struck. Our boiler had burst a water tube and we suddenly had no power. We were coming to a stop. Perhaps if the U-boats were concentrating on the convoy they might not notice us dropping behind. If they did see us we were dead in the water. It was time to cross our fingers and pray.

It did not help when a message was flashed from the commodore, "Sorry, can't spare any escorts. Good luck."

Being off watch I was part of the repair party, and what a job I had ahead of me. The marine boiler was shaped like a triangle; two great water drums at the bottom with a larger drum at its apex holding water and steam. The lower drums were connected to the top one by a lot of tubes which were full of water. One of these tubes had burst and the boiler couldn't be used until it was repaired. Work was going on getting the heavy inspection doors of the drums open. The trouble was that everything was still red hot.

With the doors removed it was a question of going in and carrying out the repair by driving a metal plug in each end of the damaged tube, thus isolating it. The petty officer said he would take the top drum, and I was allocated the bottom one. The art of delegation was in operation here as he had more room and was driving his plug down, whereas I had less room and had to lay on my back and drive the plug upwards. I put on some extra clothes for protection, and as the drum was some distance from the deck, I was lifted up and put in head first and pushed until I was in position.

With the intense heat it was difficult to breathe, and the hammer I was using felt like a lump of lead. I was getting burnt and wanted to shout to them to pull me out but I had an incentive to keep going — if the job was not completed we would be blown out of the water! When the job was done I had a few burns and blisters but at least the boiler was made ready.

We had to raise steam and catch the convoy as we were a few hours behind them by now. I don't understand to this day how the U-boats missed us as we were just sitting in the water. I can only assume they had been too busy attacking the merchant ships and we had slipped behind unnoticed, but it would have been such an easy score for them. We had not had much luck on this trip but I think we found a bit that time.

Looking at the convoy we didn't seem to have lost too many ships, which would be good news when we reached Liverpool. We had been running these merchant ships back and forward for three years. Most of us thought it was time for a break. Each watch had seven days leave, and on return to Liverpool the boilermakers arrived to start work on the damaged boiler. We just could not take a chance of that letting us down again.

I wondered if the skipper shared these thoughts when he gave us the news that after the boiler had been reconditioned we were to pick up an important convoy of just a few ships with only four escorts, including us. We were to go straight out on our own which meant that we would make more speed and fetch the convoy back. The journey out was some 4,500 miles — destination: Cuba.

I think most of us were looking forward to a change from our usual run, and I was quite excited at the thought of seeing a new country. It was a long journey but it made no difference to us — after all, the ship was our home now.

CHAPTER 5

Anastasia Morris ... Nice Eyes

As I have said, I was stationed for part of my time at Liverpool. I didn't see a lot of the city apart from the dock area, which was very busy with so much shipping moving in and out. I didn't see much in the way of air raids either, but I certainly got to know the local pubs, which were always on my visiting list. This was where I was to meet someone who was to become very special to me.

On one of our longer breaks ashore, whilst work was being done on the ship, four of us decided to have a pub crawl. We started with the pub right outside the dockyard gate and then moved on to the next one which was the pub up on the corner, called "The Goat", where two barmaids were serving. Looking at one, I thought she was very attractive. The first thing I noticed about her was her eyes. They were lovely, and her legs weren't bad

either. I used to keep a watch on them when she got bottles from the lower shelf. This was somebody who I was going to know better if I had the chance but, playing by the rules, we had a pint and moved on, which did not suit me at all. After we moved away I began to complain about the taste of the beer, saying it was a much better pint back at the corner pub. One of my mates suggested that we forget about the pub crawl and go back to my preferred pub. Once there I wasted no time in finding out the young lady's name, Anastasia, and made a date with her for later that week.

On our first date I arranged to meet her at the Pier Head. I wasn't sure if she would turn up, so I was naturally delighted when I saw her walking towards me. She had a little hat perched over one eye and wore a nice outfit which made a very pretty picture. Stasia, as I called her for short, was an extremely beautiful girl and, I must confess, it was very much a case of love at first sight. From the very first time I saw her serving behind the bar I felt drawn towards her. Our first time out we took in a picture show and then went for a quiet drink before I took her home. I was just waiting for the time when I would see her again. After that, any spare time I had off was spent in the pub where she worked.

Whilst I was waiting for her to finish work I would chat to the landlady, Mrs Gormley, who was a very nice person and made me very welcome. It was only natural that my friendship with Stasia came up and she didn't object at all, but by some of the things she said I got a message, "Treat Stasia the right way, or else!" Each night I would take her home on the tram. We used to chat on the way, but part of the time I was talking to myself because she would fall asleep. I never said anything because she

worked hard all of the evening. Once we arrived on her doorstep we used to have a little cuddle before she went in. Every time she would remind me that I had missed the last tram back. Who cared? I didn't. I had been with Stasia and that was all I wanted. Even so, it was a bloody long walk back to the ship!

This all ended when I was sent back to Chatham Barracks. We had to keep in touch by letter and I arranged to go and pick her up and bring her down to London and meet my parents. It was only for a few days but, like all mothers, mine was a bit wary of me getting too closely involved with someone.

With my leave ending, I took Stasia back on the train to Liverpool and during the journey I suggested that we get engaged. She agreed. I told her to buy the ring herself as I had to return to barracks. She took me at my word and bought the ring on 21st November 1944. When I received the bill I had a bad case of an empty bank account. We were kept apart for a while and then I was notified of my draft to HMS Pioneer and given leave before I was due to board ship. Stasia travelled down to London on her own and my mum and uncle met her at the station, that way she would be there when I had my leave.

During war times you had to snatch as much time together as you could, and it was during this leave that I took Stasia for a walk in Bostall Woods, which was very nice in the summer. We stopped by a bordering fence and I asked Stasia if she would marry me there and then. I somehow felt that if we did not do something right away the opportunity might be lost, given that I could be away at sea for years to come. She agreed but was worried what her family would say, which was something I appreciated, but we

decided to go for it. We went home and told my mum, but I'm afraid that she wasn't at all happy with the idea. Nevertheless we made arrangements to be married on Thursday, 19th January 1945.

It was to be a quiet wedding, but my parents were not going to attend at first. My mother, as I've said, was not happy at the thought of my getting married and was not going to attend the wedding and said that my father could not take the time off work. My dad was a nice old chap but he never had a lot to say for himself as he just wanted a quiet life. I had a private chat with him and he soon arranged for some time off. I bet Mum gave him a right lecture when she got him home. He used to do things like give me some money and say "Don't tell your mother." Thanks Dad — you're a pal.

My best man was a friend called Dusty, and the witness was Gwen, who was my brother's first wife. We were married in the Registry Office in Woolwich, South London after which we had a few drinks and a meal. Nothing big in wartime.

I was raised in the Church of England, whereas Stasia had always been a practising Catholic. She was not happy with a non-church wedding because it would not be recognised in her religion. We decided that when peace returned we would get married in a church and that was what we did. We didn't get the chance of a honeymoon as I had to report back to my new ship.

We decided that when I got out of the navy we would have two children, a boy and a girl, which is what happened, but that's another story. We had a short period of married life together before I joined the HMS Pioneer six days later and was on my way to Australia via Cuba.

CHAPTER 6

Destination Cuba

With our boiler in top condition we set off. Even if we knew where we were heading it was best not to tell anybody, and we were all aware of the saying, “Careless talk costs lives.” This was an urgent job so we took the straightest route across the North Atlantic Ocean.

We were going to make the journey out at full speed, which was a great change after the slow convoy work. The only snag was that at these speeds the fuel went at an alarming rate, so it was necessary for us to refuel at sea. We were over halfway there before fuel was running low, so we arranged to meet with the supply ship and take station alongside one another.

A rod with a light line attached was fired from a special rifle to the other ship. The light line then pulled a thicker rope and that rope pulled across whatever was required, in our case an oil

hose. For convenience, the connection point was near the guard rail along with a point for the dipstick. Being off duty I was told to stand by the hose and keep dipping the tanks with this long dipstick. Everything was going fine, and we had a steady flow of fuel coming over, but the sea was rough and the ships were rolling heavily. I had to keep an eye on the hose, which at times was taking a bit of strain. After a while I noticed that the hose was beginning to sag, which meant that the gap between the ships was closing. Who was to blame? I don't know, but the situation got worse, so much so that I thought to myself, "Chief, if you want those tanks dipped, you're the man to do it."

The supply ship was big and stood high in the water. I didn't want that bouncing on my bonce, so I made a hasty retreat from the guard rail. From a safe distance I watched for what I knew was going to happen as the two ships came together. At the same time the supply ship rolled on to us. It was like stepping on a beetle as our ship was forced low in the water and all the gear on that side was damaged. The lifeboats were turned into matchwood; they just flew apart as they were crushed. The ships rolled apart after that, with each skipper trying to widen the gap. My oil hose was pulled apart and it was decided that we had enough oil to finish our journey, so we called it a day and sailed on.

