

CHAPTER XIV FLAG LIEUTENANT

The Admiral lived in a large, Canal Company house and as is usual for a flag Lieutenant, I lived with him and had extremely comfortable quarters. The Admiral also fed me and provided drinks, so my living expenses were very small. In general, it looked as if I had fallen on my feet, providing I could hold the job down.

Next day Bobby Hughes took me round Navy Office, Ismailia, and introduced me to my fellow officers ^{and} the cypher staff, and began my initiation into the mysteries of my job. This consisted of responsibility for all naval signalling arrangements in the area, liaison with the signal officers of the army and air force and, as a side line, major domo and chief of protocol for the Admiral's establishment. In other words, I was on duty 24 hours a day.

There was quite a big cypher office manned by wives and daughters of British subjects living on the area and we had teleprinter connections with Cairo, Suez, Port Said and Alexandria. For the reception of the most secret messages, I had to man the teleprinter myself so I soon became familiar with the working of these machines, now well known to millions as they tap out football results on T.V. I had never seen one before and ours were very temperamental owing to the lines having faulty insulations, very much affected by damp and dew. It was fairly standard practice, when the teleprinters were misbehaving, to suggest that it was because a spy had tapped the line and put it out of balance. Sometimes we even went as far as to type "Please get off line so that we can receive message. Will let you have a copy" Oddly enough, this nearly always seemed to be effective and the machine started typing sense.

January is one of the few months when the sun does not shine all day at Ismailia and what with rather gloomy days, no friends and the feeling that I was not making a very good impression on the Admiral, I was rather miserable and home-sick. Bobby Hughes had departed to his new job as a flotilla signal officer and I was rapidly

getting the feel of my job but I was not entirely surprised when the Admiral said to me one day:-

"I think perhaps it would be better if you sought accommodation with some of the officers who are more your own age. I feel we have little in common and I expected the Admiralty to send me an older man".

I asked if he considered me unsuited to the job and he replied that he was quite satisfied with my ability as Signals Officer. This implied that he was not very taken with my capabilities as a social organiser, I suppose, and with this I would have agreed as it was an entirely strange venture for me. So I retreated to a pension kept by a Miss Wilmot, at which most of the unmarried officers, and those without wives in Ismailia, lived. It was a pleasant, well-run establishment and, of course, I got to know people much more quickly than in my comparative isolation as flag Lieutenant.

As the weather improved life became very pleasant indeed. I moved into a flat in the pension with three other officers, which allowed us to do a certain amount of entertaining. We were looked after by a rather gloomy Egyptian named Abdul, who made the worst tea it has ever been my misfortune to drink. One morning it tasted so foul that I went out to the kitchen to see how he made it. On the stove was a tiny saucepan with a capacity of about half a pint and in this was a bag containing tea leaves. The saucepan was half filled with a dark, evil-looking liquid. Abdul explained that he poured about a tablespoonful of this disgusting liquid into a cup and filled it up with warm water. I counted ten and then proceeded to show him how tea should be made and had at least one good cup. But my fellow flat-mates said Abdul always pocketed the tea money so we were unlikely to get real tea every day.

At a party celebrating the departure of a R.N.V.R. colleague, Ralph Sketch, I was unfortunate enough to have a tumbler shattered on the back of my head and an R.A.F. doctor, who was present, insisted on taking me back to his hospital to remove the splinters.

Naturally my tropical shirt suffered and was pretty well soaked in blood when I took it off that night. I had to leave the flat early as I was officer of the day and when Abdul came in and saw the bloodstained clothes he showed one of his rare bursts of emotion and said:-

"Poor Captain Mittel, he broke!"

Incidentally, we were all 'Captains' to Abdul.

James Brown, an R.N.R. paymaster, who hailed from Newmarket, decided that I ought to ride and gave me some excellent lessons. There was a very good riding school and stables on the edge of the town and riding in the early morning and evening was a popular recreation. Bathing was, of course, the most popular form of exercise and there was a splendid place known as the 'Jardin des enfants' but the season did not really commence before April or May. Sailing was also very popular, the local boat being a Bordeaux. These craft were about 18 feet long and carried an enormous balanced lugsail, which made them exciting but not very easy to sail. These were kept at the United Services Club on the Nefisha lagoon, on the outskirts of Ismailia. The club itself was very pleasant and well run.

