CHAPTER VI MIDSHIPMAN, ROYAL NAVAL RESERVE

I had received an appointment as Probationary Midshipman R.N.R. in H.M.S. 'King George V', a venerable battleship from the 1914-1918 war, now serving as gunnery ship of the fleet. This meant a considerable expenditure on new clothes and uniform as all my existing buttons and badges had to be changed and various new garments purchased. My father must have accepted this philosophically, as he did most things, and certainly I had not been much of a drain on the family purse during the last two years or more.

So one fine day in May 1923 I boarded a train at Paddington bound for Weymouth and Portland harbour where I was assured I would find the battleship. On the train I met another Union-Castle cadet named Mosey and with much in common we soon became good friends. At Weymouth we embarked in a picket boat and were soon saluting the quarterdeck of our new and rather imposing home.

All the midshipmen (there were 29 of us, all probationary R.N.R) slept in one large space below decks known as the midshipmen's flat, with about five feet of headroom. We all had Marine servants who slung our hammocks and lashed them up for us, which I considered a big improvement on Pangbourne, where we did this ourselves. But there, for every midshipman, was a great big wooden seachest, no doubt supplied by Gieves and just like mine which had caused such a stir in 'Dunvegan Castle'. As all the midshipmen came from either Worcester, Conway or Pangbourne, they were quite familiar with these seafaring relics.

The gunroom (the traditional name of the common room of the midshipmen in any man-of-war) was a long narrow compartment, the furniture consisting mostly of the table, at which we all fed, and a big coal stove with a brass funnel. In charge was a friendly sub-lieutenant named Gibb who quickly and precisely explained our status and responsibilities.

There were in fact 25 midshipmen direct from Worcester, Conway and Pangbourne, who were promptly designated 'Junior Midshipmen' and four of us, Mosey, Lambert, myself and a charming fellow whose name I cannot remember, who had virtually completed our apprenticeship indentures and who without further effort became 'Senior Midshipman'. This was a valuable appointment as it carried quite considerable privileges. The senior midshipmen were exempt from all the traditional gunroom games in which all junior midshipmen were at the mercy of the gunroom sub-lieutenant. Most of them have now slipped my memory but in nearly every case the last man home got a beating or had to clean the brass funnel of the gunroom stove for his slackness. It was all good fun and nobody suffered, for Gibb was a most estimable chap and we all thought the world of him. Some years later when I was serving in the aircraft carrier 'Furious', Gibb, then a lieutenant in the Fleet Air Arm, did his first deck landings while I was officer of the watch and I was delighted to see him again - and get him down on deck safely.

The snotties 'nurse' was a rather forbidding Lieutenant-Commander named Eyre, which he rather acidly pointed out must be pronounced 'air' unless we wished to raise his 'ire'. He did not endear himself to most of us and appeared unwilling to grasp the opportunity presented by so many young minds in need of guidance in naval affairs.

We were divided into three watches and the general routine was for one watch to be doing some form of study, one watch doing seamanship and practical work and the third doing watchkeeping duties and running boats. This last was of course by far the most popular, especially being in charge of a picket boat.

'King George V' had two picket boats, each about 45 feet long, steam driven and capable of something like twelve knots.

In harbour they lay to lizards (= mooring ropes) at the end of lower booms. When a picket boat was called away, the crew boarded by running out along the lower boom and dropping down a rope ladder into the boat. Fires were kept banked and a good head of steam was available within minutes.

These boats had single screws with a large pitch and were capable of astonishing acceleration. Once you got the feel of them they were a joy to handle and coming alongside the gangway aft there was an unwritten law that you did not ring 'stop' until the picket boat's bow was level with the battleship's stern. This left about a boat's length in which to bring up from twelve knots. Having got your bow at exactly the right angle, three rings on the engine-room gong brought a sudden surge of astern power and if you had judged correctly, brought the boat alongside the gangway with the gentlest of nudges.