Reaching Cuba we found the Americans had a small base there but we didn't get to see much more as the merchant ships were waiting to move. It was simply a matter of filling up the fuel tanks, taking on provisions, then moving out. There were six ships to go back to the U.K. with four escorts. Sometimes four escort ships had to look after 20 ships, so I wondered why there

were so many of us for just six ships? Why were we sent out here at full speed to get these well protected ships back home? What were they carrying? We never found out, but luckily we got them all back home safe. Nobody found out what that cargo was, and it proved to be one of the best kept secrets of my war.

As we neared home we flew a flag from the masthead which was triangular and reached halfway along the ship. What was it? It was the paying-off pennant, an extremely long pennant, the length of which reflects the length of service, flown by a ship returning to its home port to discharge its crew. Once we reached Liverpool the ship would be taken over by the dockers and given a refit and all the crew would be paid off and sent back to barracks. When the time came I felt sad about leaving HMS Folkestone. It had been my home for over three years, and the thought of strangers tramping around her where we used to eat and sleep just didn't seem right somehow.



Aged 19 having just joined the navy.



Aged 19 and training at Malvern.



The barrack church at Royal Navy Barracks, Chatham.



HMS Folkestone, frigate.



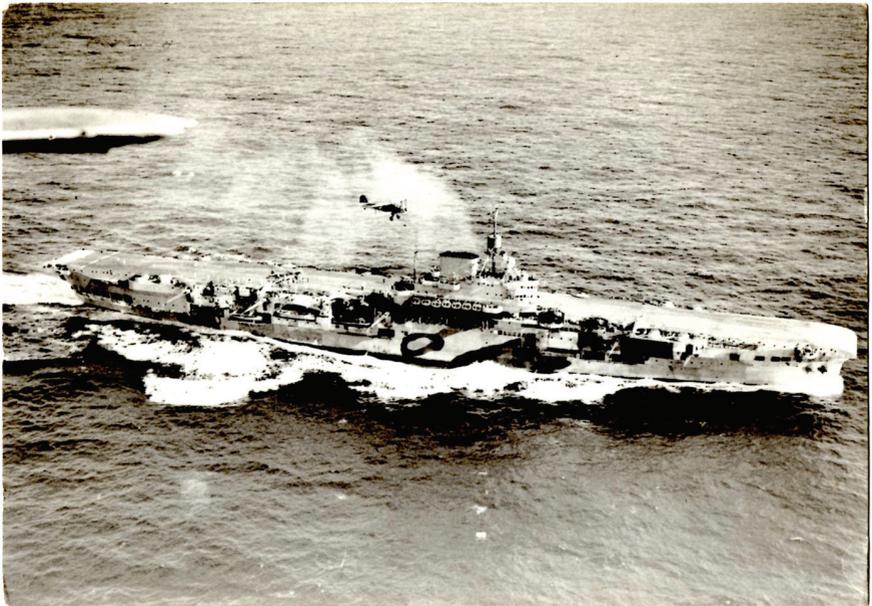
Me in the middle, aged 21, with a couple of shipmates from HMS Folkestone.



Aged 21 on HMS Folkestone. I'm second from the right and Dusty is second from the left.



Aged 22 on HMS Folkestone.
I'm on the left, just having come off watch.



HMS Pioneer, aircraft carrier.



Left to right: Me (aged 22), Nig-Bo and a couple of shipmates.



Aged 22 in Ghana, West Africa.



Me and Stasia on Thursday 19 January 1945, our wedding day.



One of the new planes being pushed overboard at the end of the war.

My medals from HMS Folkestone and HMS Pioneer.



Aged 23 and back in civvy street, New Eltham, South London.



The Daniels family group, circa 1946. Left to right: my younger brother Vic, me, my mother Anni, my father Will, and my elder brother Bill.



Christmas 1995. The author, the author's wife, and the editor.

CHAPTER 7

Back to Chatham and Sydney

I was back to Chatham Barracks to see what was to come next. Arriving there it was the same old routine with lots of noise and bustle. Down on the dockside there was an old sailing ship which was used as an overflow from the barracks. This was where they put us. It was much quieter down there, and the ship itself was a picture, with massive wooden beams everywhere and spotlessly clean. I quite enjoyed my stay aboard her and although we used to go to the main depot for our meals, apart from that we lived on board. They kept us busy with parades and I put in for another course, shortly after which I received my passing certificate for petty officer.

Being in Chatham and close to home, we were allowed night leave and I was able to go home a few times. When I was at home I would sometimes go to the pictures; other times I would

sit indoors or go out for a pint. Visiting friends was not possible as most were themselves in the forces, however it made a break being home, but I was always thinking about what ship I would be on next and what seas I would travel.

I was restless and wondered how long I would be ashore, although there were some of the other sailors who had settled in the depot and never went to sea. I managed two months and then had the call to report to the marshalling yards where I was told to report to Barrow-in-Furness to pick up our new ship, HMS Pioneer.

This was a brand new aircraft carrier and when I arrived the dockers were still aboard. The ship still had to be taken out on trials as the navy did not accept a ship until they were satisfied that everything was working perfectly. As the ship was in the harbour, I was taken out in a motorboat and as we approached the ship I could see just how massive it was. The flight deck stood some 40 feet from the water which made the poor old Folkestone look like a midget. The trouble with big ships was that there was even more bullshit to deal with, as I would soon find out. The first thing that struck me as I stepped on the deck was the amount of space available, not at all like the cramped conditions I had been used to. Nice new paintwork as well.

I was shown to the stokers' mess deck, which meant I had to go past the galley, step through a bulkhead door and there before me was the mess. There were long tables and stools, and around the bulkhead stood lockers for each man but there was still plenty of room to walk around. Over to the left was another door, which was where I was going, which led to a smaller mess.

It had just two tables, end on with a gap between them. In one corner was a small fenced area which was for stowing the hammocks during the day. We even had our own lockers. There was a large ladder leading to a hatch in the deck which was a very nice set up. We could have our grub and then step up on deck for a bit of fresh air. What a difference! The engine room and upper decks were a bit untidy at this stage because the boat builders were still on board — they would stay until the sea trials were completed. Once everybody was satisfied, the ship was signed over and became part of the navy fleet. Then we started to get it shipshape and looking like a naval vessel.

In the next few weeks, in between trial runs at sea, the seaman were busy filling the ship with provisions and I was allocated a temporary position in the boiler room until we all got sorted out for our correct duties. It was the most boring job I had been given. These boilers were big — they stood 20 feet high — and the top drum held water and steam. This drum had two sight glasses that showed its water level. If this dropped I would nip smartly down the ladder from the platform where I was standing and put an extra water feed pump on. Due to the size of the boiler, the chief stoker was down at furnace level and could not see the levels at the top, so I was positioned near the top of the boiler on the platform and for four hours I had to stand there and watch the water level.

Thank goodness I only had to suffer this for the sea trials. Once they were finished I had two main jobs which alternated between the steam generator and the refrigerator system. These were my sea watch duties: in harbour I would be the motorboat

driver and, when required, the shore patrol. The generator job was easy because it was just watching the various dials and listening for any unusual noises. Stokers spent a lot of time listening to machinery. It was surprising when a machine was running at a constant speed that any variation could be picked up at once by ear. This was one of the reasons that whistling was forbidden in the engine room. The title of Stoker went back to the days of coal-fired boilers. In the near future the title of Stoker would be replaced by Marine Engineer Mechanic.

I enjoyed my job on the motorboat, which was just a water taxi service, however you never knew who you would pick up. Shore patrol was power. When you walked around with white gaiters round the ankles, white belt, and white arm band on which were the letters "NP" (Naval Police), any sailor boys on shore leave behaved themselves. Power, sheer power. I was quite happy doing these jobs and I don't think I would have changed them.

We were at last preparing for sea and we would leave at the morning watch. There were two escort ships which would look after us. Hopefully they wouldn't want to lose a brand new carrier on its first duty.

After being tossed around the ocean, sailing on this ship was like being in a Rolls Royce. It had a very slow and gentle roll but it used to pitch, which meant that the bow of the ship moved up and down all the time, enough to make the new lads look a bit green around the gills. On the mess decks, after going through the stokers' area, you passed through yet another bulkhead door into the fleet air arm mess where there were hundreds of seasick men.

It really was a picture to see in rough weather where meals were left untouched on the tables, and bodies were in every corner.

We had to walk through the mess to get to the heads (or as landlubbers called it, the bathroom). Once again it was better than I had been used to, with plenty of toilets and wash basins, even the luxury of showers — much better than using a bucket.

Going through bulkhead doors was something I did all day, as every so many yards there was a door in a bulkhead with an opening about three feet from the deck. You stepped over this as you passed the door, which was kept clipped open most of the time. It was only on the order of, “Close all watertight doors!” that they were shut and clipped. Once this was done we had a ship that was a series of watertight compartments giving us a better chance to survive if one part of the hull was penetrated.

