

CHAPTER

MARINER IN MOSCOW : Eric Middleton's story

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Having been appointed to the staff of Admiral Baillie-Grohman in November 1944 I was awaiting further instructions at home. The Admiral was to head a team detailed to take over the German navy in Kiel immediately after hostilities ceased. At the moment, however, VE day appeared to be some distance away as bad weather and stubborn resistance by the German army had appreciably slowed down the Allied advance.

The telephone rang and a friendly voice identified itself as a member of the 2nd Sea Lord's office. He requested me to report to NID 16 at the Admiralty forthwith, prepared to go abroad at very short notice. To me this meant pack a suitcase and be prepared to fly somewhere or other within the next 48 hours, so I said, 'Shall I pack some tropical gear?'. This was received with what might have been a chuckle and the reply, 'On the contrary'. How right he was !

On arrival at the Admiralty I was first conducted to the office of the Director of Naval Intelligence where I was interrogated by a rather stern-looking Colonel of Marines. In the course of our conversation he asked me how long I had known Admiral Archer, Head of the British Military Mission in Moscow, short title '30 Mission'. I replied that to the best of my knowledge we had never met, unless it was a long time ago, before he was an Admiral, and I had forgotten about it. This answer produced an obvious change of atmosphere and after asking if I was sure about this the Colonel left the office saying that he would have to check up on the matter as the Admiral had asked for me by name for the appointment.

This all seemed to me to be very odd and I visualised arriving in Moscow, possibly after a rather harrowing trip by North Russian convoy, only to be told that I was the

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wrong chap and had better catch the next ship home again. But when the Colonel returned, also looking a bit puzzled - or suspicious - he confirmed that Admiral Archer had specifically asked for Commander E.W.Middleton RNVR and that there were not two of us so I was bound for Moscow. Interesting as this appointment might be I cannot say I was overjoyed at the prospect of experiencing a Russian winter or anything Russian for that matter.

In the offices of NID 16, deep in the bowels of the Admiralty building and almost uncomfortably close to the heart of the central heating system a very charming young lady initiated me into the requirements for life in Moscow in winter. These included things like long woolly underwear and a cautious approach to any attractive females who might sit next to me at the Bolshoi theatre as they were usually provided by what was then the NKVD.

So on Tuesday 28 November 1944 I arrived at Euston station en route for Moscow and found myself in charge of a naval draft of 42 ratings all bound for North Russia. I promptly delegated my authority to a very efficient Chief Petty Officer who had done the trip before and knew the drill. As far as I am aware all the men arrived safely at their destinations which I modestly considered to be a good effort.

The long train journey to Thurso was enlivened by my travelling companions, some of whom had been to Russia before and were returning from leave. One of these was Lieutenant Victor Tate RNVR, senior naval interpreter to the Mission in Moscow and an extremely likeable man. He had been born in Russia and spoke English with a noticeable accent but, as I discovered later, the Russians thought he spoke beautiful

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Russian and loved to hear him speak their language. He had two sisters married to Russians and living in what he insisted on calling Gorky instead of the new name Nijny-Novgorod. The journey was without incident as far as Inverness where we changed trains.

It was approaching nine or nine-thirty at night and much to our relief the station buffet was open. We all dashed in calling first for drink and then for food. A determined-looking female said sternly,

'Ye'll get nae liquor! The bar closed at nine o'clock'.

And nothing would move her, not even the fact that we had just spent about eleven hours in a train with no restaurant or buffet car. Why do we have to make wars more unpleasant than necessary ?

The Royal Hotel at Thurso provided us with an excellent breakfast when we arrived in the pitch dark at about eight o'clock next morning. The ferry to Scapa Flow sailed from Scrabster at 1030 and at 1330 we were alongside Dunluce Castle from whence a drifter transferred me to the destroyer Caesar. This was the ship of Captain Brewer, Senior Naval Officer of the close escort, a fine seaman and a most remarkable man in many ways. He was an accomplished pianist and loved a wardroom singsong which in no way detracted from his ability as a destroyer captain and very experienced commander of close escorts. In the evening I went ashore to the naval officers club at Stromness and met several old shipmates there. Returning on board Caesar at about 2200 I found a sing song in full swing. Having joined in I found myself seeking my bunk in the visitors accommodation - ~~in~~ the hospital - somewhat later than I intended.

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The escort fleet sailed from Scapa at 1130 next day, Thursday 30 November, and having rounded the Isles of Shetland to the westward headed north for the rendezvous with the convoy. This we made next day in steadily deteriorating weather. As we went north the weather continued to get worse and Caesar pitched and rolled as only destroyers can. Days and nights became almost indistinguishable, the daylight consisting of about a couple of hours of a sort of twilight around midday. I assumed the duties of signal officer and spent most of my time unbuttoning cyphers and sorting out the messages which applied to us. At intervals I made trips to the bridge for fresh air and a look at the convoy. I would like to have kept a watch but felt Captain Brewer would ask me to do so if he wished. Perhaps I should have volunteered the information that I had a capital ship watchkeeping certificate.

Each day during the twilight spell planes took off from the Woolworth carriers accompanying the convoy and disappeared into the gloom. The carriers were plunging about in the nasty sea that was running and neither taking off nor landing on can have been very pleasant. One could only admire the skill and courage of the pilots, most of them very young. Occasionally there would be U-boat reports and away would go the escort vessels making Asdic sweeps round the convoy, none of which was successful.

All the ships officers slept in the vicinity of the bridge and Captain Brewer offered me the choice of a mattress on the deck of his sea cabin or the use of the 1st Lieutenant's cabin right aft. I chose the 1st Lieutenant's cabin on the principle that you may as well be comfortable as long as you can. By this time the weather was so bad that I had to go aft along the catwalk which was about six feet above the deck and ran from the forward superstructure to the after one, in

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which was the entrance to the after cabin flat. Captain Brewer gave instructions that I was to phone the bridge when I had arrived aft safely. This showed a welcome concern for my safety but struck me as being of little practical use as there was nothing that could be done if a sea carried me over the side. Later when we were being attacked, or thought we were being attacked, by a U-Boat with acoustic torpedoes the captain sent a rating aft to fetch me up to the bridge. This again was a kind thought as acoustic torpedoes homed on the ships propellers and had a habit of blowing the stern off. Although I did not deserve it in the least I apparently got the reputation for unusual sang-froid by sleeping all alone in the after cabin flat on a North Russian convoy. In fact it was quieter and much more comfortable than on or near the bridge.

By 5 December we were well inside the arctic circle with U-Boats reported all round. The ship went to action stations several times and carried out sweeps without result. The daylight now consisted of about 40 minutes gloom at midday but the weather was as bad as ever. Surprisingly it was not cold and a duffel coat was not really necessary on the bridge.

Off the Kola Inlet a U-Boat attacked Caesar with torpedoes unsuccessfully. An Asdic sweep failed to make contact but depth charges were dropped as an anti-acoustic torpedo device. It was quite calm and there was an eerie stillness as the ship lay stopped, denying the torpedoes the propeller noise to home on. At intervals the quiet night erupted with the noise of the exploding depth charges *dropped by another destroyer.*

About midnight we entered the Kola Inlet in bright moonlight with Orion glittering in the southern sky like a great silver banner. The dark hills on either side of the inlet were emphasised by their light dusting of snow. For the

convoy it was journey's end. Not a ship had been lost.