Sometimes, naturally, mistakes were made. Some, perhaps, not always accidentally! A snottie who got the wrong side of his engine-room crew might experience some delay, or even anticipation, of his orders which could be quite embarrassing. One poor chap got in a panic and having rung 'stop' rang 'ahead' again instead of 'astern' and went straight through the massive teak gangway removing the picket boat's funnel and half her superstructure, causing the officer of the watch, so he said, to have three sets of twins.

The usual punishment for any misdemeanour was stoppage of leave, although summary punishment in the gunroom consisted of a beating by the sub. I do not remember Gibb ever using this corrective but I daresay he did as he had several black sheep to contend with.

All the same, life now entered an entirely new and generally pleasurable phase for those of us who had roughed it in the half-deck for some years. Even the youngest midshipmen were treated as officers and gentlemen and if they were in doubt about the necessary behaviour Gibb was quick to steer them along the right course.

At dinner every night except Sunday - when we invariably had a cold supper - all the niceties of naval tradition were carried out, grace being said - the brief naval 'Thank God' - and the King's health proposed in the time-honoured fashion: The president rising and saying 'Mr. Vice, the King' and the Vice president responding with 'Gentlemen, the King'. In those days the King's health was drunk seated in the navy, the change to the general standing position coming a few years later. It is said the change was made on the suggestion of H.M. King George V.

One night a week was gunroom guest night and on this occasion the Royal Marine band played throughout dinner. 'The King' was followed by the national anthem and then the president of the mess invited the bandmaster to join him in a glass of port. This small ceremonial was most affecting and did as much to make one feel part of a great naval tradition as wearing the uniform.

Nearly every night on board we played bridge, Gibb being a dashing if not very scientific player. The favoured drink was a very reasonable sherry at 4d a glass, the product of the previous spring cruise when the combined fleets met in the Mediterranean.

The captain of 'King George V' was known as 'Black' Pearson, not I believe with reference to his character but because of the colour of his hair. He was to me at that time a most forbidding individual, nevertheless, and woe betide the snottie who did not stand rigidly to attention whenever the captain passed along the deck.

It is a naval tradition that you only salute on passing a senior officer on board ship when meeting him for the first time on any one day. Captain Pearson was later relieved by Captain Kemmis Betty with whom I came in contact on several occasions later on.

A most remarkable man was Captain Pedder of the Royal Marines. He had come up through the ranks and was a walking encyclopedia of things naval and of 'King George V' in particular. A morning's instruction with Pedder was really good value and he was always ready to advise and assist with problems. The Royal Marines manned one of the ship's five turrets, each of which housed two 13.5 inch guns. As is usual, the marine's turret was the acme of brilliant paintwork and polish and to see the turret crew in action (peace time action in this case) was breath-taking. The noise made by the gun loading apparatus, the clang of the cages and the roar of the chain rammer were deafening but, oddly enough, the huge gun going off came as an anti-climax and the smooth, almost slow recoil of the enormous breech was a distinct surprise.

One of the problems of a man-of-war in peace time is that of keeping all the crew constantly but not boringly employed. The vessel is manned as a fighting unit but for reasons of economy can only do a certain amount of steaming or firing guns and torpedoes. Only a limited amount of time can be spent in cleaning and polishing and, certainly at the time in question, nobody had enough money to enjoy more than a restricted amount of leave. So every job requiring manual labour was usually tackled by four or five times the number of men that was actually necessary. On one occasion when we were hoisting a whaler I remarked to the officer in charge that whereas he had about forty men on the job, in the merchant service we would be lucky to have ten. He did not bite my head off but quietly pointed out that not only did the system give the men something to occupy them but it trained them at the same time.

Even so, it used to make me smile to see some thirty or more men scrubbing the quarter deck with long handled brooms. Having assembled the men and got the hose going the Petty Officer in charge would order 'scrub forrard'. Having shuffled slowly forward to the other end of the quarter deck the hands would rest philosophically on their brooms for some minutes until the P.O. ordered 'scrub aft'. In 'Goorkha' the bosun's mate and four or five men scrubbed all the decks from right forward to right aft in about an hour.