As Italy had not yet entered the war everything was very peaceful in our part of the world and once I had really got the signals side organised to my liking - and the Admiral's satisfaction, of course - life was very pleasant indeed. There were two open air cinemas which commenced business about 10.0 p.m. and finished at 1.0 a.m. and there was an excellent French club where one could dine and dance.

Naturally a great deal of our work consisted of dealings with the Canal company and Society at Ismailia was composed of Senior Canal company officials, navy, army and air force officers, Canal pilots and a few Egyptian officers and officials. In all, a very cosmopolitan crowd with French, Italian and Greeks predominating.

Most of the children appeared to be able to speak about five languages and change from one to the other in mid-sentence.

The Admiral was expecting Lady Pipon and her daughters to come out to Ismailia but one of the daughters, Hermione, was taken ill and eventually the other daughter, Penelope, came out on her own. She arrived in one of the P & O ships ~~'Stralks'~~; "Straths", I cannot remember which one but the captain was Lyndon, who had been Chief Officer of 'Ranchi' when I was in her and he gave me a pleasant welcome aboard.

Soon after Penelope arrived at Ismailia, Admiral Pipon told me he would like me to return to Admiralty house and help Penelope run the establishment. In fact, the Admiral was so experienced in that sort of thing that he did most of the running himself and was good enough to treat me as an apprentice and endeavour to teach me all the tricks. I learned a good deal about food and wine and housekeeping generally under his able tuition and he was always trying new dishes and local wines.

Penelope was 18 or 19 and very easy to get on with so it became a very pleasant household. Our major domo was Pace, a Maltese P.O. steward and he had two young Maltese stewards to assist him, one of whom, Vella, acted as my valet. I never took to Vella and did not really much care for being valeted but I got used to it.

Although from what has been written it may not appear that I was kept busy, in fact I was. There was a constant stream of signals, all of which I had to check and initiate necessary action where possible. Every morning at nine and each afternoon at five I would take the signal log to the Admiral and he would go through it carefully, asking what action had been taken on each.

We were responsible for signalling arrangements at Port Said and Suez and communications with the contraband control ships and various auxiliaries. I kept in close touch with the Flag Lieutenant to the Rear-Admiral, Alexandria, and with the Fleet signal officers, making trips to visit them at intervals.

With riding, sailing, swimming and a fairly busy social life, which included entertaining Canal company officials and their families, I found myself on the go from 6.0 a.m. or earlier until 1.0 a.m. or later. Somehow or other, the dry warm ^{climate} ~~weather~~ seemed to make my normal eight hours sleep quite un-necessary.

One day I received a number of bills from the Egyptian Posts and Telegraphs department for the teleprinter lines between Ismailia, Port Said, Suez and Alexandria and Cairo. The naval accounts office in Port Said forwarded them with a request that I sign them as correct and return them. My commercial training had made me wary, so I made some enquiries and came to the conclusion that our Egyptian friends were sending the bills to both ends of the line and that we were, in fact, paying twice over! One of our paymaster lieutenants had been with Barclay's Bank, D.C.O. in Egypt for some years and I asked him if he would come to Cairo with me and tackle the posts and Telegraph people. He agreed and so I asked Admiral Pison if he would give me permission to approach the Egyptians and get the matter put right. He said I could try but he thought they would put so many difficulties in our way that we would be unlikely to succeed.

In Cairo we had no difficulty in seeing the head of the Posts and Telegraphs, who was very polite and, of course, said the whole idea was absurd. When I asked if it was possible to see how they recorded the charges he sent for a ledger and said, "There you are!" with a smile which said "but you won't get very far". My companion quickly ran through the pages, making a few

notes in pencil and then said something in Arabic, which had an immediate effect.

"So you understand our ledgers, Well, it appears you are right and we have over-charged you by 100%. We will put it right", said the Egyptian. "After all, it was a simple mistake".