Now that we were at sea the skipper told us our destination. The reason for waiting was so that nobody leaked the information ashore. All information came over speakers which were all over the ship and a normal message could be a bosuns’ whistle followed by “Up spirits.” When the duty officer was going to talk, you heard the bosuns’ whistle and then the words “D’ye hear there?” It was on this pipe that he told us we were sailing to join the Pacific Fleet and we would be based in Sydney, Australia.

My suit would need to be pressed for this one. That would be easy — we even had an iron aboard. We liked to look smart going ashore. There was not a lot of difference in the summer and winter dress, it was just that in summer we wore a white shirt and hat, and in winter we had a blue jersey and hat. For tropics, an all white suit was worn with blue piping or white shirt with

shorts. The favourite suit was the “tiddly” as it was called, but it was one you had to buy yourself. You had to go to a naval tailor to get it made properly as it needed accurate measurements. The trousers were bell-bottoms which had no flies. Instead the waist had two broad bands that fastened with four buttons. This was a very tight fit that gave a corset affect. Below this was a flap which was lifted to cover the bands and had buttons on each side to hold it up. This gave a very smooth waistline. I wondered how many ladies knew this but never actually admitted it?

The legs of the suit were turned inside out and soap was rubbed on the creases, then ironed. There had to be seven creases and both legs had to look identical. This served two purposes: firstly, with the legs closed in their crease, they would not screw up and secondly, when we wore them they didn’t sag but stood out.

That was the trousers, next came the shirt, but was it was going to be hot weather? I would leave that and just use a dicky (a strip of material that you put your head through and tied the ends at the waist). Finally came the collar, on the bottom of which were three separate pieces: the centre one which went down the back, and the two outer ones which were placed over the shoulders and tied at the waist.

The uniform was tight and to put it on you rolled the bottom halfway up to the neck, then pushed your arms and shoulders through and a mate would help you pull it down. The collar was then pulled out from under the uniform and lined up with the under collar of the suit. The one that you saw must have three vertical creases. The next thing was the black silk. Mine was real

silk and a present from my mother. This went under the collar, down the open front of the suit and tied at the bottom of the v-neck with a blue ribbon. At a wedding this would be changed to white.

The last item would be a lanyard, which is thin white rope, and very often a knife was secured on its end. This once again went around the neck and into the v-neck. Last of all was the hat. What can you do with a hat? Not much, but at least it had a ribbon around it.

Every ship had a bowman. He was the one who could tie a beautiful bow, evenly spaced sides, two nice ends standing up. It really was a work of art. Go and see him, offer him sippers and he would make one for you. The correct position for the bow is above the left ear, but me and one or two of the others had this work of art above the left eye.

We now had a picture of highly-polished shoes, trousers evenly creased, uniform jacket which fitted like a second skin, real silk around the neck, and badges which were made from gold wire. The badges were expensive but they really stood out — one arm had a propeller with a star and the other had an anchor for a leading hand and a stripe for four years service.

The hat was worn low over the eyes at all times. That concluded the picture of Jack the Lad, but one problem remained however; how did you get the skin-tight suit off? Once again it was down to your mates. You placed your hands on his hips and he would peel it off for you. It was a good job we all worked together!

Back to routine matters; we had been told that the first stop on our journey would be Gibraltar, which wouldn't take too

long. I was watchkeeping the generator which was a high-speed steam unit that rotated so fast that it always gave off a screaming sound. By the time four hours was up my head was buzzing and, unfortunately, ear muffs were not heard of. Having said that, it was probably just as well as you had to listen for any change in sound which could have meant trouble.

With the watch over, the grub would be on the table ready. We didn't make our own menu on this ship as it was like the barracks where the galley did it all. We just went along and collected the big trays, which had enough portions for our mess. There was no choice available and as soon as the meal was finished one lad filled a dixie — a large oval type bucket — with hot water into which we added a bit of soft soap. That's all we had, but it cleaned the dishes and it was a routine we had to get used to on board. Keep everything clean and neatly stowed away and it would pay off, especially if the ship gave a sudden roll. Then it took less time picking up the mess.

It was a nice day and all quiet so I went off to the flight deck to get a bit of fresh air. This was where we took our walks, and when the sun was out it was ideal for sunbathing. A couple of us would walk back and forwards across the ship till our legs got tired. There was plenty of room; it was much more cramped on HMS Folkestone where I had to keep my arms out of the way. This was why you very often saw old sailors walking with their hands behind their backs.

Off watch there was always plenty to do, like keeping the mess clean and washing both clothes and bedding, which then had to be ironed. As there were no women around at washing

time we used to strip off so we could slosh the water anywhere. The hammock was the worst as it was quite a size, and when spread out we used to lay it on the deck and scrub it. It was quite something watching a naked man scrubbing a hammock with his head down and his behind in the air — not a pretty sight I can assure you!

Another thing we used to scrub was our collar, as when they were first issued they were dark navy, almost black. This didn't look the part when we were in our best suit, so we kept washing and scrubbing to get rid of the dye. When we were finished we had a collar that was a nice light blue and stood out against the dark uniform.

We had some flashy gits about in those days, but when we went ashore we really looked the part. Once we reached town the shore patrol was there to make sure we behaved ourselves. Sadly, in the so-called modern navy of today, they tend to go ashore in any gear they care to wear and do what they want.

We arrived at Gibraltar but it was only to be a brief visit and consequently there would be no shore leave. This was the first time I had travelled in the Atlantic and not come under attack, which made a pleasant change. We made several stops on our journey. Whether this was to show off the navy's new carrier or to let the different people see more power on its way to the Pacific Fleet, we were never told.

After two days we moved on to the next stop, which was Tunisia, where we were able to get ashore. It was interesting to have a quick look around these places but, as always, we were surrounded by children looking for money, or they would offer

to take you to their sister. I am afraid that we had to threaten these kids to get rid of them, otherwise they gave us no peace.

Another short stay just along the coast was Alexandria, which was a very popular stopping place for naval ships. Our travels then took us into the Suez Canal where we sailed down the centre of this huge construction and where the banks seemed very close. All you could see on each side was sand, but we made it safely through the canal and into the Red Sea where we went straight across to Bombay. After a quick visit there it was on to Colombo where we had to make our way across the Indian Ocean.

So far we had been very lucky in that it had been like a cruise, but that was going to end very shortly as we were getting closer to Japanese held territory, and we all knew how much those Japanese pilots loved the sight of our big flat deck. We might have seen lots of places, but they were all viewed from the deck of a ship. We were not on a cruise, and the ship must be ready for action at any time.

Perhaps a word about HMS Pioneer. It had a different setup than usual in that the aft hangar was full of brand new planes, but the fore hangar was full of spare parts and had a marvellous workshop. In the past when a plane came in to land and it had been damaged, which was quite often, it was just pushed over the side.

To save this loss of planes we carried a large flat barge. The plane was lowered to the barge and then back onto our ship where, in a very short time, it was airworthy again. The barge was pretty fast through the water as it was powered by two big V8 engines. Because of the design of the boat there was no room

to stand in the engine space, and with two motors going in a confined space it was so deafening that I was always pleased to shut them down.

We were now ready for the last leg of our journey, nonstop to Aussieland, which was a distance of another 3,000 miles. It went without incident although we once sighted some Japanese bombers. Fortunately they were after something else, but nevertheless we still closed up to action stations just in case.

When off duty at these times I had to man a pump which was situated in the bowels of the ship. It was a massive beast with connecting pipes to all of the watertight compartments. Due to its low position, anytime we had a flood the water dropped towards the pump which then used its full power to send this water overboard. If it was in a higher position it would have to give up part of the power to suck up any water which would lead to its not being so efficient.

It was rather a lonely existence in my position with just a pump, a telephone, and me. My job was basically to wait for a telephone call which would tell me whether to pump or flood. If by chance the ship was holed it would be contained to that part of the vessel by the watertight doors. I would then try to pump the water over the side which gave damage control a chance to see if a repair could be made. If this was not possible, because for example the hole was too big and the pump could not cope, the ship would start to list to one side. Then it would be necessary to stop pumping and that part of the ship was given up as lost. In these circumstances I would flood the other side of the ship which would pull it back on

an even keel so that, although it sat lower in the water, at least it would be stable.

Being that low in the ship meant that you didn't know what was going on up top. The flight deck was some 40 feet above the waterline and I was many feet below the water, so to pass the time I used to look around the bulkheads and wonder how far up the waterline was. I then used to look at the three ladders, the first of which led up to a platform where you turned right and walked to the next ladder and then up again and right to the next which took you to the top platform and the watertight door. I knew that if a torpedo hit the area that I was in the water would reach the door before I did and would come in with a terrific force.

The thought didn't frighten me as I think I accepted the fact that it was just a way of life. I would either make it or I wouldn't. If that seemed a bit cavalier, it wasn't. It was simply that after years of being battered around the ocean I learned to accept these things. I think I worried more about grub time at action stations where I stayed at my post with no break for however long it took. When my watch time came round I was relieved from the pump and went down to the engine room, which was another four hours in which I didn't eat, but never mind — I would get some eventually.