Caesar and the other escort vessels made fast to a long wooden jetty at Polyarnoe at noon. As the ship came alongside a man followed by a large brown bear ^{was} ~~were~~ walking down the wharf, the bear shambling along upright and holding with its fore legs a large log of wood to which it was chained. The purpose of the log, of course, being to prevent the bear running away on all fours.

I went ashore for a short walk before tea but there was not much to see. Naval establishment buildings in red brick but nearly all the rest of the houses were of wood and the streets pretty primitive. So was the plumbing, apparently, as most of the wooden houses were surrounded by sheets of dubious looking ice representing the drainage system. In the evening three of us went to a cultural concert at the Red Navy club which commenced with a lecture lasting three-quarters of an hour. After that it was very good indeed with some fine singing. Russian sailors and Wrens danced during the intervals - ordinary ballroom style including a Rhumba. The Wrens were all sturdy and plain but no doubt in Polyarnoe one could not afford to be choosy. Back on board we found a sing song in progress and joined in. As I was to sleep on the wardroom settee I had to see it through. On the way back from the concert we lost our way and ended up descending a steep path covered with ice with the result that we all tobogganed down on our backsides ending in a bang at the bottom. Visitors from Somaliland came over at midnight and I got my settee at 0530!

I lunched ashore at the British naval mess next day and stayed on for tea, yarning with the inmates who were glad to see a different face for a change. Polyarnoe is a very isolated spot. I dined on board Caesar. After dinner there

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was a film show in the wardroom - Casablanca - which was attended by some Russian naval officers. One of them told me he had just returned from six weeks leave. When I made the comment that he was lucky to get so long he replied,

'But I only got 48 hours at home. I live on the eastern side of Lake Baikal and it took me nearly three weeks to get there and the same time to get back!'

After the film there was a terrific sing song during which we were boarded by officers from escorts Tavy, Caprice, and Bahamas. We returned the visit to Bahamas at 0200 for sandwiches. Everyone was wearing someone else's reefer and when the sandwich cutter sustained a bad gash he cried in horror when the officer wearing a Surgeon-Lieutenant's insignia offer to sew up the wound.

'Don't let him touch me,' the victim cried, 'He's not a doctor; that's the captain!'

From Bahamas we all adjourned to Tavy and at 0400 I got back to Caesar accompanied by Guns (Lt Stewart) and Torps (Lt Durrell) and found the sing song still going strong with Captain Brewer playing away merrily. How they could all do it after being on practically continuous watch since leaving Scapa was beyond me. And they were to sail for the homeward journey next day.

Brewer/ Saturday 9 December: Farewell beer on board Caprice at noon then lunch in Caesar and goodbyes all round. Captain/in- vited me to drink a glass of port with him in his cabin and in fact insisted on my having two. He was kind enough to say that he appreciated the fact that I had made myself useful - and at home - on board and that he would be glad to have me sail with him at any time. To me this was high praise.

Shortly afterwards I cast off Caesar's lines and rather sadly watched her move away and head for the open sea. I was sorry to leave her and her cheerful and friendly crew. Cassandra, an escort destroyer of the same class as Caesar was torpedoed not far from the mouth of the Kola Inlet and although badly damaged managed to get back into the harbour safely.

Having seen my friends depart I paid a call on the Senior British Naval Officer at Polyarnoe and made my number to Admiral Egerton who was interested in a first hand account of how things were going on the western front. I then made my way to the naval mess where I had a much needed hot bath and turned in early. I was definitely a bit frail after trying to keep up with the indefatigable escort officers.

Next morning I did a tour of the naval establishment and in the afternoon visited the W/T station and signal office with the Flag Lieutenant. It was very cold and getting dark. We went across country along paths full of rocks, ice and snow. It all seemed rather dangerous to me. We skirted a lake on which a number of young people were diverting themselves by skating in the light of flares. The electricity supply I had noticed tended to fail at the most inconvenient times but as lights were on all day and most of the night the plant was probably overloaded. That evening I dined with the Admiral together with his Chief Staff Officer, Secretary and Victor Tate. It was a very pleasant evening rounded off with two glasses of brandy. My alcohol intake had been much too high the last few days - and I was to pay for it.

Monday 11 December: Awoke with a decidedly upset stomach which no doubt I deserved. In extenuation it may be remarked that over the last ten days or so I had had a variety of relatively strange foods and a lot of rough weather. Also a couple of

nights with little sleep. It struck me that the most dangerous part of the Russian convoy for me was the night life in Polyarnoe. Packed and prepared for departure during the forenoon and ~~eat~~ a light luncheon. Victor and I left Polyarnoe at 1415 in an ex-RAF launch and called at Vaenga, where the British hospital was situated. We arrived at Murmansk at 1615 and were met by Victor's brother John with a lorry in which we proceeded to the Mission headquarters. Here I met the SBNO, Commander Fitzgerald, Commander Nelson RNR, Sub Lt Rae and Mr McGregor of the Ministry of War Transport. I was still feeling unwell so refused, with regret, an invitation to dine and was escorted to my Intourist hotel where I turned in. There was not much of Murmansk to be seen in the dark but there were signs of devastation. There was a lot of lorry traffic and I noticed that they all gave turning signals by opening the cab door on the side *to which* they were turning.

The Intourist hotel was not very inviting, the architectural style being more like that of a museum with marble columns and arches. I was given quite a large but very bare suite with a lobby, washplace (cold water only) but no lavatory. It was ill-lit, not very clean and very depressing looking but at that stage of the war this was hardly surprising. Soon after I turned in I realised that I had company and discovered a small army of bed bugs migrating across the floor towards my bed. I was able to discourage them.

It was 1800 when I turned in and I slept until 2000 when one of the female staff brought my rail ticket for next day and asked how I was. I asked if I could have a glass of tea and she said, 'Yes, of course, at once'. Nothing arrived and I went off to sleep again. Victor looked in at 2330 and seemed relieved that I was still alive. I then slept well until 0730 when I was called.

Breakfast consisted of dark bread, butter, cheese, garlic sausage, ~~and~~ red caviar and tea without milk or lemon. It was by no means an unpleasant meal. In the pitch dark we arrived at the station to find hordes of people milling round the train. Our places were booked in a 'soft' coach so we had no trouble. Victor and I were in one compartment and four ratings returning from leave in the other. Victor and I had a number of bags of confidential mail for Moscow on the spare bunks. It was just getting daylight when the train left at 1030 with a large electric locomotive hauling. Victor told me that nearly all towns have electrified lines for about sixty miles on either side after which a steam loco takes over. Once this happened to us the rate of progress declined rapidly to an ambling 15 or 20 miles an hour. The fuel was wood, piled high in the tender and replaced at intervals from huge stacks beside the track. As the scenery consisted entirely of forest this cannot have posed any problems.

It took four days to cover the 1500-odd miles to Moscow but at the slow speeds progress was smooth and Victor and I were very comfortable in our 'soft' compartment and well supplied with food which we brought with us. We swapped dishes and drinks with the ratings next door and slept a good deal of the time. Victor had brought a large tin of caviar with him and this went down very well. The lights failed at intervals and the train electrician was usually too drunk to do anything about it. He spent a lot of time talking to Victor about his valiant efforts during the siege of Moscow.