We returned to Ismailia having saved the country some £12,000 and no doubt a great deal more had the overcharge been allowed to continue. Admiral Pipon was delighted but I got no thanks from the accounts department.

The Admiral had a number of important and interesting guests and in the course of duty I met most of the senior officials in Egypt. Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, Air Marshal Longmore, Admiral Baillie Grohman and Liét. Colonel Geoffry Keyes stayed with us at different times.

An incident which I remember particularly was one which involved Averell Harriman, then, I believe, Lease-Lend Administrator. He was inspecting the depot at Suez where great quantities of Lease-Lend material were stored awaiting outward transport and which the natives were removing almost as fast as the legitimate owners. Mr Harriman was discussing the possibility of increasing the rate of distribution and there was some discussion with the American local representative, a Mr Green, who was a vice-president of the great American, General Motors Corporation. Mr Harriman was in favour of using the largest possible vehicles and Mr Green came out strongly in favour of small trucks. After some consideration of the problem, Mr Harriman said, "The trouble with you, Jimmy, is that you always did think small". And this was to a vice-president of General Motors!

As it became more and more likely that Italy would enter the war on the side of Germany, things in the canal zone began to liven up. Admiral Pipon made several enquiries about a tanker

bound east through the Mediterranean and I wondered what specially important war equipment could be on board. It must be something very secret, I surmised, as I had seen nothing about it on any signals. When at last the ship arrived at Port Said I told the Admiral, who breathed a sigh of relief. "I was very worried about that ship, Flags", he said to me, "I thought the Italians might get her. She has a dozen cases of sherry on board for me from Williams and Hambert". I later learnt that Admiral Pipon had relations in the firm of Williams and Hambert, who had sent the sherry to him.

When we were expecting the declaration of war by Italy at any moment an Italian ship arrived at Port Said and her cargo was declared as 500 tons of aircraft bombs. To my complete astonishment orders were given for her to proceed unhindered. In reply to my suggestion that the bombs were intended for us by special delivery on outbreak of war, the reply was that until war was declared we could do nothing about it. I then suggested that any of the British canal pilots would be able to stage an 'accidental' grounding, which would hold the ship up the necessary 24 hours but good old British fair play and 'it wouldn't be cricket' won the day. The ship completed her transit of the canal and disappeared off down the Red Sea to Massawa. She was, I think, shadowed. Sure enough Italy declared war the next day and the bombs nearly reached their destination, the ship being sunk almost within sight of her port.

Almost immediately the enemy started raids and dropped magnetic mines in the canal so the sweeping arrangements which had been prepared were put into operation. These were still somewhat Heath Robinson in the early days and involved a heterogenous collection of craft. Large pontoons with enormous coil magnets were towed by tugs, magnetic sweep 'tails' were used both from the shore and from craft and a little later a Wellington

aircraft fitted with huge circular magnetic coils under the wings arrived and commenced daily sweeps. These were extremely hazardous and the pilot relied on the speed of the aircraft to keep out of the way of the explosion. He would make one run down the canal at about 200 feet high and follow this with one at 100 feet. When a mine exploded at the lower level the plane disappeared in the fountain of water, which burst up into the air.

All along the canal look-out posts were established and manned by Egyptian soldiers. Each post had a large wooden pointer and the look-out was supposed to leave this pointing at the spot where he saw a mine enter the water. The idea was that two adjacent posts, if they both spotted the same mine, should give a cross bearing of the exact position. Divers would then go down and see if they could locate the mine and a little red buoy was used to mark the spot. As no doubt the look-outs often had their heads well down during a raid the system was not entirely successful but a lot of mines were marked and subsequently swept and exploded and some were recovered intact. A Canadian mine disposal expert, Lieutenant George Cook, G.C., rendered a magnetic mine safe in a deserted spot by the canal, sitting astride it and sawing away with a hacksaw. It must have taken something more than mere courage to do that. As a matter of interest he survived the war and returned to his peacetime occupation of boat designing at Toronto.