Meanwhile, we were steadily sailing on to Sydney. After what we had been through in the past few years this trip was a luxury cruise. We knew it was only for a short while as once in port we would replenish our supplies and then head back to the China coast. I was sure that some of those mad Japanese pilots would be pleased to welcome us.

I was watchkeeping on the refrigerating plant for a change. This setup was much like a domestic unit, only on a much larger scale. There was more work on this watch due to the maintenance required on the filters to clean the pipes which had to be kept clear of sludge. This reminded me of some of the fridges I had seen when visiting ashore where the pipes were covered with a thick coating of ice. This not only stopped the fridge working efficiently but cost more to run by having to work harder to maintain the temperature.

Having strayed this far to the domestic front, I will take an opportunity to explain how it works. First you need a refrigerant, which is something with a low boiling point. To give a comparison, water will boil at 212°F while ammonia boils at -28.01°F. There is a vast difference and ammonia was widely used in the large plants, but not on the home front.

Looking at the back of a fridge there is a round object near the bottom, which is the compressor, and a lot of pipes above, which is the condenser, and then pipes that go into the compartments. The refrigerant, which is gas, is compressed which turns the gas to liquid. Compressing the refrigerant made it hot so it ran through all of those pipes, which in turn would cool it and it would then enter your fridge to the thermostat.

The liquid that is in the system will remain liquid as long as it is under pressure all of the time. Once it is past the thermostat it can expand in all of the pipes in the fridge and return to gas. This is where the low boiling point comes in, as when changing to gas it is actually boiling and taking the heat from the fridge to do so. A simple demonstration would be to put a drop of petrol

on your hand — it will evaporate and leave your hand cold. What it did was to boil and take the heat from your hand to do it.

They say that a drowning man will clutch at straws. I believe this due to what happened to me whilst I was carrying out some maintenance work on the refrigerating plant. This incident lasted only minutes, but to me it seemed like a lifetime.

I was going to clean a filter in one of the ammonia feed lines, which were pretty large items. I had all the bolts out of the cover but it still refused to come apart. Even with a lot of pulling and using a hammer around the outside edge it still wouldn't budge. I did not dare drive anything between the two parts in case it ruined the seal for the future. These covers had a built-in lifting handle, so I stood astride the filter, bent my knees and pulled.

Nothing happened for a while, then it suddenly let go. Unfortunately a lot of ammonia gas was released at the same time, and being right over the filter I took the full force right in the face. Breathing rather heavily from my struggles with the cover, I took a mouthful, which immediately paralysed my lungs. The terrifying thing about this was that I could see, hear, and move about, but I had stopped breathing and, more worrying, I could not make a sound.

Two stokers walked past the other side of the engine room and I frantically waved to them to come over, pointing to my mouth. I was trying to tell them that I needed air, but they just walked on not knowing what I was gesturing about. I had pains in my chest and remember falling back to the bulkhead. I slowly slid down to the deck and it felt like there was an iron band

around my chest. I was desperate and in agony. I reached out and grabbed handfuls of air and tried to put it in my mouth. I couldn't see properly and I knew that I would be unconscious in a matter of seconds, when suddenly one of my lungs must have made a bit of movement and I finally got a sip of air.

It was like sucking through a straw, but it was enough. It took quite a while but my air intake slowly increased and then finally got back to normal. In about half an hour I had recovered enough to finish the job I had started. I don't know how long I was suffering for, as I wasn't counting the minutes. The question was, how long could someone hold their breath?

Nobody knows by experimenting because you would let yourself start breathing before the agony started, and working where I was it was rather isolated and nobody realised I was in trouble. I never mentioned it to anybody as it was an episode I wanted to forget. I had seen a lot of action in the past few years, but that was something that had really frightened me.

The coast of Australia had been sighted so it wouldn't be long before we were in port. The weather had been great, sunshine every day for weeks, and steaming into Sydney we dropped anchor in the harbour. It made such a nice change to be near land again and I was already thinking of shore leave, but there was a lot to do before that started. A lot of machinery had to be shut down, the ship had to be neat and shipshape, the fuel tanks had to be filled, and supplies had to be brought aboard. The boilers would be kept at standby with low steam pressure so that the ship could be ready for sea duty in an hour or so. Only when all that lot was completed was it time to think

about that shore leave, but who was going first? We had to wait for the officer of the watch to tell us if it was going to be port or starboard watch. It was decided that the port watch, which was mine, were to stay aboard.

I decided to write a letter to Stasia as I had already had a letter from her telling me how much she was missing me. To ease the pain of our being apart she had taken to driving around Liverpool in a jeep with an American serviceman. Well, we all had to do our part in this Anglo-American relationship. I thought with a bit of luck the wheels might fall off — that would slow him down a bit! She had told me about this young man so I did not worry about it.

Her letters were something I used to look forward to, and it was always a big disappointment if none arrived. On the other hand, being away from home didn't worry me as it was what I expected when I joined the navy. Being thousands of miles away I couldn't just pop home for the weekend so I just settled down and tried to enjoy wherever I was at the time.

For some reason I was not impressed with my first trip into Sydney. It was not the place itself but more the nasty looks that were passed our way which came across as open hostility to Royal Navy personnel. It was obvious that we were not very welcome, and there was not a smile to be seen. People even moved to one side of the pavement as you walked along.

The pubs were open from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and had U-shaped bars which made it a madhouse with everybody shouting for drinks at the same time. We used to stand there in our uniforms calling for a drink and would not be served,

although people each side of us got their drinks from the bar staff who would then dart away to serve someone else. They were not refusing to serve us, it was just that they didn't want to hear us.

These were people who watched the war go by. If they had tasted a bit of the bombing that England had been through they would have been crying out for us. Another thing that I didn't like about this city were the beggars. They were on every corner, and I must say that I found them a right pain in the rear.

We received word that we were moving out a convoy towards Hong Kong. We had destroyer escorts, which made a change to have somebody looking out for us. The size of a carrier — some 30,000 tons — made it a bit slow for taking quick evasive action. This was its obvious weak link. It couldn't dodge torpedoes, which was why we needed the escort.

Unlike the Atlantic where the submarines hunted us in packs, we did not encounter any in the Pacific. This time our enemy was in the sky, but this run was a quiet one and when the merchant ships were safely berthed we returned to Sydney.

We definitely had a problem with this place and, as we knew that we were going to be there a long time, we decided to wait until we had a complete day off to have a good look around and then make up our minds. Two of us set off and we decided first to look out of the town where we found a fun ground called Luna Park. After spending a bit of time there we looked for the famous Bondi Beach and hopped on a bus that took us there.

At last there was something I liked about Aussieland; this great stretch of golden sand. I could have stopped there all

day, but it was no good trying to sunbathe in a full uniform, so I decided to return at some later date. As it happened I returned there several times. One of the days I went back was on Christmas Day. Whilst most folks back home were freezing, I was lying in the sun on golden sand. It was so nice that I stopped on the beach all night.

The following morning I decided to leave the beach and look around the town. They had some nice hotels although they were a bit expensive. I took to the side streets where I found some shops where they sold everything. You name it, they had it. Whilst looking in the window of one of these shops I noticed a sign which said "Condoms fitted free." I went in and a nice-looking lady with lovely skin, golden from the sun, came up to me and asked if I wanted any help. I asked if she was the lady that fitted the condoms. When she said she was I asked her to wash her hands as I wanted a quarter of liquorice, all sorts!

We decided on a plan whereby four of us would get together and rent a two-bedroomed flat. As there were two of us from each watch it meant that only two would use the room at any one time. The next step would be to don some civvies — a jacket, a pair of trousers and a shirt. Our disguise was complete — even the naval police would not be able to recognise us which at least gave us a bit more freedom.

The flat was situated a bus ride away from the city and in a small side street, well away from any naval policemen. It made a nice change to wander round the town with no fear of anyone watching you, even if after a few hours it was time to change suits and report back on board.

It was time to set sail once more and we were on convoy to Hong Kong again in order to keep their rice supplies going. These had been quiet runs so far. When we reached harbour my job was as the motorboat driver which meant that I drove it through the water at whatever speeds were required, working with an engine that was positioned at midships. The steering of the boat was the job of the coxswain, and two more seamen made up the crew.

When the “away motorboat crew” pipe came the four of us made our way to where the boat was tied. Below the guard rail was a boom which was secured to the ship’s side when at sea. However, in harbour it was swung out and lashed by three wires — one on each side and one up towards the flight deck — to keep it stable. It was about 20 feet long and 30 feet above the water and was about the size of a telegraph pole with a top side that had been flattened off.

In the sea at the end of the boom was the motorboat. The idea was that no matter how rough the sea got, the boat could not damage itself against the side of the ship. A thin piece of rope ran from the ship’s side to the end of the boom to help us reach the end, but it was too slack to help, so the drill was to step over the guard rail and start walking the boom. We didn’t think about it, we just went!