The major discomfort was the fact that within a few hours of leaving Murmansk the lavatories were all in a disgusting state and quite unusable. This feature of train travel in Russia ~~was~~ well known and we had been provided with some dope to deal with the situation, plus some powder to discourage fleas and other vermin.

Our Marouska (Mary), the carriage attendant, brought us frequent cups of tea at very odd times. Once it was at 0200 when she arrived with her usual cry of 'Pazholsta chai' as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Half awake and grumbling I asked Victor what on earth she was doing up at that time of night. He explained that she had other services she performed if passengers desired but in any case she had to wait until the samovar boiled. Later on in the journey she informed us that if we wanted any more tea we must get some wood for her at the next stop as she had run out.

Everyone was very friendly and curious about what we were doing in Russia and was life in Britain as unpleasant as they had heard. There were a number of highly decorated Russian officers in our coach including an airman, Hero of the Soviet Union, on a month's leave. He spent some time standing in the corridor outside our compartment, very drunk and happy. He had a naval petty officer with him as a sort of keeper to see he did not get into too much trouble. When he left the train he tried to fire a 'Russian salute' but fortunately his pistol jammed.

As the train meandered slowly on it was clear that time meant nothing. We usually went to bed about 0100 and got up at 1030, possibly with a break for tea in between. Breakfast consisted of tea and caviar at noon with lunch sometime between 1500 and 1600. Last meal of the day at 1900. All times subject to all sorts of things like availability of tea, visitors who would not go or possibly a stop in a station. At one of these stops in daylight many of the men on the train jumped down into the snow, stripped to the waist and had an invigorating snow bath. At Yaroslav I decided to get some fresh air and walked up and down the platform. Victor warned me to be ready to board the train at short notice as on a previous trip a companion had been left at Yaroslav and spent

a very uncomfortable few hours trying to keep warm until another train came along.

Owing to our Maroushka running out of wood we not only went short of tea but there was no heating in the coach either. As a result we had a very cold night but the next day dawned fine and clear and we got the first glimpse of the sun for a fortnight. The country looked very attractive with lots of fir trees and silver birches with an occasional frozen stream. There were little villages consisting of a few wooden houses every few miles. The train stopped about every twenty miles and at most of the stops the locals ran a little market with eggs and vegetables on sale. Some passengers who could not get into the train rode on the buffers - and it was very cold ! It was all rather pleasant and primitive.

Gradually we crept nearer Moscow, our time of arrival continually being extended, and we eventually arrived at 2300 on Friday 15 December the complete journey having taken me seventeen days. It seemed longer.

We were met at the station by Paymaster Lt Commander Stuart Spittle, the Admiral's secretary, and Major Arthur Cox who drove one of the Mission's cars. We went straight to the Admiral's flat in the Arbat and reported our arrival. My fears about my reception were unjustified as the Admiral accepted me without comment. Neither did he comment on my incipient beard which I had allowed to grow from the start of the journey. Victor and I were then invited to dine at Stuart Spittle's flat where we had a very cheery meal, afterwards proceeding to the flat where I was to live.

This flat really belonged to the Embassy and was one of three in a building in Skatertni Pereulok, literally 'Tablecloth lane'. The ground floor was occupied by Jock Balfour, the Minister, and the top floor by Cecil and Yvonne Barclay,

a senior member of the Embassy staff and his wife. I was to share the middle flat with Major Ted Croft, Squadron Leader Boris Trapp and Major Arthur Cox. The flat was very comfortably furnished and had a staff consisting of a plump and very voluble cook and an elderly and rather taciturn maid. There was also a dvornik, or porter, who did some of the cleaning and kept the heating stoves going. The cook was his wife. I had a pleasant , large room to myself and in spite of the lateness of the hour and the fact that I was dog tired I was able to see that it was a very comfortable billet. It was in fact 0330 by the time I turned in.

Saturday 16 December: My first day in Moscow started very leisurely fashion with a hot bath at 0900 followed by an excellent breakfast. After a suitable interval to give our digestions a chance Ted Croft and I left for the Mission headquarters. This was in the Ulitza Kharitonevsky, nearly opposite the Russian Admiralty which I thought must be very convenient but later learned that things were not like that in Russia. The Mission HQ was usually known as Dom Djaysit - house no. 10.

Most of the staff of the Mission lived in a large ornate mansion said to have once been the residence of a sugar magnate. This was known as 'Comintern' so perhaps was once used by the Third International or may just have been given the name by a wit. Here lunch was served each day for all the staff except the Admiral who had his meals at his flat.

My job was to deal with all naval matters under the supervision of the Admiral who, prior to becoming Head of the Mission had been head of the naval section but now was responsible for all three services. The senior army officer was Colonel Napoleon Brinckman and for the RAF, Air Vice-Marshal Thorold

Once a week I would have a meeting with members of the Foreign Relations department of the Russian Admiralty. This took place at a small private house on the far side of the town and not, as I had anticipated, in the Russian Admiralty. Most of the business at these meetings consisted of an exchange of technical questions. The Russians would ask theirs and then I would put to them the questions to which the British Admiralty desired the answers. I soon found out that although I was able to provide the answers to the Russian questions pretty promptly with information received from Britain I hardly ever managed to get any answers from the Russians at all. Not surprisingly I was frequently asked what I was doing about it in rather acid signals from Britain.

Take in →
14A overleaf

It would be easy to write a whole book or even a series of volumes on life in Russia in wartime and the general 'Alice in Wonderland' atmosphere of the proceedings. Things like the Red Army Store in Moscow, about the only one with any stock, and where Marshals and Generals got massive discounts but the poor privates had to pay full price. When I told a Russian that I thought this very undemocratic he replied sagely, 'Well we could not afford to give privates a discount - there are millions of them and the store would go broke!' There is obviously communism and communism. The official parties at Spiridonevsky, the building used for state entertaining, were sumptuous in the extreme with marvellous exotic dishes and fine wines, while the dejected citizens queued for their ration of black bread.

outside

Entertaining on a lavish scale was not the sole prerogative of the Russians in Moscow. The various Embassies and Missions were not far behind when it came to parties. However, when it came to musical entertainment the Russians would produce superb artistes of a standard not easy to match anywhere in the world. Moscow was a city of paradox.

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Throughout my first week or two in Moscow I was continually intrigued with the question of how and why Admiral Archer had asked for me to be appointed to his staff. Clearly we had never met before. I decided that when I felt the time was ripe and the occasion propitious I would ask him why he did so. In due course that moment arrived.

The Admiral permitted himself an enigmatical smile and said,

'Well, Middleton, I will put your mind at rest and at the same time do my best to prevent you getting a swollen head. Like most admirals I have a good contact in the Admiralty. When I decided that having become Head of the Mission I must have a staff officer to assist with naval matters I asked what officers might be available for appointment. I was given a list of five names. I knew the other four.'

It was certainly an effective head-shrinking exercise and a complete rejection of the 'devil you know' adage !

As there were only a few days to Christmas, parties were very much in the air. The British Mission together with the British Embassy and the other Empire Embassies and Legations in Moscow were giving a combined New Year's Eve party and as this was going to involve over three hundred people the arrangements required some careful organising. Already I was beginning to find the round of wining and dining in Moscow rather too much after the austerity of wartime Britain. Or perhaps I missed out in Britain.