In spite of all this the enemy began to score some successes. Although swept and 'provoked' many times, Mines exploded under ships and on one occasion this happened at the southern exit to Lake Timsah, just by the Australian war memorial at Jebel Marryam. I was driving to Suez with Admiral Pipon and our car was almost alongside the ship when it happened. In spite of the fact that the ship was so close to the shore a number of lives were lost, all, I imagine, due to the explosion itself.

On another occasion the Admiral was going to inspect a ship which had been mined and run aground on the east bank a few miles north of Suez. When we arrived at the spot we embarked in one of the rowing boats used to run lines for ships in transit. As we were rowed across (and the canal seems enormously wide from a small boat) we noticed a little red buoy marking a mine just ahead of us and almost at the same moment we heard the noise of an approaching aircraft. It was the Wellington doing the daily sweep! The pilot obviously would not be looking for small boats crossing the canal. I felt a cold perspiration break out on my forehead and looked to see the Admiral's reaction.

"All we can hope, Flags", he said calmly, "is that the sweep is not as successful as usual".

The Wellington roared overhead, its magnetic coil looking like an enormous quoit, and if there were a mine under the little red buoy that particular provocation failed to incense it. I expected the Admiral to comment on the noise of my heart beats. We waited on board the ship for the second sweep to go by before returning to the west bank, needless to say.

Admiral Sir Walter Cowan arrived at Ismailia wearing a khaki tropical uniform with the insignia of a commander, Royal Navy, and more medals than anyone else I had ever seen, except Admiral Mountbatten. But then Admiral Mountbatten wore outsize medal ribbons I think, which made his look particularly exotic.

Admiral Cowan had insisted on being given some job or other, although it was not the practice to re-employ retired Admirals of his age. So he was told he could be naval liaison officer or naval adviser to General Robert Laycock's 'Layforce', which arrived in the canal area with three 'Glen' ships converted to Assault Ships. I am not quite sure who they were proposing to assault at that time but I assume there was some idea of a landing

in Italy or behind the Italian lines in North Africa.

Admiral Cowen was over seventy years of age but insisted on marching and training with the young troops. When nothing else offered he would cajole the local commanders to let him go on bombing raids, submarine trips and generally appeared to be seeking death in action. When he came to stay in Ismailia Admiral Papon said, "I don't know what we can do to entertain the little man, he's such a fire-eater. He's bound to think it terribly dull here".

After dinner all the company moved out on to the verandah to drink their coffee as it was a very hot night. Suddenly the guns opened up and a mining raid of the canal was in progress.

"Where's Admiral Cowan, Flags?" asked Admiral Papon, "he will enjoy this".

"He stayed downstairs, sir", I said, "I'll go and tell him".

The little man was fast asleep on a settee in the sitting-room but he opened his eyes as I entered.

"Admiral Papon told me to tell you that there is a mining raid in progress, sir". He thought you would like to see it".

"It is very good of him, Flags, but would you tell him I beg to be excused. I have marched 30 miles in the desert today and I am rather tired." He closed his eyes and slept peacefully.

Admiral Cowan was eventually captured in the western desert while on an outing as a passenger in a tank. An army officer, I presume the tanks commander, told me that they suddenly found themselves surrounded by German tanks and the German squadron commander dismounted and was strolling across the desert to receive their surrender. Admiral Cowan asked if it was the intention of the British tank crew to give in without a fight and on being told that there was obviously nothing else to do said, "I'm not going to" and promptly drew his revolver and took a pot shot at the German officer, who did not flinch.

The little Admiral was quickly restrained by the tank crew, who assumed they would not be blown to pieces but to their great relief the German officer took it all as a joke. Having been conveyed to a prisoner of war camp in Italy the Admiral spent most of his time telling his fellow prisoners they simply must escape or they were not doing their duty. I got the impression that my informant thought the whole thing a bit too much like Captain Marryat and I rather sympathised with the navy, if that is what they had to put up with. I am happy to say that Admiral Cowan was exchanged or released on account of his age and seniority and was soon back in business again, training with commandos in England. There can be little doubt that he must have been a re-incarnation of one of Nelson's band of brothers, if not the great man himself. Of course, he died in his bed like so many who have looked for a glorious death.