When we reached the end we knelt down and felt under the boom for where the rope ladder was secured. Once we found it we took a good grip because we then had to slide off of the boom onto the ladder. We didn’t use a normal rope ladder otherwise our legs and the ladder would be swinging everywhere. The trick was to go down the side of it, which made matters

much easier. On reaching the bottom we would find the boat secured by its painter (a rope attached to the bow) but it would be several feet away. Next thing was to hang on to the ladder with one hand, reach out with the other and start pulling the boat in. As it got nearer we would grab a bit more rope, which was not easy as we were swinging about on the bottom of a rope ladder, but it gradually came nearer and when it was close enough, and the time was right ... JUMP. If you did it wrong you would soon know as you disappeared beneath the waves.

We used to work well together as a crew and even though the coxswain and myself were both of the same rank it was always recognised that he was in charge of the boat. When we had a call to take out the boat the cox used to say, "I will leave it to you Stokes." This meant that he didn't have the worry of having to judge the right speed required and steer the boat at the same time.

We had this down to a fine art. When we came alongside I used to come in at full speed; when near the gangway I would cut the engine and then go full astern while at the same time the cox would put his rudder hard over. The effect of this was that the boat came to a stop and then slowly moved sideways right alongside the gangway — perfect positioning and the art of working together.

Demonstrating the wisdom of naval officers everywhere they decided to break up our little team by replacing the cox with someone who had just been made up to a leading hand. The power must have gone to the new man's head as on our first run together I mentioned that the previous cox used to leave the

engine to me and, if he wanted, we could operate the same way. He replied that I should obey his commands, and he was quite arrogant about it as well. Now up to a point any stoker would tolerate any seamen, but they didn't mix with them or take any lip, so this cox was well out of order. I decided that for the honour of stokers everywhere this man must be punished!

On our first trip I decided that I would obey his commands to the letter — give 'em enough rope! After making our way out to the dockside to take some officers ashore we returned to the ship with an empty boat and I felt certain that my plan of total obedience was going to work. Nearing the ship he called for slow ahead — just what I wanted. A boat must go at a certain speed or you cannot steer it. I slowed the engine as ordered, but it was too slow and the boat lost steering. Now the panic started as we drifted away from the ship.

The seamen were screaming to the cox to put the helm over. He was screaming back that he was doing just that but he couldn't steer the boat. Looking out of the side of the canopy I saw that we were drifting under the bow of the ship and the officer of the watch, who had been observing our approach, was now standing on the guard rails trying to see where we were going. He didn't have to wait long as we eventually struck the side of the ship!

After this I generously gave him enough speed to limp to the gangway. This man did not have the sense to tell me to go astern but he had instructed me to obey his orders, which I did. As soon as we arrived the chief shouted down for the boat crew to report to the officer of the watch. He was not a happy man and called us everything under the sun. He asked me if there was anything

wrong with the engines. “No sir, just obeying orders,” I replied. By the way the cox looked at me I think he was beginning to rumble. When we were dismissed we secured the boat. In the mess later the cox came to see me and admitted that he had slowed down too soon and asked if I would look after the engine when we next went out. Needless to say I agreed. The moral of that little tale to him was to not be big-headed and to listen to advice from those who knew better.

Whilst at anchor in Hong Kong Bay it was surprising how many junks (ancient Chinese sailing ships that are still in use today) gathered around the ship. They arrived in the morning and stopped all day with their different wares to sell, and come lunchtime they lit a fire on their boat and started cooking, just as if they were at home. I found this rather amusing as there wasn't a lot to see ashore. When we did go on land we wandered around the old shanty towns and tried some of the rice wine. We used to drink what we could get when in these foreign countries. There was not much scenery, just dirt roads and lots of shacks, although we had to stay around the dock area as it was not considered safe to travel too far from the ship. There was a chance if you did wander off you might not return. Not all orientals liked sailors.

After that was usually a ride in a rickshaw, either further afield or back to the dockside. It was on one of those runs ashore that a member of our crew got stabbed. He had wandered too far inland and was jumped on by a couple of coolies (unskilled laborers of the region) after his money. He put up a fight and received a knife wound, which fortunately was not too serious — just a few stitches and a rest and he was well on his way to

recovery. However, this incident really upset the whole ship's company, and the first reaction was for retribution.

Anybody who was entitled to shore leave lined up for the liberty boat. Nobody was allowed ashore until the officer of the watch had carried out his inspection, and any rating not up to the correct standard was not allowed ashore. He noticed the large numbers leaving the ship and issued a warning to the effect that he wanted no trouble because of the previous incident. That fell on deaf ears because that night many of the Hong Kong residents got a severe kicking. Innocent people suffered that night but an angry sailor abroad was someone to be avoided. Many complaints were received on board but nothing happened. Nobody knew the guilty parties — we all looked the same in our uniforms, didn't we? It was probably a good job we were moving out and making our way back to base in Sydney. We looked forward to trying our shore experiment with the two-bedroomed flat when we got leave.

On board HMS Pioneer I found a few more rules and regulations existed than what was on the last ship. Whereas we used to get our rum ration neat, we now had to have it three-in-one: three parts water, one part rum. We assumed it was to stop us bottling it and saving it until later. If you drank a tot before you went on afternoon watch it made you feel very sleepy so we used put it in a bottle for later. We couldn't do that if there was water mixed with it because of the quantity involved and our small containers.

Officers' rounds were made every evening. This was when an officer would walk the length of the ship looking to see if

anything was out of order. Two steps behind him was the Master at Arms, who we referred to as “copper,” with his little book ready for offenders’ names.

I was caught once when the pipe “Lifebelts to be worn” had been given, which meant that the belts had to be worn anywhere and everywhere. I was about to jump into my hammock without mine on, but unfortunately I was spotted before I got beneath the blanket, which cost me a bit of extra work. The lifebelt was not much of a lifesaver in those days — it was just like a tyre tube with a cloth covering, but at least it used to help.

To make sure people of the wrong watch had not sneaked ashore, every evening the leading hands had to muster all of the stokers together in order to carry out a check of numbers. After this they would fall them in on the hangar space. All of the ratings were there and as it came round to your party they were called to attention. I would then march to the officer of the watch and after saluting report “Stokers’ mess all present and correct.” and then return to my party and stand them at ease. When all had reported we could return to our mess and relax for the rest of the evening.

Another little ritual was payday when you lined up at the appropriate time and waited for your name to be called, at which time you marched smartly to the paydesk, called out your name and number, removed your hat and placed it on the desk. The money was checked by two paymasters and placed on your hat. Then, on the order, you replaced your hat and returned to the line. Removing a hat was easy but in the navy it was removed only one way. The hat had “HMS” on its band

which must face front at all times. With your right hand you grasped the hat firmly, just above the left ear, and brought it smartly down to your side. Every man would be standing with his “HMS” showing.

On our way back from collecting our pay we had been told there would be no shore leave, but instead we would replenish supplies and move straight out again. The reason we were going straight out on duty was because the fleet had been asked to complete a mission. It was at this time that the U.S. were preparing for the assault on Okinawa and there were neighbouring islands with Japanese airfields which had to be put out of action. Over in the Atlantic the British always seemed to take control, something that was just accepted, whilst on this side of the world the Pacific was more American, so when the British Pacific Fleet arrived they were controlled by the American high command. As the fleet moved out, the heavy brigade was a formidable sight:

- HMS Illustrious
- HMS Indefatigable
- HMS Indomitable
- HMS King George V
- HMS Howe
- HMS Black Prince
- HMS Argonaut
- HMS Euryalus
- HMS Gambia
- HMS Swiftsure
- and eleven destroyers

The heavy stuff was made up of aircraft carriers, battleships, and cruisers. My advice to the enemy was that when you saw this lot coming, duck! Our target was the Japanese airfields on the Sakishima Gunto islands and we made good time getting there, but slowed as we approached our target. We finally approached under cover of darkness. I went up onto the upper deck during the night we approached. It was an eerie and black night and I could not hear a sound or see anything, which was really amazing when you think of what massive ships were moving forward.

With our quiet approach, and the help of the darkness, we could all proceed to our allotted stations. As dawn broke we had been spotted but fortunately it was too late, we were already in position. Our aircraft were on their way and the ship's guns were laying a barrage of shells on the island. The Japanese got some of their planes in the air, but most were destroyed. The damaged ones were just ditched in the sea as there was no airfield for them to go back to thanks to the aircraft and the naval guns which had completely destroyed it. As a matter of fact there was little left of the entire island.

The trouble with this area was that there were so many of these little islands. On one occasion, whilst attacking the Miyako and Ishigaki islands, both the HMS *Indefatigable* and the HMS *Ulster* were damaged by kamikaze pilots. To see a bomb-laden plane heading for your ship struck terror into the heart. Bits flew off of the plane as it took hits, but still it would keep coming. Fortunately, many fell short and we all gave a sigh of relief.