At the same time the luncheon parties, bridge parties and other house entertainments were full of interest as one met diplomatic corps people from all nations and the conversations were usually lively and full of educational value as far as I was concerned. One bridge party I am not likely to forget. When we cut for partners I found myself playing with an American officer, André Lord. I had marvellous cards and played every hand in the first rubber which we won easily. So it went on and throughout the evening my partner hardly played a hand. We ended up winning an enormous sum in roubles. My partner thanked me very politely and when he had gone my host asked me if I knew who he was. On my saying I did not, he laughed. 'Well, he is currently rated as America's number one bridge player ! I doubt whether he has ever had all the calls taken out of his hands in one evening before.' I daresay he dined out on the story for some time to come.

Moving about Moscow on foot was a rather tricky business, particularly crossing the wide streets. These usually had a sheet of ice on them and a certain amount of care was necessary to avoid suddenly finding you had both feet in the air. The best antidote was to wear galoshes, which had good non-slip properties. As one took them off on entering any building it was sometimes difficult to avoid someone borrowing them. Rather like undergraduates and bicycles.

There was plenty of evening entertainment besides parties; theatres, ballet, opera, movies - all though all the cinemas seemed to have the same film. This was 'Lady Hamilton' and was apparently a great favourite with the Muscovites. In addition there were film shows at both the American and British Embassies.

The prime favourite was the ballet, with the number one corps at the Bolshoi Theatre but also some attractive shows at the Filial Theatre and the Stanislavsky. Tickets for the Bolshoi were strictly rationed and it was rarely possible to go more than once a week. Ulanova was Prima Ballerina and it was even more difficult than usual to get a ticket when she was dancing. 'Bakhchesaraisky Fontan' was a wonderful spectacle and in it as the Polish princess Ulanova was superb. Not only the dancing but the mime and acting was of the highest order. In the wonderful setting of the ornate Bolshoi Theatre it made a memorable evening. Ballet also had the advantage that no knowledge of the Russian language was necessary!

Out of doors there were the usual winter sports and at the Embassies the tennis courts were flooded to provide skating rinks. Not far outside Moscow there were some rather mild skiing slopes which were very popular with the Mission but after a crop of broken legs which seriously depleted the Mission staff further skiing was forbidden.

About the middle of January a Parliamentary Delegation arrived in Moscow and we got involved with a good deal of the entertainment. We gave a party at Skatertni at which Lord Lovat and Stephen King-Hall were guests also Averell Harriman, the American Ambassador, and his daughter. There were also quite a number of Russians, mostly actors and actresses who seem to have more freedom to mix with foreigners.

Should anyone read these notes they might be forgiven for thinking that 30 Mission existed for the sole purpose of attending parties and generally amusing themselves. In fact this was not ~~entirely~~^{like} true and there was usually quite a lot of work to do. This was not made easier by the fact that dealing with Russian officials was often very frustrating. It was by no means unusual to get no reply at all for some time after asking for a meeting to discuss some important naval matter at the request of the British Admiralty. Then a telephone call would come late in the evening making an appointment for midnight or even later. At times life in Moscow had all the qualities of a nightmare.

Towards the end of January news began to come through of the Yalta conference. As shipping was involved I had to get a lot of information from the Russian Admiralty about minefields, navigation aids and so on. All this information had to be checked to ensure that it made sense before being transmitted in a signal to London. There was a minefield at the entrance to the port of Constanza, quite an extensive one, and the swept channel had a dog-leg in it which was not marked by buoys. When I suggested to the Russian admiral that it should be marked or straightened he lent over the chart with an indiarubber and rubbed out the minefield. 'There,' he said, 'I have swept it!'.

Admiral Archer decided that he ought to go to Yalta to make sure all the arrangements were in order at that end and asked the Russians if they would fly him there two days before the conference was due to start. They said at first that no aircraft was available and then that the airfield was unusable for some reason or other. It was clear they did not wish him to go. So he asked if there would be any objection to him going by train. The reply came back that of course he could go by train; they would arrange the necessary propusk (pass)

and tickets. So in due course, two or three days before the conference was supposed to start, the Admiral accompanied by his secretary and Victor Tate made their way to the railway station. Here they were shown into a VIP waiting room furnished in early Victorian style with pot plants and anti-macassars. It was early evening and the train for the Crimea was due to leave shortly.

next day
I was duty officer at the Mission and at 0700 ^LStuart Spittle was on the phone asking for a car to pick them up so that they could go home for baths and breakfast! At 1100 I went to the station to see what was happening and they had just returned. Apparently the Russians kept feeding them tales that their train had broken down somewhere south of Moscow after various accounts of why it was running late during the night. It was clear that the Russians had no intention of letting the Admiral get to Yalta before anyone else. So they all went home again, the Admiral nearly hysterical and saying he loved sleeping in waiting rooms. Eventually I had dinner with the Admiral at the Arbat that evening and then the party returned to their favourite station once more. The train did arrive and they did get away that night, arriving at Yalta just when the Russians wished them to.

Without the Admiral to back me up I was in a minority of one when it came to dealing with my American naval colleagues. The Americans had a Rear-Admiral, at least two captains and a commander or two in their naval section and they wanted to alter the courses in the Black Sea laid down by CinC Med. Admiral Archer had instructed me not to vary these courses on any account so I had to dig my toes in. I pointed out that I would certainly be for the chop if I agreed to their proposals and eventually they gave in gracefully. I must say I found all the people I had to deal with in Moscow very friendly and mostly helpful. My Russian naval colleagues I think did the best they were allowed to do.

Even so, with the Admiral, Stuart Spittle and Victor Tate away at Yalta I had to deal with a lot more work and as we had some visitors some time had to be spent looking after them. One visitor was Captain Collingwood RNVR, a scientist who had come to Russia to examine an acoustic torpedo the Russians had got hold of; the other was Captain Walker from Archangel who was having a few day's leave. We saw quite a lot of one another and I much enjoyed their company.

Russian lessons were obligatory. I was supposed to have half an hour every day but it was not always possible to fit it in. Our teacher was Vera Petrovna, who also taught at the Embassy, but I fear she did not find me a very bright pupil. On one occasion a number of us went to a party at her flat and got a pretty close insight into life in wartime Russia. I asked Vera whether life in Russia now was very different from that in the time of the Tsar to which she replied, 'Not very much but then we were miserable because of the Tsar; now we can only blame ourselves!'.

The return of the Admiral and party had many of the aspects of his departure. On Wednesday, 14 February I was told that his train would arrive at 1300 so I went to meet him. At 1700 there was no sign of the train and at the station they said it was still some miles away so I went back to the flat to get a bit of rest in case it became an all-night session. I returned to the station at 2300 and after a wait of over an hour was once more informed that the train was still miles away. I returned to Skatertni and lay down but did not get much sleep as the phone rang at intervals all night. At 0600 I set off for the station again and this time my efforts were rewarded as the train arrived at 0700 with some very weary travellers. With Admiral Archer were two new arrivals, General Laycock, Chief of Combined Operations and Anthony Head from his staff, both of whom I knew and was very

pleased to see again in such unusual surroundings. Stuart Spittle, Victor and cypher officer Lecky Taylor were also there, all pleading for hot baths. I cannot remember whether I got a full report of the Yalta conference but if I did it clearly did not make much impact at the time.