'King George V' spent some time in Portland Harbour and we soon made ourselves familiar with the delights of Weymouth. Tea we had at the 'Dorothy' cafe, which had a three-piece orchestra. Later on, beer in a cosy pub with a delectable barmaid and then back to the pier to catch the picket boat in time for dinner or, if we had late leave, to the dance in the pier pavilion where we never lacked partners.

One day the commander's orders said bluntly 'Midshipmen to sailing instruction' and in true naval style the whole thing was arrayed on a lavish scale. Every boat in the ship provided with a mast and sail was put in the water and filled with eager midshipmen. Each boat had its own permanent coxswain and these hardy seamen appeared far from happy with the task ahead of them as there was not only a fresh breeze but a strong hint of mischief from the crews. Sure enough within an hour every boat - and there must have been seven or eight of them - launch, pinnace, two cutters, two whalers, galley and probably skiff - was dismasted, most of them from trying to sail under lower booms when coming up to pick up a lizard. The commander was not dismayed but kept a running tally of names for stoppage of leave. Then a most unfortunate thing happened, not entirely by chance perhaps. The Captain decided that he wished to sail his galley ashore. When he was

told the score he ordered spare masts to be shipped in all boats and the young gentlemen kept at it until they could pick up a lizard without losing a mast. It was rather a long day but very instructive.

Next we were sent on a musketry course on the ranges at Portland. This was quite good fun as the weather was clement, a good picnic lunch with a bottle of beer apiece was provided and I, for one, liked shooting. In fact, I managed to pass as marksman and was duly presented with 30/-, which I understood was the appropriate award. This may have been the king's bounty but I rather fancy it came out of the gunnery officer's pocket. He was a Lieutenant-Commander Bosanquet, a quietly efficient officer who made no concessions to diffidence, none the less. On one occasion when we were doing a simulated shoot on the practice table, he said to me, "You know how to go about it, Middleton. Show them how to do it". I modestly suggested there were others better qualified, whereupon he called out another midshipman and ran through the class one by one. I was not given a second chance but learned a lesson I was never to forget.

Our instructor on the musketry course was a West Country gunner's mate who was disarmingly friendly. But when we rather overdid the skylarking he quickly showed his claws and had the whole class doubling up and down the range, over the firing points with our rifles at the slope, bumping up and down. We all had very sore shoulders for weeks afterwards.

When we were shooting at one of the longer distances, possibly 800 or 1000 yards we were astonished to see two figures come bounding across the line of fire. Our instructor gave the order to cease fire immediately and a moment or two later further figures appeared as if in pursuit. This later proved to be the case, the first two being boys from the nearby Borstal institution.

They were soon recaptured and led back to face the music. As they must have known the ranges quite well, could see the red flag and hear the rifle shots, we thought they must be quite desperate to have taken such a risk. No doubt they hoped by doing so they would discourage the pursuit.

At the end of the course we did some team shooting against our instructor and some of the range officers and did very well. Altogether our week on the ranges was good fun and most of the midshipmen appeared to enjoy it.

Our ship then sailed for Invergordon and spent some time carrying out towing trials of battle-practice targets. These consisted of huge pontoons with an enormous lattice-work on top on which canvas strips were laced. In any wind they sailed handsomely and they were brutes to tow. During this time I spent some days in one of the attending Admiralty sea-going tugs, the "St. Cyrus", which was good experience. I did not fancy the motion of these vessels much and was very nearly sea-sick one gusty day.

There was a pleasant little ~~nine hole~~ golf course at Nigg, on the north side of the entrance to Cromarty firth and while at Invergordon I played one or two games there. It was a very sporting little course, maintained by local farmers and all visiting naval officers (and presumably ratings) could join for the stay of the ship for ten shillings. There was a small inn by the landing place where one could get a good meal of bread and cheese and a pint of beer for about a shilling.