An aircraft carrier was at risk from torpedo attacks, but the other target that the Japanese went for was the "island," which

was the large superstructure that stood high on the deck on the starboard side of the ship. This was the control centre for the whole vessel, and if it took any serious damage we had a problem. The flight deck presented itself as a nice wide target, but it was tougher than you might first imagine. Underneath the flight deck was four-inch reinforced armour plating. The bombs would hit the deck and damage its top, but this would be filled in with quick-setting cement as a temporary measure.

After this piece of action it was time once again to return to base. This time there would be some shore leave, but for how long? Well at least I had one day off. We were on our way to our flat and had the room set up — all we had to do was to pick up some civvies and on to the room to change. It felt strange being out of uniform after all this time but I was determined to make for town and see what happened.

We took a walk around the shops first and I saw another of those shop notices. This one said “Sex Instructor, First Lesson Free.” It was time to move on as we passed a pair of naval policemen. Fortunately, they did not give us a second look. The disguise was working.

Now the final test was when we went into a pub. When we reached the bar I called for four beers — two for each of us. They were on the counter in a flash. We tried other bars and the result was the same, but put the uniform back on and they wouldn't serve us. Funny people indeed, but who could forget the thanks we owed to the thousands of good Aussies who helped us fight the war?

Off to sea again. This time it was the airfields on Formosa in the China Sea, which went as well as our last strike. We received

some deck damage but nothing to cause any alarm. A quick move around the other side on the Bay of Bengal and it was a bombardment and air strike on Car Nicobar, Port Blair, and the Andamen Islands in the Indian Ocean. These were only small islands so it didn't take long to finish the job.

Information had been relayed to the fleet that there was troop movement around the Bay of Bengal area. This was not far from where we had been operating so we moved nearer the coast and spotted them — a convoy of ten Japanese troop ships. We caught them between Rangoon and Moulmein in the Bay of Bengal and they didn't have a chance against the air and fire power of this fleet. All ten troop ships were destroyed.

We had helped send thousands of men to a watery grave but we just didn't think about it. We knew what was happening to our comrades and these people thought nothing of taking your head off with a sword. Our comrades had been tortured and starved and I was not sorry that these Japanese had died. It was a job well done and time to return to base.

CHAPTER 8

VE Day and Still at War

They had just celebrated VE day back home. I must have been wearing this blue sailor's suit for about five years now but there was still plenty to be done in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The East Indies Fleet had by now gained undisputed control in the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Straits, and their carrier craft were now employed on reconnaissance flights in preparation for the next assaults on Port Swettenham and Port Dickson in Malaysia. The British Pacific Fleet, its first period of operations completed, all returned to Sydney to replenish and carry out the repairs that were needed. HMS Implacable had just joined us and was available to attack the Japanese base in Truk. American and Australian forces were engaged in amphibious operations to remove the Japanese from Burma, supported by ships from the Royal Australian Navy.

Although it was nice to go back to base for a break, the thing that was complained about most was the inadequate afloat support and need to return to Sydney for supplies. With the vast distances in the Pacific we would have liked some minor bases nearer home. Meanwhile, the Australian Navy was busy with allied air and naval bombardment of Balikpapan in Indonesia prior to a landing by an Australian division. With the British Fleet back out again it was time for a combined attack on the Japanese mainland by the British Fleet and U.S. battleships.

They had dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, and the next one was for Nagasaki, but still the battle went on. The British Pacific Fleet, integrated with the U.S. Fleet, continued air and gun bombardment of the Japanese mainland. Sixty Japanese aircraft were destroyed, six destroyers, two escorts, a submarine chaser and a torpedo boat were sunk. Other attacks were being made on Honshu Island while aircraft from HMS Indefatigable attacked targets in the Tokyo area. HMS King George V moved on and anchored in Tokyo Bay. This had been a few mad months and at times I thought it would never end, but at last they had had enough. They were going to surrender.

The Japanese were fanatics. They just wanted to go on forever, however that could not be and finally, on 2nd September 1945, the Japanese signed the surrender documents on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Harbour. At the same time, Vice Admiral Walker accepted the surrender of the Japanese local commanders on board HMS Nelson off Penang, and on 6th September 1945, Japanese forces in New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomons surrendered to General Sturdee of the Australian Army on board

the HMS Glory off Rabaul. On 18th September 1945, Admiral Mountbatten accepted the surrender of the Japanese forces in Southeast Asia at a ceremony in Singapore. At last, it was all over.

I think it took me a long time to realise that, after all those years of fighting, it had finally stopped. The skipper gave us the news over the Tannoy system. It was a great feeling, not only that the war was over, but the fact that we had survived it. We would be the lucky ones and be able to return home when our job out here was finished. A different feeling ran through the ship at this time because for the last few years we had been waiting for bombs to hit the deck, or a torpedo to come through the side. It was not something that we used to worry about, but we all had to admit that it was there at the back of your minds.

Most of the fleet had now returned to Sydney but it appeared that something was missing — the urgency. Normally as soon as we reached port we would replenish supplies, overhaul the guns and ensure that all aircraft were in flying condition. The guns took up most of the time, replacing their ammunition and giving them a thorough examination. There was no shortage of artillery — we had the heavy machine guns plus eighteen 4.5s (so named for their 4.5 inch barrels). We needed all of this firepower in order to protect the flight deck.

Repairs to the flight deck would be carried out by experts from shore. It was bedlam on board as the quick-setting concrete we had used to repair deck damage now had to be drilled out, and the sound echoed all through the ship. The island on the ship was a target for many enemy aircraft and had taken its fair share of bullet holes. In war times this would have been left or

maybe had a quick patch, after all we didn't want officers getting a draft round their behind! But now all of this could be done by professionals. We could carry on with shore leave whilst all this was going on.

As some sort of reward for our efforts we were allowed five days leave. A lot of my mates wondered as to its worth when we couldn't go anywhere. That could be true for others, but for four crafty matelots it was going to work out fine. As only two of us would be ashore at the same time we wouldn't be crowded and it was really going to be a bonus for us to have a room to ourselves.

We changed as soon as we arrived ashore and when the bars opened we went in and got served straightaway. What a difference. The bars closed at 6:00 p.m. which left us short of drinking time, so after we wandered around we went to an off-licence and bought a bottle of plonk. The shopkeeper warned us to go easy on it as it was rather potent, but we soon acquired a taste for it, and it was very cheap. It was just like being on holiday during those few days, and with the war behind us it was a great feeling.

During the day we used to either spend time around town visiting different coffee bars or maybe go out to the funland, or else make our way to Bondi Beach. This was such a great place to be, especially as sometimes we would have a big expanse of beach all to ourselves, although it did get packed on certain days. We had trunks on under our trousers so we would strip off and enjoy the lovely sunshine, and it was on one of these very busy days that a young lady approached and sat beside me. We soon struck up a conversation and the time went by as we chatted

away, but then I felt her hand on my leg! What was a young man to do when a gorgeous blonde with skin kissed golden by the sun started fondling his leg? Like me you would have said, "I'm a married man, take your hand off of my leg and go and sit somewhere else!" That's my story and I'm sticking to it!

Those few days of shore leave soon went by and it was time to think about returning to the ship. We went back to town and had a few beers, then returned to our room and changed into our uniforms. We made our way back to the dockside to wait for a liberty boat to take us back on board. I think this was one of the few times I was reluctant to return to my ship as I had had such a good time. Back on board the seamen had been busy. There was a lot of paint scraping going on whilst others followed behind putting on a nice fresh coat. It was times like this when I was glad that I was in the stoker branch. We were a separate engineering unit, and as such we didn't do deck duty of any sort. All we concerned ourselves with was the mechanical side of the ship.

At times in harbour there was not a lot to do but it was important to always look busy. I used to wander around the ship for hours doing nothing, but I carried a bundle of cotton waste in one hand and a ring spanner in the other. Every stoker had his own spanner. All valves on board were in the shape of a ring, and the spanner had a hook on one side and a short bar on the other which was slipped over the ring and helped with the turning of the valve. All the time you walked about with one of these it looked as if you were going somewhere to work so nobody stopped you.

Something we were taught in the navy regarding a valve, which should always be remembered in civvy street, is that after you opened a valve wide you should always shut it down by half a turn before you left it. The reason being that somebody else might be told to open it after you, and if it was opened to its stop they would think it was stuck and use a spanner on it and shear it off. Now being half a turn shut they would know as soon as they moved it that it was already open. Here endeth the lesson.

We were still doing a bit of sailing and making visits along the China coast. Macao, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Formosa were just a few of the trips we made. Most of the time it was just a casual visit, but on other occasions we could be called upon to assist with the control of prisoners. They were put to work repairing roads and making new landing strips for aircraft. The Chinese were hard task masters and we were there to stop their prisoners from running away. Some would jump over the harbour wall into the sea, which was a waste of time as they had to come out eventually, and all the reward they got was a thrashing from the Chinese guards with long canes. With that rough treatment awaiting them, if they were going to make a break for it they should make sure they didn't get caught.