Captain Collingwood who had been to Leningrad and Kronstadt in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Russians let him examine the acoustic torpedo returned to Moscow. He had been told that they would let us have a micro film of the plans and instruction manual for the torpedo. Some considerable time later after Collingwood had returned to the UK I received the film and sent it on. A long time afterwards I was told that in fact the film received was a Micky Mouse or some other cartoon! As the acoustic torpedo was being used against convoys taking war materials to Russia it failed to make any sense at all.

But a change of routine was imminent and on 25 February in company with Major Ted Croft, Major (Doc) Thornton, Captain Peter Squire (interpreter), Sub Lt Jameson (Cypher Officer) Leading Coder Holland and Staff Sergeant Mahoney I left Moscow for Odessa. Our mission was to make arrangements in co-operation with the Russian authorities for dealing with the Allied ex-Prisoners of War, escapers and evaders who had come into the hands of the advancing Russian armies. Three British ships were on their way to Odessa bringing Russian troops which had come into Allied hands on the western fronts. Many, if not most of these men had been captured wearing German uniforms, a fact known to the Russian authorities and not likely to earn them a welcome reception.

The Allied personnel being collected and forwarded² to Odessa included members of air crews who had been shot down, soldiers captured as long ago as May 1940 at the time of Dunkirk,

survivors from the Dieppe raid, a number of French, both army and civilians, and small groups or individuals of other nations. Our job was to try and iron out any difficulties in their reception, housing and subsequent embarkation. A special team was being sent from Britain to do this job but was not due to arrive for some weeks but in any case our party, with some experience of dealing with the Russian army and officials, was perhaps better placed for getting the initial organisation working.

The train journey to Odessa was much like any other train journey in Russia in wartime - slow with unexplained delays and made difficult by the unsanitary condition of the lavatories. There was one rather terrifying incident when we crossed the Dneiper by a temporary bridge replacing the one destroyed in the fighting. This was a crazy-looking wooden structure about a hundred feet high over the turbulent river in which there were large lumps of ice striking the bridge supports with vicious blows. Half way across the narrow, slender structure the engine driver seemed to have doubts about the wisdom of crossing and proceeded to reverse the train back to the safety of dry land. Whatever the reason for this manoeuvre he changed his mind again and much to our relief we crossed in safety. This happened at Cherkassy where there had been some heavy fighting.

On the afternoon of 28 February we began to approach Odessa, passing through some miles of devastation on the outskirts, and arriving in the town at 1600. We were soon installed in the Londonskaya Hotel overlooking the harbour and after three days in the train our first requirement was a hot bath. Ted Croft and I shared a large twin-bedded room and we tossed up to decide who should have first use of the bath. In accordance with what seemed to be a Russian custom the bathroom was entered direct from the corridor and acted

as a lobby for the bedroom. It seemed a strange arrangement. Ted won the toss and after some difficulty managed to coax a reluctant dribble from one of the taps. Even this gave up when there was about four inches of water in the bath. As it was February and the bath itself was cold the water did not stay luke very long; it was certainly not warm. It appeared to be all we were going to get so I had to make do with what was left by Ted. After nearly three days in the train it was definitely second-hand.

But that was not all. When I removed the plug from the waste the water cascaded noisily on to the floor as there was no pipe attached. We studied this phenomenon in dismay rather than surprise and Ted quickly summoned the Marushka or chamber maid who had a little cubby hole at the end of the passage. This elderly female arrived at a smart trot bearing a bucket, broom and mop as a result of either intuition or long experience. She commenced mopping up operations without comment and Ted inquired whether it was proposed to fit a waste pipe at some time or other. 'What,' came the acid rejoinder, 'And do me out of a job?' There was no answer to this logic.

Apart from the view everything else about the Londonskaya Gostinitza was rather squalid, uncomfortable and inefficient, particularly the cusine and service. But of course there was a war on, to use an old expression common in this country, and Odessa had been occupied by German troops not long before.

Feeling slightly less travel stained we were summoned to a conference with Colonel Mazunov who was responsible for the arrangements for dealing with the Allied personnel being repatriated through Odessa. He was both pleasant and efficient and a happy choice from the point of view of the British team. He proved to be helpful and understanding throughout our stay and really deserved a decoration from Britain, if the

Russians would have let him accept one. The friendly relations with ^uor Russian opposite numbers were due in no small measure to the quiet competence of Major Ted Croft whose pleasant, almost easy-going manner concealed a brisk efficiency and if necessary a steely determination.

Commander Lea RN who was liaison officer in the Black Sea appeared to have a watching brief and had little to do with the British merchant ships. Lt Commander Harshaw USN represented the naval side of the American mission in Odessa but also had little to do with the ships. As an ex-merchant service officer I was quite used to dealing with ship's captains and officers and well acquainted with the ship's requirements in a foreign port. On the Russian side most of my dealings were with an Inflat official sent from Moscow and these were almost entirely friendly, if at times somewhat frustrating.

Colonel Mazunov's second in command was Major Ulukhpaev and he was also very efficient and helpful. Both these officers had been sent from Moscow and were of a very different calibre from the local staff and appeared to have a great deal more authority. From our point of view this was a blessing and made life much easier than it might have been.

At the conference Mazunov announced that 14 officers and 140 other ranks had arrived in Odessa that day and that arrangements had been made for us to see them tomorrow, by which time they would have been deloused and registered. In order to be able to distinguish the various groups as they arrived this became ^{Serial} ~~Group~~ A.

Next day Thursday 1 March we visited the Serial A party in what for obvious reasons was called the School Camp. All the XPOWs were in very good heart and the majority apparently in remarkably good physical condition considering the privations

they had all undergone, some over a period of a number of years. The resilience of these men could hardly have failed to win the admiration of the British team from Moscow. Some of the XPOWs were survivors from Calais and Dunkirk. Some from the ghastly and ill-conceived Dieppe raid. None showed any outward bitterness at ^{his} ~~their~~ fate but ^{all} were buoyed up by the thought of an early return to their homes.

There was only one officer at the School Camp and a visit to another camp produced fourteen more, of which three were transferred to the School Camp. On the way a column of new arrivals was encountered, led by an RAMC captain carrying a large Union flag. They were singing and marching briskly in step. It was a reassuring sight and in fact in sharp contrast to the behaviour of ^{some} other nationalities.

No news of the ships had been received and we spent part of the day looking round the town and visiting the famous Potemkin steps. The centre and main part of the town appeared to have escaped the more serious damage in the fighting and gave every indication of having been a very pleasant and attractive place. There were wide, tree-lined streets, mostly of cobblestones and a variety of buildings looking out over the harbour and Black Sea to the southward.

Friday 2 March still brought no news of the ships which we now knew were the Duchess of Bedford, a Canadian Pacific liner of some 22,000 tons, the Moreton Bay and the Highland Princess. All were bringing repatriated Russian soldiers from the western front. Many, if not all, captured wearing German uniforms by British and American forces. I had seen long lines of these men in Normandy marching under guard to the LSTs on the beaches in which they were transported to Britain. They were now it seemed making their last sea voyage at Britain's expense.

