

CHAPTER XIIIW A R

So along came another appointment, this time to the Examination Service at Swansea and about the end of August I arrived at H.M.S. 'Lucifer', the headquarters of the Naval Officer in Charge, Captain Percival. The senior officer of the examination service was Lt. Commander Robinson and there were two other officers appointed for sea duties.

Our vessel was the 'Roger Beck', the local pilot boat, which cruised in Swansea Bay over the high water period and then anchored. She was handled by two skippers who worked 24 hours on ^{and} 24 hours off. Named Screech and Hamilton, they were very skilled at handling the little vessel as indeed they had to be, going alongside ships in the Bristol Channel in all weathers. I soon learned a good deal about going alongside ships and boarding them, from these two worthies.

The boarding officers worked a 24 hour tour of duty also and this was usually quite enough in bad weather. If three or four ships, or possibly more, arrived on one tide it was quite exhausting work jumping for the pilot ladder and climbing up the side of some large vessel. Leaving was usually even more hazardous still and had it not been for the skill of Screech and Hamilton I doubt whether any of us would have survived our initiation.

The pilots also continued to use 'Roger Beck' so we got to know them all very well. They were a cheerful, interesting lot and, of course, all good seamen.

One day at the beginning of October we had just put a pilot aboard a ship off Mumbles head when I caught sight of a boat through the mist. It was a ship's life-boat and not far off the shore. I pointed her out to Hamilton, who promptly headed 'Roger Beck' in that direction when almost immediately two more life-boats came in sight. We ran up close to the first one, which was drifting slowly and saw at once she was full of lascars. We threw them a line but they lay in the boat lifelessly, some of them obviously injured. My P & O experience came quickly to my rescue and I called out in lascari-bat, "Khalassi, make fast that rope quickly". As soon as they heard their own language the lascars lost some of their lethargy and before long, and only just in time, we had all the boats in tow. I also asked them what ship they came from and where she was, to which they replied that the ship was the 'Mawarri' and she was some miles 'out there'.

As soon as the men were safely ashore we set off in 'Roger Beck' to find the ship and after steaming for about an hour came across her being taken in tow by a tug. With one of the pilots I went on board and found the ship completely abandoned and with a lot of water in her holds. After some consultation and checking her draught, it was decided that we might be able to get her through the lock into the docks but the port authorities would not take the risk and we eventually beached her in Oystermouth bay.

All this had taken us beyond our normal tour of duty and it seemed to me that I had hardly made my report on the proceedings and had a brief rest before it was time to join the 'Roger Beck' again.

Somewhere around four o'clock in the afternoon the Port War Signal Station on the Tutt head made us a signal to say a ship had stopped after an explosion about ten ^{miles} to the southward. Away we went in a heavy swell and presently sighted a big cargo vessel, low in the water and apparently anchored. We had no idea what had damaged the 'Marwarri' the previous day but assumed it was either a torpedo or a mine.

Here was another victim apparently and the little 'Roger Beck' seemed to be an easy target for either method of dispatch. We ran up alongside and Pilot Clarrie Mock and I boarded the vessel which, like the 'Marwarri', had been completely abandoned. We examined each hold and found about six feet of water in her but there was no indication that she was sinking now. She was indeed anchored and we subsequently learnt that this was a result of the explosion. She had, in fact, anchored herself in about 16 fathoms. But there was no power on board and we could not get into the cable locker to let go the end of her chain because the lower portion was flooded. Her name was 'Lochgoil'.

The imperturbable Skipper Hamilton asked his engineer if he had a hacksaw and if so, how many blades. The answer was yes, two hacksaws and a new packet of a dozen blades. So Hamilton boarded 'Lochgoil' and with two of his crew proceeded to cut the cable with a hacksaw. I took over command of 'Roger Beck' and Clarrie Mock, the pilot, assumed command of 'Lochgoil'.

There was quite a big swell running and, of course, we had no idea what had happened to the ship - whether she had been mined or torpedoed or sabotaged. She had a very valuable cargo on board and as every ship was now of vital importance to the war effort we were determined to save her, if possible.

It was soon dark and the great bulk of the damaged ship was eerie in the gloom. Hamilton and his men worked away steadily but having made one cut nearly through two inches of cable link, the weight of the chain closed the gap and they had to start all over again. In the end they made three or four cuts before the huge link parted and the work took a number of hours.