We used to make these trips and then return to our base at Sydney. It was quite a treat to travel the ocean with no aggravation. We were still having our days ashore and we were getting to know our base very well. It was like a second home by the time we would eventually leave it.

One of the strangest trips we ever made was when we were told to proceed to the deep waters off Brisbane. Once we were

there the air crew brought out all of the aircraft which we carried onto the flight deck. They then proceeded to smash holes in the planes and push them over the side. All of this waste started a bit of a rumble among the crew who wanted to know why they couldn't be used for civilian activities. The answer was that it would cost too much to convert them. We were then told that the aircraft concerned were items which came under the terms of a lease-lend agreement with the U.S. and were not the property of the U.K. The order to dump them at sea came from Washington, but we still thought it was a terrible waste. Many of these aircraft were brand new with the guns still wrapped in oiled paper. Each one had a nice mounted floating compass. I managed to rescue one of these — it was the only thing I could get in my kit bag! I got it home without being caught and some years later my brother used it on his boat.

With that job done it was once again back to Sydney. We had had lots of sunshine out there but this time it was raining and it came down very heavily. Talk about stair rods — it just poured straight down and went on for several days but, being rather hot in this part of the world, once it stopped it dried very quickly.

A mention of the weather reminds me of a time in the motorboat when I had taken a party ashore and was returning to the ship. There was just the coxswain, two seamen and myself aboard and we had made about a quarter of our journey when, without warning, a blanket of thick fog dropped over us. It was really dense and I couldn't see a thing. It was eerie, and everywhere was dead silent. I don't think I have ever felt so alone as I did at that time. We had no choice but to press on.

Unfortunately a small boat like ours did not carry a compass so we had no help, and trying to steer in dense fog is rather hit and miss because we didn't know how far the tides were moving us off course. We positioned a seaman in the bow to watch ahead as we ploughed on, and after some time we heard him shouting "Stop! Stop the boat!" Straight away I put the engine to full astern, and with a horrible scraping sound we came to a halt. We had jumped the boom (the wire netting that is strung across the front of the harbour to keep out enemy submarines) and the boat had stopped halfway across. I knew we had enough power in the engine to pull us back off, and by hitting that boom at least we knew where we were. Thank goodness the boom was there because it meant that we had been heading out to the open sea and if we had carried on we would not have been found until the fog had lifted.

In the middle of this fog we had a little chat about our position. We knew there were several navy ships in the harbour. Between us we remembered the position at which they were each anchored, so we made for the first one and leap frogged from there until we found our own ship. Upon reporting aboard we were told by the officer of the watch that we had taken a long time to do the run!

CHAPTER 9

Officers and Men

One of the young officers was Sub-Lieutenant Townsend. He was a snotty-nosed little git and I had already had a run in with him when Lieutenant Commander Harris told me to tell Townsend that he wanted to see him in his cabin. He was in the ammunition hold with his crew so I went down and gave him the message. No sooner had I told him than he started screaming about me wearing my boots in an ammunition hold (they must be rubber so that there was no chance of a spark). I said there was nothing wrong with my boots, but he told me to keep my mouth shut or I would be on a charge. When I asked him how I was supposed to give him a message without coming down to find him he went berserk. His crew had all stopped what they were doing and watched when he called a chief and said that

I was to go before the officer of the watch. The thing was that I knew something that this little dick didn't.

I was marched before the watch officer who was none other than Lieutenant Commander Harris. When the charge was read out I was asked if I wanted to answer to it. I asked if I could remove my shoes for his inspection. When he looked at them he saw that they were my own and were made of rubber. The sub thought I was wearing standard issue. I was dismissed whilst the sub was told to stay behind. I nipped back to the ammo store and called down to the lads working there, who gave a quick cheer because they didn't like him either. I then moved a little further down the ship on the pretence of examining some pipework and waited for his return. It was about 15 minutes before he showed his face, which was scarlet. It looked as if he was going to cry any minute. He must have got a right rucking from the officer of the watch because he had been put in an embarrassing position. He disappeared below and I later heard him shouting at his crew. Temper, temper.

Most of the long-serving officers were not too bad, although there was one who was the ship's commander. He was only about five foot tall and just as wide — he was like a walking barrel. In front of the ship's crew he used to rant and rave at the officers below his rank. No wonder his sort were referred to as pigs; even we thought he was out of order and we used to feel sorry for the men concerned, although we didn't have much contact with him ourselves, thank goodness.

Now that we were in peacetime we were back to captain's rounds. The mess deck was always kept clean and tidy, but when

the captain was coming all hands who were off watch had to muck in. There must not be a speck of dust or dirt anywhere. Tempers got a bit frayed whilst this was going on as some men had just been on watch and all they were looking for was a bit of rest, but nobody had a sympathetic ear.

“Don’t sit there, I’m going to scrub that stool.”

“Well, I’ll sit on the other one then.”

“Can’t. It’s all wet — eff off!”

“I’ve just scrubbed that bit of floor, get your big feet off it.”

“Where do you want me to go?”

“Just do us a favour and piss off!”

“Can I get something out my locker?”

“Eff your locker! No you can’t!”

This was the way it went on all morning until it was time for the skipper. The leading hand of the mess would be waiting at the entrance ready to snap him a salute. The navy salute is different from the army and air force in that the latter have their palm facing outwards, but watch a sailor — he has his palm facing inwards. We like to be different, after all we are the “Senior Service”. Back to the mess, a quick salute and the call of “Stokers mess deck ready for inspection Sir!” In he went wearing a white pair of gloves to carry out a search for a speck of dust. The mess had lots of pipework, and his glove would be rubbed all over them, as well as the tops of lockers, under the table and stools, all of the equipment. He missed nothing, and if he found something he would hold his hand out to show

a tiny mark on his glove. He would not say a word, and only when he left, if it was favourable, would he say “Good clean mess.” After he had gone, any man after his rest looked in.

“Can I come in now?”

“Don’t give a monkey’s what you do.”

“A bit different from this morning, you miserable git!”

“Why don’t you eff off?”

We were back to normal again, home sweet home. Nobody took any notice of the rather strong language. That was all part of life on the mess deck. In fact, it was surprising how so many men lived in such close proximity to each other and yet there was never any trouble. We all had our arguments, and some resorted to fighting, but that was just a way of life on board. You had a disagreement, you thumped one another, then you went and sat in the mess and discussed it.

“Hey, that was a good poke on the nose you took.”

“Yes, but how about that one you got in the eye?”

That was it — all over. You didn’t bear a grudge on a ship. You couldn’t. You lived too close together.

Being in male company all the time allowed you to swear and say anything you wanted without offending anybody. Its drawback was that you tended to forget sometimes when on shore leave. An example was when I was on a train and I was standing in the passageway by the toilets. My mate said to me

that his hands were all sticky. "I'll just nip in and wash them." A lady walked past me and went into the same toilet. Out she came in a hurry and said to me, "You might have told me he was in there!" I said he was only washing his hands. This brought forward an explosive "WELL!" and off she marched. I didn't intend to embarrass the lady, it just happened because I was used to an all-male world and didn't think. That also reminded me of an occasion when we were to go on shore leave and one of the blokes always boasted that he could get himself a girl. No one wanted to go with him. I don't know why. His name? Ivor Biggun!

On shore leave most of the time you were allowed to stop out all night, and one of the places I had always been thankful for was the Salvation Army. It was a place to find a clean bed and a nice breakfast, although some of the people in there were a bit dodgy. Precautions were best taken, such as any clothes that you took off had to go under your pillow. As far as your shoes were concerned, the best thing to do was to lift the leg of the bed by the headboard and put one leg inside each shoe. You know what they say in the Sally, "First one out is the best dressed."

Anyway, we were nearly ready to go. It was the last day of shore leave and time to collect our belongings and return the keys to our room. Time for a last look around. I had been here a long time, and even if I say so myself, I think I knew that I would miss Sydney.

CHAPTER 10

A Hero's Welcome?

We had just about finished our tour of duty — we left England in January 1945 and it was now the middle of 1946 — and preparations were being made for the long haul home. Back in the U.K., with all the VE day celebrations that had been going on, a lot of the folks had forgotten that there were thousands of British troops still in the Far East carrying on the fight. I suppose that being safely tucked up in bed made it easy to forget. We all hoped that the Pacific Fleet would be able to return together. Unfortunately this was not to be, and was something the fighting men thought of as a missed opportunity. A lot of news could have been made of that event, and it would have been a nice reminder that the war had still been going on out east. We imagined the headlines, “Triumphant British Pacific Fleet on Their Way Home.” What a

homecoming that would have been but it was all vetoed, so we were told, by the American High Command. As they were in charge out in the Pacific, that was that, so we all made our way back at different times. Never mind — the last thing we wanted to do was to upset the U.S. Navy!