Ted Croft and his team were busy dealing with the many problems bound to arise with such a wide variety of human beings and the somewhat restricted facilities of a recently recaptured town. Doc Thornton was surprised at the general standard of fitness and said that such men as were sick or wounded received all the attention the local hospitals afforded. Captain Peter Squires as interpreter was fully occupied, literally night and day, dealing with the many unusual situations and minor misunderstandings that arose. Thanks to the good sense and good humour of Major Ted Croft and his Russian counterparts differences of opinion were few and usually quickly settled. Sub-Lieutenant Jameson and Leading Coder Holland were kept busy dealing with the many messages passing between the team in Odessa and Admiral Archer in Moscow. Once I was satisfied with the general arrangements for the reception and handling of the British ships I had little to do until they arrived. I visited the camps with Ted Croft or Doc Thornton, getting a warm greeting with a shout of 'The Navy's here !', the sight of a naval uniform no doubt encouraging the view that the ships to take them home could not be far away.

One excursion with Doc Thornton was to visit a hospital train full of wounded who had arrived from Constanza in one of the big ferries which plied between that port and Odessa. When we got to the train in the docks I funk'd going on board as my instinct told me I would dislike the experience immensely. This was undoubtedly correct as when, some twenty minutes later, Doc Thornton left the train his own revulsion was plain. He said that the condition of many of the wounded was appalling and gangrene was rife. He was convinced that a large proportion of the men he had seen would not survive.

Next day we were told that the ships had arrived at Istanbul and should arrive at Odessa on the morrow. I had a long

talk with Flying Officer Frank Such and some RAF comrades at the School Camp. Such had been appointed leader of the camp by the Russians and apparently carried on with these duties in spite of the fact that there were officers there senior to him.* It was here that as far as I was concerned Miss Walker came into the picture. Such said that they had met her in Lublin where she was having some difficulty in persuading the Russian authorities that she was a British citizen and had applied to the British Embassy in Moscow for a British passport. When it was known that a train for Odessa was going to leave Lublin Such said Miss Walker came to them and asked if they would get her aboard the train and try and fend off the Russians. This they did, donating various bits of RAF uniform which transformed the 68 year old lady into a passable imitation of some sort of serviceman. And so she spent the journey to Odessa in a cattle truck full of men, making use of the many stops for very necessary purposes.

As soon as he knew of her presence Ted Croft arranged with Colonel Mazunov for her to be moved to the London hotel. By this time she had somehow or other acquired feminine attire and she was dressed in a quite well-fitting coat and skirt when I first met her. I remember her as a trim, quiet and determined lady. Elderly but not old-looking and certainly not aggressive. This memory of the redoubtable Jane Walker is at variance with the accounts of her character and demeanour which I heard later from people who knew her well. To me she was calm and pleasant but impressive in an unspectacular way. It seems to me unlikely that anyone who had met and spoken to Jane Walker ^{would} ~~who~~ ever forget her. The years have in no way dimmed my memory of her.

* In fact he was Flight Sergeant Frank Such. It was the custom of RAF air crews to promote themselves if captured as this normally ensured better treatment.

I really only had one talk of any length with Jane Walker but in this I was able to get some idea of her activities in Poland and a vague glimpse of her life in Austria during World War I. When I asked her what she did in the first war she merely said, 'Oh, much the same as in this,' from which I assumed that she had assisted escaped prisoners of war. Of her other activities earlier in life I learned more later. It has always been one of my great regrets that I was unable to have other talks with her and learn more of her life's history.

Sunday in Odessa was no more exciting than Sundays are usually. In fact it was a very frustrating day. Life in the London hotel was a frustrating experience. It was rarely possible to get through dinner in less than three hours and generally it was not worth waiting for. The only mitigating fact was the availability and quality of the wine which included a Russian version of champagne. On this day we had a meeting arranged for 2100 with the Russians. By the time appointed we had only managed the soup course but the Russians, who sat a few tables away, had obviously finished their meal. So Ted sent word to say we would come to the meeting when we had finished our dinner. As a result the next two courses arrived together.

During the day we had filled in time with a stroll to a fine park on the outskirts of the town with a splendid view of the harbour. The Germans had done a good demolition job on the harbour and I was concerned that the Russians might have been optimistic about their ability to provide safe berths for the ships. But there was little that I could do about it except hope for the best.

The troops were getting restless as the Russians would not let them leave the camps and they complained that they

were still being treated as prisoners. Apparently Frank Such and his five RAF companions were not under this embargo and were allowed to wander about the town as they pleased. However, Ted Croft went to work on Colonel Mazunov and he agreed to allow an organised walk round the town. This turned out to be an escorted march but at least it added a little variety to the dull life the men had led for some days. One can see the point of the Russians not wanting several hundred tough, pleasure-seeking XPOWs all over the town.

On Monday 5 March the ships were in sight at last and the Duchess of Bedford berthed alongside in the harbour at 1130. There were no difficulties and I breathed a sigh of relief. Major Croft and I boarded the ship accompanied by Commander Lea and Lt Commander Harshaw USN. We met Captain Knight, the master, and Lt Colonel Dashwood, OC Troops, and arrangements for disembarkation of the Russian repatriates ^{were} ~~was~~ discussed. All the Red Cross stores and clothing for the XPOWs were on board the ship but as it was intended that she should move out into the bay and allow the other two ships to disembark their Soviet troops the stores were left on board for the time being.

Disembarkation commenced almost at once and as the men came down the gangway wearing British uniform, ~~and~~ each one carrying a kitbag on his shoulder, to me they looked like soldiers of one of our own regiments. The ship's officers said that they were the best behaved troops they had ever carried. Disembarking continued all the afternoon, the men coming ashore in a steady stream. They fell in on the quayside and were marched away surrounded by a guard of honour, or at least a guard, with sten guns at the ready. They did not appear to be happy at their return to Russian soil.

There were a number of maritime problems to sort out and

I lunched, dined and slept on board, meeting the ship's officers and dealing with the Russian merchant marine official, a tall, rather lugubrious individual who improved on acquaintance. Because it was the name of his organisation he was always known as Inflat to me. The accommodation and cuisine of the Duchess of Bedford was markedly superior to that of the London hotel.

Captain Knight had been by no means happy that his large ship had been berthed in the battered harbour without tugs by a pilot who spoke little if any English. Fortunately there was little wind and the pilot was first-class. But Captain Knight was clearly determined not to repeat the performance without tugs if it should be blowing hard.

Duchess of Bedford left the berth at 1000 and proceeded out into the roads where she came to an anchor. Moreton Bay berthed at 1300 and commenced disembarking troops immediately. Both Ted Croft and I experienced our first taste of something less than a welcome. The OC Troops, Colonel David, a fiery Welshman blistered Ted for going to see the ship's captain first. Ted's protocol was correct but it was not a propitious start. When I introduced myself to Captain Grayson he viewed me with obvious distaste and made it clear he had little intention of taking any notice of my advice or instructions. The reason for this unfriendly reception was the fact that apparently he had an inherent dislike of RNVR officers on the grounds that they were singularly ungifted amateurs. Fortunately for me or at least for the smooth working of the ship the Chief Officer, whose name was Tillot, was in the cabin with us. Seeing my dismayed expression he stepped forward and explained tactfully that I was an old shipmate of his and had spent many years at sea both in the merchant service and in the Royal Navy and could be relied upon to act in a seamanlike manner. Captain Grayson responded by saying, 'Then why is he masquerading in that outfit?'