Ismailia was an odd outpost of war, not quite in it and not quite out of it, as far as danger was concerned, although it must be emphasised that the men dealing with the magnetic mines in the canal daily performed deeds of ice cold heroism. Nevertheless, Admiral Pipon was wont to remark that the Italian forces were sadly lacking in enterprise. This, I may say, before the limpet mine attacks on the fleet in Alexandria harbour. But when one saw the concourse of ships in Suez bay, the great quantities of war materials at Suez and Port Said and the comparative safety with which most of the ships were passed through the supremely vulnerable Suez canal, it would be difficult to disagree.

In November 1940 I received a cable to say that my wife had been taken ill with peritonitis and was on the danger list and for some days I did not know how she was getting on, although the Admiralty said I would be kept informed. Admiral Pipon was very good and said I could go home if it could be arranged

but at that stage of the war it was very difficult. Eventually I got more encouraging reports and the Admiral suggested that I should not go home unless it was decided that it was necessary for my wife's recovery. At the same time he put in train arrangements for a relief for me but it was clear that the Admiralty had no intention of providing one in the near future.

So life continued to be an odd mixture of social functions in which the canal company figured largely and feverish bursts of activity when some special operation was being mounted. One I remember was when a task force was being sent to British Somaliland to try and frustrate the Italian efforts in that part of the world and the troops, guns and ammunition were being embarked in the Great Bitter Lake. I was duty officer and all sorts of complex problems were arising. In addition, as signed officer I was dealing with a constant stream of urgent and important signals. This was all happening during the evening and night and at about ten o'clock Admiral Pipon and his Chief of Staff, Tony Simpson, arrived at Navy office to find out how things were going. I explained briefly what the problems were and what I had done. Admiral Pipon said "Are you quite happy about your ability to handle things, Flags?" "Yes, sir, as far as I can see. But if anything I am not sure about turns up, I will, of course, get in touch with you at once". "In that case we can go home and have a night-cap and go to bed, don't you think, Tony?" said the Admiral and as Tony Simpson, rather reluctantly, I thought, agreed, off they went. When I came off duty next morning the expedition had sailed and I felt that no matter what happened I must never let the Admiral down.)

Indeed, Admiral Pipon appeared to have a remarkable facility - not uncommon in Admirals, I must admit - for delegating responsibility in a way which would have generated instant ulcers in lesser men.

On one occasion, when I knew him very well, I was bold enough to say that I wondered on occasions how he could do it. He replied to the effect that he always assumed an officer was capable of doing the job the Admiralty had appointed him to do. Further that he would allow anyone to make one mistake and would not blame him for it. This I knew to be true and what is more that the Admiral invariably took the blame himself if a staff officer tripped up. But only once. On the second occasion the officer concerned ceased to be on the staff. It seemed to me to be an excellent way to get the best out of people and I have never held much of an opinion of the man who says he must do the job himself if he wants it done properly. He obviously cannot handle men.

The Commander in Chief, Admiral Cunningham, and his Chief of Staff, Admiral Willis, came to Ismailia on more than one occasion and it was impossible not to be impressed with the dynamic ability of these two quite dis-similar characters. On one occasion I had been for a short ride in the desert with Penelope and was striding down the hall of Admiralty house smacking my leg with a riding crop. Passing the sitting-room doors, which were wide open, I saw Admiral Cunningham and Admiral Willis in deep discussion with Admiral Pison. None of them looked up but as I put my foot on the stairs I heard Admiral Cunningham say, "Who was that, James?" and Admiral Pison's reply, "That's my flag Lieutenant. Dashing fellow on a horse. What were you saying?" I expected an immediate appointment to some fearful job on the Tobruk run by return of post but in fact the C in C was very friendly when I took him to the aerodrome to return to Alexandria and while taking advantage of a short wait he said, "When the war is over I think I shall write a book entitled 'Airfields I have peed on'".

One of the odd jobs I had to do was report on the camouflage of the cable stations at Port Said and Suez from the air, so on the Admiral's instructions I asked *the* Group Captain ~~Go~~, who commanded the local airfield, if I could have a flight over the canal for the purpose. He agreed cheerfully and added "What is more, I will take you up myself, Flags".