On our way at last and the first stop was to be Brisbane. We were only stopping overnight and the officers were going ashore to say their goodbyes to some of the shore staff. There was no leave for the ratings. It was a lovely bright sunny morning as we started the long journey back home and I felt a bit sad to see the coast of Australia disappearing behind me. I had enjoyed my stay there but I knew that it was a place I would not see again, but we were heading home. “Anastasia, I’m on my way! Pass the word to any friendly Yanks in the vicinity, or we will have an arse-kicking contest!”

It was now peacetime and we had more freedom of movement. Off watch I spent my time on the flight deck laying in the sun or watching where our journey was taking me. We were sailing around the top of Australia and far over to the right was New Guinea. We made our way through the Banda Sea on to the Java Sea. Borneo was to the right, Java and Sumatra to the left, on to the Straights of Malacca. When we first came east all of this territory was in the hands of the Japanese, and many a naval battle was fought around these shores. We had nothing like that to worry about now and it was time to bring in the old tradition of the “Crossing the Line (equator) Ceremony”.

A large canvas pool was rigged on the deck and one man was dressed as King Neptune. He had his followers and would always

pick a couple of tough nuts who would run around the ship and grab anyone who was too slow to get out of their way. Once you were caught you went to Neptune. It didn't matter about you kicking or screaming — you were going. You might arrive on deck with an arm hanging a bit loose because it was half out of its socket but don't worry, it was only fun! Neptune had his big bucket of suds which would go all over your face. The idea was to get plenty in the mouth, nose and eyes, just to give you as much discomfort as possible, and then it was all scraped off with wooden razors. Once the job was finished the heavies grabbed hold of you and chucked you into the tank, clothes and all. You had completed the "Crossing the Line Ceremony".

We continued our journey and crossed the Indian Ocean towards Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with the Andaman Islands and the Bay of Bengal to our far right, as we made our way to Bombay (Mumbai) to take on supplies. It was just a brief stop there, then we were on our way again, across the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden and into the Red Sea where we passed Saudi Arabia on the right and Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt on the left. Then on to the Suez Canal, passing Cairo and Port Said before stopping at Alexandria for a short while, which was a well known port for shipping. There were a few more navy ships at anchor in the bay and it was surprising just how many sailors that you could see wandering around the port.

Alexandria was the usual picture with lots of stalls, some with their goods spread on the ground, a lot of which was flashy and brightly coloured so as to catch your eye in the hope that it would be bought by the lads to take home. It was soon time to

continue our journey home and we made our way through the Mediterranean Sea with Crete to our right and Libya to the left. Further on we passed between Malta and Sicily and then saw the coast line of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco to our left. Then it was on to Gibraltar for a brief stop but no shore leave, then we continued on through the Strait of Gibraltar with Tangier to the left, past Cadiz to the right and then on to the Atlantic and our old battleground.

As we steamed steadily towards the U.K. I wondered how many bodies of our old shipmates we were passing over who were now lying at the bottom of the sea. Although it was rough at times I still think that I was one of the lucky ones who made it back home.

It was the usual rough ride across the Bay of Biscay but soon the coast of England would be in sight. This was the time when we wanted to come back as one force, one great armada of Royal Navy fighting ships returning from the war in the Pacific. What a welcome we would have received. It could have been a great homecoming, but instead we anchored in the harbours in ones and twos and nobody knew we were back. It was very disappointing after what we had been through.

We were sailing up the west coast of England making for our destination and there was the harbour in front of us. I could hear the ship telegraph clanging as we completed a manoeuvre and in a few minutes we would slip the cable (drop the anchor). The seamen were lined up on the deck for entering a port and that was where they would remain until they were dismissed. Only special sea duty men moved on decks. With a loud rumble

the anchor was dropped. To be close by it was deafening and it vibrated through the ship.

We had brought our ship back to its home, back where we started in Barrow-in-Furness where she had been made and where we picked her up brand new some 18 months ago. She looked a bit different now. Her paintwork was a bit tatty, the flight deck was full of patches from bomb damage and the whole ship was riddled with patched bullet holes. We had travelled halfway around the world and covered many thousands of miles, and in all that time we did not have any problems at all from our engines. Well done, Barrow.

Most of the crew would be sent back to their own barracks and a skeleton crew would remain aboard. The shore team would arrive to inspect the damage and start to put the old girl shipshape again. When you have lived on a ship you get attached to them. It was different with a house. You went to work and went out in the evening, so you were not spending all your time in the house. Not so aboard ship where you never left it. You worked on it, slept on it, ate on it, and had your leisure time on it. It became part of your life.

My draft notice would arrive soon and I would be on my way back to Chatham Barracks. I wondered if that Yank was still in Liverpool? "Clear the decks Anastasia. I will soon be on my way!" As expected, a few more of us had our draft notices and I would be saying goodbye to life aboard ship. It was a life I would miss because in my years in the Royal Navy I had never regretted joining the service. I was always a seagoing sailor and that was what I joined for and where I was most happy. Barracks life was

not for me. It was handy for nipping home at night but that was all I could say, whereas I could not wait to get to sea. If you wanted to travel the world, and you weren't frightened to leave home, the navy was a great life. My life was going to take a dramatic change. I was on my way back to Chatham Barracks where I would be for a couple of weeks before I received my discharge papers. Every man was seen and asked if he wanted to continue in the service. I had made my decision to leave because I had Anastasia to go home to, but if she had not been there I would have continued in the navy.

As life in civvy street after the war went by I knew I had made the right decision, but I was not sure if Stasia felt that she had done the same. We now lived together in London, and I think she was missing Liverpool. I also wondered whether that Yank was still up there, unless he had gone back to his ranch. It didn't help that we had to live with my mother, who was rather inclined to be a bit awkward towards Stasia. My dad was no problem as he never said anything. I think that all he wanted was a quiet life. I was not settled, not surprising, considering what I had just left. I missed all of the hustle and bustle of navy life, constantly surrounded by groups of friends where there was always some activity going on.

For years I had been told when to go to bed, when I could eat, when I could have some leisure. A spoken command over the Tannoy system and we all jumped to obey. We had been programmed this way, but suddenly this was all taken away and I found myself in a small house with no conversation going on and everywhere so quiet. I felt like I was in a cage and I just had

to get out. Coming home on leave was different because I knew I was going back to the environment that I was used to, but now I realised that I was on my own and must get used to being back in civvy street, as well as thinking about earning a crust.

After a couple of weeks off I returned to my old firm and asked for my job back. It was a matter of law that any person going off to war had to be offered their job back when they returned. They offered me a job at the New Eltham branch in South East London which was a very nice area so I accepted and arranged to start the following Monday. As easy as that, and back where I started almost six years ago.

I think I have come to the end of my little story now and I hope that it has given you some insight into what life was like for a wartime sailor, for that was its intention. It was a long time ago that Nick and I had gone to the recruitment office, 17 January 1941 to be precise. Now it was near the end of 1946 and if he had been with me in the Royal Navy we might have been swapping stories, but that was something we would never know. Just remember how it all started, two young lads going off to war — Nick and myself, but Nick did not return.

Epilogue

Back in civvy street I had started to settle after navy life. I continued to work for my old firm and in fact, apart from my time in the war, I worked for them for 23 years. The chance for promotion with them began to look remote so I decided to move on. I left and started with the milk retailers United Dairies.

Although it took me a few years, I did succeed through the ranks as a Salesman, Supervisor, Depot Foreman, Assistant Manager and finally a Manager. I had been in several depots as I moved up the ladder, the smallest consisted of 12 rounds in Ilford and the largest had 69 rounds in Brockley, South East London.

After 25 years with them I was awarded a gold watch for long service and two years later, at the age of 64, I decided to call it a day and retired — after all, I had been working since I was 14!

But what happened to the young lady I married back in 1945 you may be asking yourself? Well, I'm glad to say that we are still together and recently had a great time with our family and friends celebrating our golden wedding anniversary. In 1997 we will have been together for 52 years — we must have done something right!

As hoped, we had two children, a girl and a boy. Jacqueline, who is nearing her 50th birthday, came first and married Rod, an electrician, 29 years ago. They had four children and live in Thornton Heath, South London. She spends her time looking after children in a local school and we don't see very much of her these days.

Michael was next and he married Margaret nearly 24 years ago. He is now a manager in the Civil Service and is coming up to his 47th birthday. They don't have any children but do have three cats and a large overdraft! They now live in Leeds, West Yorkshire and regularly cross the Pennines to see us.

Looking back, I don't think that life worked out too bad for me. Stasia and I had a hard struggle at times to get by, but that's what had to be done to feed and clothe our family. Of course there were bad times, there always are, but there were a lot of good ones as well. Too many to recall — in fact, that's probably another book!

Finally, I would like to thank you for finding the time to read my book. I hope that reading it gave you some of the pleasure that it gave me in writing it.

JACK DANIELS, NOVEMBER 1996