But we had no difficulties from then on. In fact I had not seen Tillot since we were midshipmen in 1923 so it was not a bad effort on his part. What with the difficulties of dealing with harassed Russian officials and war-weary ship's officers in a strange, devastated port together with our responsibilities for the battered but uncomplaining ex-Prisoners of war it was a good thing that Ted Croft and I were able to work amicably together.

Red Cross stores were being loaded into Moreton Bay from lighters alongside and this went on throughout the night. I lunched and dined on board and found time for a brief exchange of experiences with Tillot. I turned in in a 20 berth cabin at 0500 and was called every half-hour until 0800!

Next day, 7 March, British servicemen commenced embarking at 0900 and it was marvellous to see the almost disbelieving grins of delight on every face. They really were on a reliable escape line this time.

A new batch of XPOWs - and others - arrived at the School camp, the others being women of which there were fourteen. As time went on the problem of women followers and the Russian attitude towards them increased² considerably. Most of the women were said to be married to the men they accompanied and were of various nationalities - Polish, Italian, Yougoslav and Russian. The Polish and Russian wives were not allowed to leave with their husbands nor was a German woman. This last was probably just as well as subsequent inquiries revealed that the man in question already had a wife in Britain.

As XPWs and others hoping to leave Russia arrived at Odessa they were first registered by the Russians and de-loused. They were all issued with clean underclothes and those that needed them were given overcoats, boots, tunics and caps.

The leader of the American mission in Odessa was Major Hall who worked in friendly co-operation with Ted Croft and was generous with supplies of cigarettes and other stores prior to the arrival of the British stores. The American headquarters in Odessa had a room packed from floor to ceiling with tinned goods of every description including gallons of orange juice. A French mission arrived later, after the first three ships had left.

The question of security was difficult and complicated. Although the majority of men in each serial had been together for some weeks and would probably have had time to smell out any infiltrators, there were also a number of loners who had to be interrogated. The Russians were always on the look-out for Poles, Germans and renegade Russians who might be trying to escape on board the British ships.

Moreton Bay left the berth at 1300 on 7 March with 500 British and 1200 American troops on board. She was replaced by the Highland Princess and disembarkation of Russian repatriates commenced at once. As before the men were in British army uniform and carrying kitbags. It needed a fairly close look to establish the fact that they were not typical British soldiers. Each contingent was mustered outside the dock gates surrounded by the usual armed guard. Here they were harangued at length by a senior officer in what can hardly have been a speech of welcome. Apparently they were told that they were to be given the honour of dying for their country by marching over the minefields ahead of the advancing Russian armies. As ^here seemed little doubt that most, if not all of them had deserted to the Germans this may be considered rough justice. The Russians only had one way to deal with traitors. Any innocent man caught in the same net must be considered unfortunate. There are no niceties in war. Some people ~~people~~ have blamed the government for sending these men back to certain death. There is little doubt that

had the Russian troops not been returned to their country none of the Allied troops held by the Russians would have seen their homes again. The Russians have always driven a hard bargain.

On board Highland Princess I had a drink with the OC Troops, Lt Colonel Card, his Adjutant and the ship's doctor, followed by a mug of cocoa in the ship's hospital! I slept on board as minor problems cropped up at intervals but in general things were now going very smoothly. Ashore, another party of XPWs arrived and were accommodated in the Railway camp. (In fact this was another school, alongside the railway. We never found out what happened to the pupils.)

Embarkation of troops on board Highland Princess commenced at 1000 and finished at 1400. In the space of four hours 900 British and 800 French nationals boarded the ship which was something of a feat. On board every man had to be given a berth and made familiar with the routine. Of course the staff on board had had plenty of practice at carrying troops but their passengers this time were a very mixed lot. Most of the French were civilians and forty-five of them were women. I did not find out how they came to arrive in Odessa but presumably they were deportees and prisoners from concentration camps. The speed of embarkation might well have been even better had it not been for the fact that the French had all their personal belongings with them, almost down to the kitchen sink. At the time of the fall of France a number of captured British soldiers remarked that the French prisoners were all very much better off than they were as they were all carrying a good supply of food and various other necessities. As they had to travel many miles on foot it cannot have been easy.

One of the last to arrive at the ship was Miss Walker and as she approached the gangway one of the Russian militiamen

(police) stepped forward and indicated that she must not go on board. I was standing by the gangway with Ted Croft and imagine that we expected some possible trouble. Ted let go a broadside in Russian which I believe was to the effect that Miss Walker was a British subject and that the British Government would take a serious view of any attempt to hinder her return to Britain as agreed by the Russian authorities. As this splendid - but I thought distinctly risky - expostulation continued Miss Walker was edged nearer to the foot of the gangway. As the militiamen fell back a pace in the face of Ted's onslaught she stepped on to the ladder. Ted at once pointed out that she was now technically on British soil and therefore beyond Russian jurisdiction. The police retreated in some disorder and I felt able to uncross my fingers as the sten guns ceased to point in our direction. The gallant old lady fairly skipped up the accommodation ladder and made it to safety at last. The Highland Princess left the quay at 1600 and I returned rather reluctantly to the dubious comforts of the London hotel. The Duchess of Bedford still swung sedately in the bay.

Next day, Friday 9 March, it was blowing very hard from the eastward and I was not surprised that Captain Knight did not send a boat ashore. Later the weather moderated and a boat arrived at 1500 in which I went off to the ship. It was not a very comfortable trip as the spray was freezing and for the size of the boat there was a nasty sea running. I was always surprised at the wintry conditions at Odessa in view of the fact that it is in a latitude not much north of Venice. No doubt it is affected by the huge land mass to the north and east.

On board there was a long conference with Captain Knight on the question of berthing the ship. He was naturally concerned about the conditions as it was still blowing pretty hard. To add to the difficulties there was a sunken lighter

alongside the wharf. The Duchess of Bedford was a notoriously difficult ship to handle as she had inward turning propellers which restricted their ^{manoeuvring} steering effect. Captain Knight said he would not enter the harbour under present conditions without tugs. I had already broached the matter with my Inflat friend who had been somewhat non-committal but promised to make arrangements if necessary. I said I would do everything possible to persuade Inflat to provide tugs, stressing the fact that without them there might be serious delays. But were there any to be had ? The harbour had been systematically rendered unserviceable by the Germans and the Russians had not had long to remedy this.

I slept on board and by now felt quite at home in D of B . That evening there was a whist drive in the main saloon for all hands and I was invited to take part. I am not sure that my various partners appreciated this but were kind enough not to comment. It was an enjoyable evening and enlivened by the fact that the 'Winning lady' was a very large, tough fireman.

Saturday 10 March dawned grey and cold with a strong east wind still blowing. I went ashore in the motor boat and had a very rough trip with the spray freezing on the canopy. The accumulation of ice was such that I was glad when we reached the shelter of the harbour as I thought it would not take a lot more ice to make us capsize. The morning was spent in a long debate with Inflat about the provision of tugs which eventually I won - or thought I had. I confirmed arrangements for the ship to berth next day and returned to D of B, the spray still freezing. Captain Knight listened politely to my account of the proceedings with Inflat but said, 'If there are no tugs I shan't move,' and he clearly meant it.