When I arrived at the airfield and went into the mess I was received with sympathetic noises and expressions of concern by the R.A.F. types I knew.

"The old man hasn't flown a Blenheim for ages", was the general opinion, "and he was never very good in one, anyway. Better have a stiff drink before you go". Not very encouraging but typical R.A.F. banter, I thought, and shortly afterwards donned my parachute and boarded the plane, sitting in the co-pilot's seat next to the Group Captain. We took off quite comfortably and after a circuit headed south for Suez. I noticed my pilot was fiddling about with a handle in the space between our seats and after a bit he said, "I can't get the undercart up, this handle seems to have jammed. You have a go".

After a certain amount of trial and error I discovered a catch holding the handle and, on moving this, up it came and so did the under-carriage. Then a moment later the Group Captain said, "Good God, look at that, the fuel tanks are empty". Certainly the gauges were at nought but I noticed a switch alongside and heaving made this the needles went over to full and another crisis passed. My confidence was somewhat shaken. Then the rear gunner came through on the intercom and said there was no power on his turret so he could not function. That was soon remedied. Over ~~Alen~~ Suir a Very's ~~Light~~ Light soared into the air and the Group Captain said, "Oh yes we should make the

recognition signal or they may fire at us". I asked what it was and he replied that he did not know but it must be written down somewhere. I could not find it so he said, "Well, fire a couple of Very's lights anyway". It took me some time to find the lights and the pistol and work out how it functioned through the side of the 'plane. I fired a white and a red and then gave them a green for good measure. It seemed to satisfy Abu Suir, which must mean something. After this life was quite quiet for a bit as we stooged around over Suez and I made notes on the cable house. Then we turned and flew all along the canal to Port Said. A most interesting trip.

But on our return to Ismailia I thought I noticed a slight frown of concentration on the Group Captain's face. We approached the airfield from way out over the Sinai shore but even so failed to make contact and came round again. And again..

By this time I was beginning to realise the stiff drink on departure was not entirely a joke and as we did an almighty bounce back into the air on our third attempt, I wondered why the Group Captain had decided to fly at all.

The next time it was obviously now or never and my pilot put her down with the obvious intention that she should stay down, even if it were deep down. Unfortunately just as we came in another aircraft either landed or took off and we skimmed by far too close for comfort. But we landed.

The rear gunner had to be assisted from his cockpit, a badly shocked man, and had I known more about flying I daresay I would have been a nervous wreck. As it was I took the stiff drink offered and thanked the Group Captain for a most interesting trip, which indeed it was!

At intervals Admiral Pipon visited Port Said and Suez to confer with the Naval Officer in Charge and inspect the establishment. One day at Port Said we were up on the signal tower overlooking the harbour when one of the contraband control ships started to call up, using a daylight signalling projector. The Chief Yeoman immediately raised his glass and motioned to a signalman to reply but the admiral said, "Never mind, Chief Yeoman, the Flag Lieutenant will read the signal", with what I thought to be a slightly quizzical look at me. As usual, when in attendance on these occasions, I had my telescope under my arm and although I had done very little visual signalling for some time, decided that honour demanded that I should make a shot at it. Word by word and concentrating very hard, I read out,

"Has - the - old - geyser - arrived - yet".

Like a flash the Admiral barked out,

"Reply - Yes he has and you will be in hot water when he comes on board".

Signalling repartee is a naval tradition and there are many recorded gems. In fact, there is a book full of them, I believe. One of the best concerns the two British ^{cr}users being pursued by the whole Italian fleet. As they came under fire the leader signalled:

"Don't look round, I think we are being followed".

Admiral Pipon once forgot that he had invited Commander Alec Fearn to lunch and when Fearn arrived at the house the Maltese steward told him we had nearly finished our meal, so he went away again. When he got back to his station at Genifa he sent a signal to the admiral,

"Thank you for a delightful meal".

The admiral, while admitting his fault, thought this rather a cheek on Fearn's part and said to me,

"What shall we reply, Flags?" We must put him in his place."

"How about 'Not at all. I have never enjoyed your company so much!'" The admiral agreed and the signal was sent. Fearn replied, "You win".