As the severed cable thrashed out through the hawsepipe, 'Roger Beck' took the damaged ship in tow. Half-full of water she did not move easily and although the water in her did not seem to be

gaining, she had taken a bit of a list. A naval trawler appeared on the scene and through her we were able to report to N.O.I.C. Swansea and ask for assistance of tugs. These arrived during the night and slowly and carefully 'Lochgoil' was towed into Swansea Bay and finally beached alongside 'Marwarth'. Two ships saved in two days was a pretty good start and I was glad I had not been sent to Singapore.

Soon after we had beached 'Lochgoil' and put the salvage team on board we got a signal asking for an armed guard as the salvors were getting at the whisky, of which there were 60,000 cases on board. I got a young corporal and two men from the local garrison and put them on board. We were halfway back to Swansea when we got another signal saying the armed guard was firing rifles all over the place. So very reluctantly we went back again and found the two private soldiers flaked out dead drunk. The corporal had barricaded himself in a cabin and was firing his rifle through the door if anyone approached. From another alleyway, out of the line of fire, I reasoned with the corporal and eventually got him to come out. We then removed the military guard. As far as I can remember, the whisky was allowed to do its worst.

As can be imagined, there was plenty of 'Spey Royal' all over Swansea and as in 'Whisky Galore' (which must have happened long afterwards, unless it was the same incident transferred further north) cases were sunk and buoyed all over the bay.

N.O.I.C. Swansea and Flag Officer Cardiff, Admiral Bevan, were both very pleased and we all received warm congratulations. Later on I received a letter from my Lords of the Admiralty conveying their high appreciation of the exploit. Had it not been so soon after the outbreak of war I daresay I should have got the medal which all my colleagues at Swansea considered certain.

While all this had been going on I had been making arrangements for my wife and children to come to Swansea and had managed to get a flat. As I envisaged letting our own house at Ruislip, I did not want to move furniture and in any case that would have been tempting providence to move me. So I hire-purchased most of the necessary sticks. A cheap bedroom suite; two camp beds for the children; a carpet, chairs and one or two minor pieces. The table and linen my wife brought with her.

When the family arrived after a rather tiring journey, I noticed Angela, then aged five, was very spotty but was assured it was nothing catching, only harvester bites. When Jill went down with chicken-pox a few days later it was clear that the diagnosis as 'harvester bites' was incorrect.

Early in November a policeman called at the flat one night with a message to say that my mother had died and the family had been trying to get in touch with me. I journeyed up to town next day and stayed with my sister in North Acton until after the funeral. Her passing was a great shock for although she had been ill for some years I felt she had suddenly lost the will to live. The thought of war and the splitting up of the family on top of her own sufferings was too much for her. I believe she turned her face to the wall and died. My father, then eighty years of age, took the blow bravely and philosophically, as he did everything.

Our flat in Belgrave Court was tiny but comfortable and we had quite a lot of fun in Swansea. My father and mother-in-law came down for Christmas and we had a fine turkey, which would not go into our tiny oven. This did not matter as the local system was to let the baker cook your turkey and collect it as required. I had borrowed a car from a friendly commander and after a rather jolly session in the mess at the naval base went to collect the bird. This we placed in a large dish in the back of the car, piping hot and ready to serve. Unfortunately we ran out of petrol going up

up the hill towards Sketty and had to make the rest of the journey on foot, carrying a rapidly cooling turkey. All the same, it tasted very good and we had a cheerful Christmas dinner.

The girls went to a convent school just across the way from our flat and Angela, at the impressionable age of five, was soon singing and talking Welsh and muttering 'Hail Marys' on every occasion.

A number of officers and their wives were invited to Clyne Castle for lunch on Boxing Day by Admiral Heneage-Vivian and this was rather a hilarious occasion. First of all we spent some time knocking on the wrong door and were somewhat surprised to see the butler standing outside another entrance some distance away saying "This way, if you please, gentlemen". We all sat on rather splendid gilt chairs and my wife distinguished herself by knocking hers over with a crash, which produced a rather ominous silence. But everybody enjoyed themselves and the Admiral was an attentive host. He had, I remember, a young and charming wife.