I feel sorry for people who have not spent at least some

of their life on board ships. There is something fundamentally agreeable about living in a ship or indeed just being aboard one. Those that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters have a very different outlook on life from the average landsman - one hesitates to use the suffix 'lubber'. So I spent a pleasant evening on board yarning with the ship's third officer, whose name was Waters. He had been to Pangbourne and served in the P & O as I had. We drank an appreciable quantity of his liquor and reminisced for hours. I envied him his seafaring job with its routine watchkeeping and normally uncomplicated duties. Apart from a tour of duty as senior officer of a group of anti/submarine minesweepers I had spent most of the war as a sort of naval odd-job man, varying from Flag Lieutenant to liaison officer with Royal Engineers for the Normandy landings. But I had to admit that it had been an intensely interesting and at times exciting experience.

to Admiral
Pipon /

On Sunday 11 March I awoke with a feeling of foreboding which immediately crystallized into the word 'tugs'. Would they arrive as Inflat had promised ? The optimism of yesterday had evaporated and it now seemed likely that my Inflat friend had taken a gamble that was unlikely to come off.

Sure enough, at the time appointed for D of B to proceed into harbour there was no sign of the tugs. It was still blowing quite fresh but not so strong as on the previous day. I was on the bridge with Captain Knight and Pilot Dimchenko both of whom showed signs of disquiet. The anchor cable had been hove short but the expression on the captain's face made it clear that not another fathom was coming in until the tugs appeared.

Suddenly the pilot pointed towards the harbour and indicated that the tugs were coming. Through binoculars we could see two tugs in the inner harbour with smoke issuing from their

funnels and men apparently attending mooring ropes. Very reluctantly, in response to the pilot's request, the captain gave the order to weigh. The wind was now blowing a good force 6 right across the harbour entrance and on to our berth. As we approached the entrance there was no sign of the tugs but it was too late to turn back now. On the bridge we were too concerned with watching the ship's head as we passed between the piers to worry about where the tugs had got to. Captain Knight showed signs of mounting anger but there was nothing he could do.

Pilot Dimchenko was magnificent, keeping the ship fully under control and letting go an anchor off the berth at just the right moment. The ship eased gently into her berth with hardly a tremor. Captain Knight shook the pilot's hand warmly and then turned to me suspiciously,

'Did you know those damn tugs were sunk and sitting on the bottom ? I suppose they burnt some waste in the funnels to look as if they had steam up ! Of all the childish tricks !'.

His supposition was correct but then, the Russians were always great hands at improvising. I explained that I was dubious but had to accept Inflat's word. All being well we remained friends, for which I was glad as I admired Captain Knight very much. Embarkation of the remaining XPWs and others began at 1400. I remained and slept on board.

Monday 12 March: Embarkation of personnel continued. The ship gave an official luncheon for all Soviet officials concerned with the repatriation of XPWs and the British and American staffs were also invited. This was held in the main dining saloon and was a most impressive and successful function. However, the Russians did not seem to appreciate the magnificent steaks served as a main course and asked if there was

any salt fish. On being told that there was, the Russians went over to salt fish apparently with great satisfaction, some even leaving their steak uneaten. The Purser and Chief Steward accepted this philosophically.

After lunch there was a film show, the main attraction being 'His Butler's Sister' in which Deanna Durbin sings in Russian. This was followed by a Donald Duck, 'Snow fight', which had the Russians in fits. It was a most enjoyable occasion and one of the few I can remember in which the Russians let themselves go and behaved like normal, cheerful human beings.

In the evening the Russians were hosts to a large party from the ship and members of the missions at the Opera House for a performance of La Traviata. We were accommodated in three boxes and regaled in the intervals with beer and sticky cakes. Major General Perevushkin and Colonel Mazunov were also there with fierce -looking Cossack guards with very long sabres. From our box at the side of the stage we saw more than was intended and when the heroine got out of bed to complete her dying act I was amused to see that she had shoes and stocking on.

By Wednesday 14 March we seemed to be getting near the bottom of the barrel as far as repatriates were concerned and an order from Moscow instructed us to embark as many French nationals as possible. They were classified as 'Mixed French' which was pretty accurate. They seemed to have all their household belongings with them and as there were 2,000 in all it was quite a party. The ubiquitous British Red Cross was represented by Mrs Borland and Miss Ross who also boarded the D of B.

Thursday 15 March was sailing day for the Duchess of Bedford

and for all concerned it was a very busy morning. Amongst the last to go on board were the remaining British and American sick of which there were twelve. All had been well looked after in a local hospital and had had a careful eye kept on them by Doc Thornton.

After mutual expressions of appreciation and goodwill the Duchess of Bedford left the quay and I for one was sad to see her go. She had been a real chummy ship. She was barely clear of the harbour entrance when a party of about twenty British and American soldiers arrived having left their train outside Odessa on hearing that a British ship was leaving that day. Word was got through to the ship and she sent a boat ashore for the men. Colonel Mazunov was not at all happy about releasing men who had not been listed but Ted Croft put on his most persuasive manner and the Colonel, who really should have been given a British decoration, gave in with good grace. Then the motor boat from D of B would not start and there was a further delay. Mazunov looked very bored. But away they went at last after what must have been the shortest stay in Odessa ever.

Before D of B left the Russians produced a ton or two of rather dubious looking meat which was laid out on a tarpaulin on the quayside. This they said was to replace the food eaten by their men on the outward voyage. Captain Knight expressed his warm gratitude for the thought but said that they had ample stocks of food and did not wish to deprive our gallant allies. Ted translated this into Russian.

Next day we all felt rather flat for the ships left a big gap. However, our reliefs in the shape of the official party from Britain arrived from Moscow led by Lt Colonel Otten and accompanied by Mrs Thorold, representing the British Red Cross Society. My relief was Lt Commander Stephens, a captured

survivor of the St Nazaire raid and a successful escaper from Colditz. He was obviously an excellent choice for the job. I spent some time turning over details of the shipping arrangements to him and next day drove him round the docks in our Jeep and introduced him all round. Mines were still being lifted all over the docks area and one had to step lightly. Lifting was all being done by women who stacked the mines on the side of the road - there was no apparent defusing. Later the mines were loaded into lorries, not always with regard to their lethal qualities. One morning a mine detonated in a lorry and the whole lot went up with a bang including, it was said, forty women.

There were a number of German prisoners working in the docks, all of them emaciated and in rags and some hardly able to stand. I saw twenty or more of them trying to lift a rail where a track was being repaired and they could not move it. I do not suppose any of them lived to go home. But then neither did millions of Russian soldiers. War is very ugly.

Sunday 18 March was our last day in Odessa and I was really quite sorry to leave. The only blot on my stay was news from Moscow that my father had died at my sister's house in Buckinghamshire. I had only seen him twice in the last six years. After a pleasant morning walk with Ted Croft and Peter Squires the hotel produced the best lunch of our stay. We packed and departed at 2100, the train leaving at 2200. We left Doc Thornton and Sub.Lt Jameson behind, I having taken it upon myself to appoint Jameson signals officer for the new party.

Two and a half days later we arrived in Moscow. Nobody came to meet us and presumably we managed to get a taxi home. I dined with the Admiral that night and gave him a brief report. He seemed quite pleased with the way things had gone.