Our pay as midshipmen was 5/- a day and with this we had to pay our mess and wine bills which averaged about £3 a month. A snottie's wine bill was not allowed to exceed 15/- a month and below the age of eighteen smoking and spirits were forbidden.

On appointment as probationery midshipman we received a uniform allowance of £25 and this was a first and final payment, as far as I can remember. Later on as a sub-lieutenant I had to buy a frock coat and would have had to buy a sword but my father knew one of the directors of the Wilkinson Sword company named Latham, who very kindly presented me with one which I have today. Quite a large proportion of my savings were spent in maintaining myself as a reserve officer. If my Lords of the Admiralty were aware of this fact they did not find it necessary to express any appreciation.

'King George V' returned to Portland harbour and at the end of three months all the midshipmen were transferred to destroyers. Mosey, (the other Union-Castle cadet) and I, elected to serve together and we were appointed to 'Viceroy' in the 2nd destroyer flotilla, her captain being Lieutenant-Commander G.A. Scott.

This was a very fortunate thing for us as 'Viceroy' was a very efficient ship and G.A. Scott an absolutely top-class destroyer officer. He was very strict but also very willing to give his midshipmen every chance of learning the business and I enjoyed nearly every minute of my time on board.

The 'nearly' is due to the fact that both Mosey and I found ourselves on the carpet one day for exceeding our wine bills. Mosey was assistant wine caterer and, under the supervision of a lieutenant, did the wine books. So it was not difficult when our 15/- ran out to arrange an overdraft, as it were. G.A.Scott was in the habit of coming into the wardroom on occasions and challenging all present to a game of poker dice for drinks. Mosey and I joined in one Saturday noon and were delighted when the captain lost and signed for the round. But after lunch we were bidden to attend the captain in his cabin and when we entered found him sitting at his desk with our R.V.O.2's.

(Reserve Officers training books) in front of him. He wasted no time.

"Can you give me any good reason why I should not throw these books of yours out of the porthole?" he asked. Without waiting for a reply, he went on to ask how we had intended to honour our losses at poker dice had it been necessary. He also pointed out that as he saw and initialled the wine book every week he knew we had used up our allowance. He then said,

"You are both somewhat older and more experienced than the average midshipman catered for by King's regulations so I shall break them and allow you both sub-lieutenants' wine bills of 30/- a month. If you exceed that your training books will go out of the porthole".

This was typical of G.A. Scott and some years afterwards a senior officer noting that he had assessed my ability as 'above average' said, "G.A.Scott's 'above average' is any other person's 'exceptional', so we will put you down as exceptional".

There was a very great deal to learn and to do in a fleet destroyer. The 2nd flotilla in 1923 consisted of eight V and W class destroyers and a leader, H.M.S. 'Spenser'. Others beside Viceroy in the flotilla were 'Venetia, Lieut-Commander V.Wyndham-Quin, 'Wolfhound', Lieut-Commander Mortimer, 'Valorous' and 'Vanquisher. The others I cannot remember.

As midshipmen we kept a watch at sea, were officers of quarters for one of the 4 inch guns, went away in charge of whalers, were in charge of landing parties and generally involved in the working of the ship. It was pleasant and exciting. Our first lieutenant was a quiet and charming man named De Winton, the second lieutenant was named James, the sub. was Spens and the gunner, Bryce. The Chief engineers name escapes me but he was a very cheerful individual with a fund of bawdy rhymes and stories.

Every day there was a rush to get the Daily Mirror wherein we all followed the absorbing antics of Pip, Squeak and Wilfrid. La Vie Parisienne was also popular and I well remember James taking Sunday divisions with this rather unsuitable journal sticking out from a pocket through the tail of his frock coat.