As a result of my 'Marwarri' and 'Lochgoil' efforts, I was appointed Salvage Officer for the Bristol Channel, which sounded rather grand. Soon after this, two big, sea-going trawlers ran ashore at Pembrey in Carmarthen bay and I was told to see if I could get lines aboard to pull them off. In a very ancient wooden tug, I sailed from Swansea one night in a howling gale and off Mumbles Head I thought we should be lucky if we did not need assistance ourselves. The Liverpool Salvage Company, people dealing with 'Marwarri' and 'Lochgoil', were soon on the spot and when it was clear we could not get in close enough from seawards they proceeded to run out heavy kedges from the shore. I seem to remember that the captain of one of the trawlers was an instructor at a school of navigation in peacetime and that he mistook Bury Holm light for Lundy Island north light. It hardly seems possible.

One dark stormy night F.O.I.C. Cardiff asked for one of our tugs to go to the assistance of a damaged vessel 200 miles out in the Atlantic and suggested that I should go with her. I did not like the sound of this a bit as there was an enormous sea running in the Bristol Channel and the tug was not very big. It looked like being a very uncomfortable trip, whether the enemy took an interest in us or not. Just as we were locking out, Captain Slater, the Port Captain, came battling along the quay towards us and announced that another vessel had the casualty in tow and we were not to go. I was very relieved.

About this time two old ladies on the north Devon coast said they had seen a large submarine surface and thought it was very like a picture of a U-boat they had seen. Of course, nearly everyone thought this a real old wives tale but F.O.I.C. Cardiff sent some trawlers to investigate and rumour had it that they got an asdic contact, let go a pattern of depth charges and were rewarded by a gigantic explosion, which was deemed to be the end of a mine-laying submarine, probably the one whose mines had accounted for 'Marwarri' and 'Lochgoil'.

Soon after Christmas I was given a few days leave and we all journeyed to London and stayed with my wife's people in Acton. We had only been there a couple of days when a telegram arrived to say I had been appointed ~~Flag~~ Lieutenant to the Senior British Naval Officer, Suez Canal Area and telling me to report to the Admiralty for passage instructions. As I had only just been appointed Salvage Officer for the Bristol Channel, I could not help feeling that the Admiralty must expect a high degree of versatility in their Reserve Officers. No doubt, as was suggested by an officer of the Admiralty, the appointment was really due to the fact that I had recently done a re-qualifying course in signals and had got a first class certificate. It appeared that I was relieving a fully qualified Royal Navy signals officer for duty afloat, so I felt I was probably going to a useful job.

Then followed a more than hectic few days. We had to return to Swansea, pack up our flat and get rid of the lease, open up our house at Ruislip and settle in there again. I had to get inoculated, vaccinated and get together gear for a long stay abroad. I think we had about five days to do it.

At Swansea we collected all the boxes and crates we could lay hands on and packed in a few hours. Some of the hire-purchase furniture we were able to return but we ended up well out of pocket on all sides, including the lease of the flat for which I had to pay six months rent. I was told afterwards it was let again within a week.

Leaving my wife sitting on one of the crates in an otherwise empty flat, I went off to make arrangements for the stuff to be collected and put on the train to Paddington and I was assured this would be done by 3.0 p.m. At 3.30 p.m. there was no sign of any van to collect the gear so we tore off to the station, where we were told that there had been a mistake. It was not possible for one van to collect both luggage and goods, and of our 13 packages, 5 were to go with us in the train and the rest would follow by goods train. I was told it was quite impossible to do what I required. I pointed out in blunt nautical language that I was going abroad at short notice, that I had given up my flat and it was essential that our gear was removed before we left. I threatened to call for assistance from the Admiralty, Military, Police and any other organisation I could think of and a few minutes later left the station complete with van. We returned to find the front door of the flat had somehow been bolted by the caretaker on the inside and we could not get in. However, the bolts yielded to pressure and the caretaker, who came to complain, was sent packing with lurid threats of what would happen to him for interfering with a naval officer under sailing orders! We arrived at the station with the van about two minutes before the train was due to depart. I pushed my wife and our cocker spaniel on board and dashed back to see the gear loaded. The guard was about to

blow his whistle so I seized him by the arm and blurted out my now well rehearsed story of what would happen if I was prevented from catching the train complete with my possessions. "The station-master promised me he would hold the train for me", I insisted, and indeed when I got the van I was told this would be done by an official I took to ^{be} the stationmaster. But another chap altogether standing by the guard said: "Nonsense, I am the stationmaster and I never said any such thing!" By the time the last case was being tumbled into the guard's van and further argument seemed superfluous so I thanked them politely and jumped aboard.

When I eventually found my wife she was sitting in a compartment looking completely dazed and quite resigned to the fact that neither I nor our gear had caught the train.

Next day we returned to Ruislip to find the house frozen solid, the Ideal boiler burst and in general anything but a warm welcome. Endeavouring to unfreeze the bathroom waste pipe, the ladder slipped on an icy patch and I came down from the top, landing neatly on my feet holding a kettle full of boiling water. I do not believe a drop was spilled.

During this time I had had my T.A.B - T inoculations and the second one sent me to bed with a temperature and a raging headache. Altogether, it was not an entirely enjoyable Christmas leave.

I was beginning to learn the ropes though and when I received instructions to report to the Sea Transport Officer, Southampton, on a certain day, I rang him up and asked what was the latest time I could arrive. He immediately said, "You need not come until 10.0.p.m. the following day", so I managed one fairly peaceful 24 hours before leaving.

At Southampton I joined a ferry steamer, I believe the 'Duke of Argyll' and we sailed in convoy to Cherbourg. I was a bit taken aback to find there was no food or drink on board, which seemed a

bit hard case, even in war time, and when we were disembarked on to a deserted quay at about five o'clock in the morning with a biting east wind and about 15 degrees of frost, I do not think I was the only one who thought the arrangements could have been bettered. What was worse, we were kept hanging about for a long time while all our gear was unloaded before being told there was an officers' club close to the docks, where we went to get some breakfast. In fact, we did rather better than that and managed to get a couple of tots of hot rum, which put new life in us.

By now I had ^{teamed} ~~joined~~ up with an R.N. ^{lieut} ~~Lieutenant~~-Commander going out to join H.M.S. 'Gloucester' as navigator and half a dozen or so assorted junior officers. I cannot remember the name of the Lieutenant-Commander but he was an extremely pleasant, unaggressive sort of chap but not one to stand nonsense as he demonstrated later. I fear he was lost when 'Gloucester' was sunk in the Mediterranean.

During the forenoon we were bidden to attend a 'Practice en-training' with the military units with whom we were to travel to Marseilles. The naval view of this rather astonishing requirement was that it was typical of the army predilection for un-necessary organisation, but we went. Everybody got on board the train and then got out again more than once until the Train Major, ~~an~~ an un-attractive individual, seemed satisfied. While we were having a pre-lunch drink in the club, this individual came and sat alongside us and started to make uncomplimentary remarks about naval officers in general and us in particular. I told him what I thought of his methods of dis-organisation but the R.N. Lt.Commander, who was, of course, our senior officer, quietly told me to leave it to him, walked round and lifted the purple faced Train Major off his stool and marched him out of the door in an iron grip. He returned shortly and finished his drink without comment and the Train Major kept well away from us thenceforward.

The journey to Marseilles was bitterly cold as there was no heating in the train and it was freezing hard. Meals consisted of portions of wrapped cheese (very stale), crisps and very sweet tea,

11 made with chlorinated water. I was very glad indeed when we arrived at Marseilles and boarded the 'Leicestershire', a Bibby line troopship, where I was delighted to find that my comparatively senior rank had entitled me to a single berth stateroom.

On the quay it was almost as cold as in Cherbourg and the south of France was in an icy grip in January, 1940. I watched with interest the Scots Grays embarking, their lovely horses immaculately groomed, waiting their turn to be hoisted on board. I believe they were bound for Palestine and that they were one of the last cavalry regiments to dispense with live transport for the more prosaic mechanical system. It was like a romantic bridge between two wars.

Troopships were dry, or at least this one was, and I soon found my way to the Ship's Officers' quarters, where I discovered an old Pangbournian who saw to it that I was suitably entertained. It was quite a pleasant voyage.

At Port Said, I was met by the man I was relieving, Bobby Hughes, Flag Lieutenant to Vice-Admiral Sir James Phipps, Senior British Naval Officer, Suez Canal Area. We caught the train to Ismailia and I was soon being introduced to the Admiral. I got the impression that he was not altogether delighted by the first sight of his new A.D.C. I was a trifle bewildered by the newness and strangeness of everything around me and wondered how I was going to manage such a completely different job.