The flotilla worked as a complete unit under the watchful eye of Captain (D) in Spenser. It was an impressive sight when disposed in two divisions in line ahead, led by 'Spenser' and steaming at 25 knots or more. Station keeping at 1½ cables was an art and some people never seemed to acquire it. If a particular ship was way astern of station or climbing up on to the next ahead's quarter deck there would be a unanimous vote that 'so and so must be on watch'. Compared with watchkeeping in a merchant ship, many miles from land and nothing in sight day after day, this was far more entertaining and I was always happy using my Stuart's distance meter on the mast of the next ahead and endeavouring to give as few alterations of engine revolutions as possible. In fact, if one ever had to alter more than two revolutions one could be fairly sure that the next ahead had got badly out of station and was either putting the brakes on or accelerating rapidly.

Full calibre shoots were usually carried out by ships individually and on these occasions my ~~usual~~ job was officer of quarters at one of the 4 inch guns. In addition, I had to keep a record of all corrections passed to the gun with their times, also times of firing and what was actually on the sights when the gun went off. As the ship was usually steaming at 20 knots or more and probably rolling and pitching, it was no easy job to keep one's feet, let alone write down a lot of figures and times. The continuous stream of ranges and deflections coming over the voice pipes, the clang of the firing gongs, the sudden blast and thump of the gun going off all tended to confuse one.

And, in addition, the empty brass cartridge-cases rolled and clanged all round the gun platform and kept getting under one's feet. I never liked that side of gunnery although I enjoyed controlling a shoot and got first class certificates for both of my gunnery courses at Devonport.

Firing torpedoes was a much quieter occupation and really rather dull although the actual attack by a full flotilla or by several flotillas was tremendously exciting. We once did a dummy attack on the 'Aquitania' off the Nab tower and it must have made a splendid spectacle for the liner's passengers as all nine ships approached at 27 knots and turned to fire, heeling over at incredible angles and washing down in the breakers from the next ahead. No doubt it made a good talking point for the liner's passengers at dinner that night.

Traditionally the autumn cruise of the Home Fleet took us to Scottish waters and Invergordon. During the exercises the three destroyer flotillas made a combined torpedo attack on the battle fleet in rather boisterous weather in the Moray Firth. It was a wonderful sight to see the great battleships and battle cruisers steaming majestically in line ahead as we moved in to attack. One flotilla on the bow, one abeam and one on the quarter; twenty-seven destroyers with eight torpedo tubes apiece at the ready. We seemed to be getting very close to the great ships, whose secondary armament was quite clearly trained upon us. I was thankful we were not in earnest.

Our captain, G.A.Scott, was obviously very concerned because of the state of the weather and the sea that was running. He looked aft as breaking seas burst over the unprotected crews of the torpedo tubes. "I cannot believe Captain 'D' means to fire in these conditions", he said. "We shall lose some men and half the torpedoes". Then, as the signal to turn on to the firing course fluttered from 'Spenser's' yardarm he said,

"I shan't fire. Secure the tubes and stand the crews down". It was a very brave decision.

Down came the signal on board 'Spenser'.

"Executive, sir" said the signal yeoman, and with 30 degrees of helm all our flotilla turned to fire. We watched the rest of the flotilla, holding on with both hands as 'Viceroy' thrashed and leapt in the seas under full helm at speed. Down came the signal to fire from'Spenser! Our next astern fired two torpedoes one of which went up in the air and almost certainly never ran. The other hit the deck as the ship rolled towards it. It was pretty clear the battle fleet would have been in little danger had our torpedoes been armed. Our captain looked very grim. As we steadied on the retiring course 'Spenser' signalled,

"Indicate number of torpedoes fired".

Again we watched our fellow ships with interest. The score varied from one to four except for 'Viceroy', which indicated an uncompromising 'nil'.

As usual all ships followed torpedo tracks in order to recover them but a long search left the three flotillas with a large number unrecovered. The loss, not only financial but in vital equipment, was serious.

There was, of course, a post mortem on return to harbour. 'Spenser' again signalling, rather as expected, "All captains repair on board". G.A. Scott left 'Viceroy' with a complete poker face. We wondered what would happen. Captain D had signalled the order to fire and 'Viceroy had not complied. Could our captain get away with it?

When he returned he gave no indication of what had happened but we heard by 'galley wireless' that he had told Captain D that he considered that it was unsafe to leave the tube crews closed up in the conditions prevailing and this explanation was accepted.

There was a sequel. Next day the whole fleet, battleships and all, put to sea to try and find the missing torpedoes. It was not a very successful operation and must have cost the nation a small fortune. But there was never any suggestion of smugness on the face of our captain as we diligently applied ourselves to the search.

From Invergordon we proceeded to Scapa Flow to take part in gas trials. These were being conducted by scientists from the establishment at Porton in Wiltshire and consisted of releasing various gases at various distances from submarines. In each submarine an official from Porton remained on deck and carried out tests, presumably to determine the concentration or amount of dispersal of the gas at the various distances. The weather was almost consistently bad and I believe the Porton boffins were considerably affected by seasickness. Our job was to keep ships out of the area and I can well remember the look of horror or bewilderment on the faces of a trawler's crew when 'Viceroy' came thundering up at full speed with every man on board wearing a gas mask.

On our return we made a short stay in the Firth of Forth at the destroyer base at Port Edgar. It was a thrilling sight to see the flotillas berthing in the pens there, the ships turning at speed and shooting in, out of the tide, to lie four abreast, the lines of the first one in hardly ashore before the second, third and fourth were alongside her. Unberthing was the same, the ships shooting out into the Firth with the revolutions for fifteen knots. On one occasion 'Venetia' hitched her propeller-guard sponson round a bollard and nearly brought the pier with her.

Port Edgar was the only place where we all berthed alongside and ship visiting did not entail boat work. Every evening one ship or other would hoist the gun pendant and a large party of thirsty officers would repair on board.

Re-write - It was Torso that sunk for M.1.

It was an extremely pleasant, active and interesting life which certainly helped a rather callow youth to mature - and to some extent, perhaps, gracefully.

Once more the flotilla returned to the south and we were soon engaged in fleet manoeuvres. The point of this particular exercise was an attack by Red fleet submarines on the Blue battle fleet; 'Viceroy' was part of the 'cruiser' screen and we all swept down channel in rather brisk bright weather. The cruiser screen, searching ahead of the fleet, was strung out in a long line abreast, just within visual touch of one another. Suddenly the signalman on watch reported "Submarine M.3 claims to have sunk us, sir". "Where is she?" asked the officer of the watch and with a broad grin the signalman indicated astern. Sure enough there was an M class submarine, not 3 cables away and following in our wake with her massive 12 inch gun pointing menacingly in our direction. It was obviously a technical knock out and had almost immediate repercussions. A general signal arrived from the flagship calling for reports of any sightings of another submarine of the same class, the M.I, and it soon became clear that she was missing. The exercise was abandoned and our flotilla returned to Portland but we had hardly picked up our moorings when another signal ordered the minesweeping vessels of the flotilla, of which 'Viceroy' was one, to proceed to a position off the Start and commence a bottom sweep to try and locate the submarine at daylight. It was a rough night and 'Viceroy' thumped and crashed her way into the teeth of a SW gale in a most unpleasant fashion. Getting along the upper deck of a destroyer in those conditions needed great care and agility as she was washing down from stem to stern.

The weather moderated and we commenced our bottom sweep which continued for a long while. The destroyer 'Wolfhound' of our flotilla was despatched to Kiel to pick up a deep diving suit offered by the Germans and this was, I believe, used eventually but no trace of the submarine was found as far as I can remember,

but there was some evidence that she had been struck by a merchant ship when surfacing. Some years later her sister ship, the M.2, also sank with all hands in West Bay during an exercise. M.2 had had her 12 inch gun removed and a hanger built in its place from which a small seaplane operated. The original plane was called a 'Pobjoy', after the designers. It was said that there were some women relatives of officers on board M.2 at the time of the disaster.

By now my six months training as a midshipman were coming to an end and as I had my sea time in for 2nd Mate I had to prepare to take the Board of Trade examination. On the 20th November, 1923, Mosey and I left 'Viceroy' with considerable regret and made our way to our homes.