Communications by teleprinter have been mentioned but they were easy compared with telephoning, which worked on two separate systems, the Canal Company's own and the state system. Some numbers could ~~only~~ be reached on both systems and others only on one or the other. As with teleprinter lines, the insulation was poor and subject to all sorts of idiosyncrasies. To get a call through to R.A. Alexandria at Ras-el-Tin could easily take an hour and on one occasion I was trying to get through to some place in the western desert and after three hours I had still failed to get beyond Daba. Every time I got Daba and asked for my number there would be a click and the line would go dead. I was back to Ismailia again. I have seen a tough retired Royal Marine literally in tears at the switchboard through sheer frustration. Apart from line difficulties one would get operators speaking French, Egyptian or some completely unidentified tongue.

However close the war came to Ismailia and however bad the news in the Mediterranean and at home - and at times it was very bad, of course - there was still a certain amount of social life, if only to keep the beautiful Hungarian spies harmlessly employed. One officer became completely enamoured of a lovely young female reputed to be willing to pay any price for a morsel of secret information. Eventually after several warnings he was told that he was being sent home and she was being deported whereupon he asked permission to marry her first. I do not think he would have got away with that anyway but I believe it was pointed out that he was married already. With so many different nationalities in Egypt, it is fairly certain that the enemy was normally better informed of what was going on than we were.

One incident brought to light a quite incredible state of affairs in the canal zone. The admiralty made a signal to S.B.N.~~S~~.S.C.A. (usually known as 'Snobsca'), saying that the enemy appeared to get immediate information on the transit of warships through the canal and that the source must be found and dealt with at once. Admiral Pipon said that it must be the canal company who were allowed, believe it or not, to transmit details of canal traffic and receipts to France, then in German hands. I went to see the Chief de Transit and asked if I could see a typical daily report as made to the French Headquarters of the company. Amongst details of the merchant ships passing through was 1.B.B. 2 B.C. 1 B.D. and it did not need a cypher/^{expert} to translate that into 1 British battleship, 2 British cruisers, 1 British destroyer. Different arrangements were made promptly but who knows how many methods of communication they had and how many^{of} those concerned were really on our side?

By another strange co-incidence, on the day Italy declared war one of our cable ships had picked up and was repairing the main cable between Egypt and Great Britain. The Italians promptly cut it and from then on everything had to be sent by W/T or by cable round the world via Singapore and America. It has often seemed to me that we ended up on the winning side, not because of our efforts but in spite of them. As Admiral Cunningham suggested on one occasion, the Lord appeared to be somewhat unfairly on our side!

I have mentioned that Colonel Geoffrey Keyes stayed with us at Ismailia. Admiral Pipon was a friend of his father, who was the original Chief of Combined Operations. Geoffrey was a very quiet, charming man and after he left he wrote me a very pleasant letter thanking me for looking after him during his stay. Within a few weeks he had been killed in the daring raid on Rommel's

headquarters and I mourned a very gallant soldier. His younger brother, who was in the navy, also came to Ismailia but he was a very different type of person and some of his exploits tended to irritate Admiral Pipon, amongst others.

All our guests were not male and we had one very attractive girl, who stayed with us for some time. So long, in fact, that the Admiral said to me "One should never invite a guest without making it quite clear how long they will be welcome. She has been here too long, Flags. We must get rid of her". Next day he announced that he was going to Alexandria to see the C in C and that Penelope was going with him. Millicent, our guest, who was waiting for a divorce, immediately protested that she could not be left alone in the house with me, which was undoubtedly why the Admiral had done it. But she resolutely refused to be panicked in to going and at last the Admiral said "Well I'll ask Prudence Haines (an R.A.F. officer's wife) if she will come and chaperone you - or rather Flags. He is the one I think in need of protection!" So I found myself being looked after by two extremely charming females, both of whom were determined to show how good they were at running the house. Unfortunately Prudence went down with chicken-pox and was really rather ill so she was not able to function satisfactorily as a chaperone.

Indeed, there were all sorts of occupational hazards to being a Flag Lieutenant and I think I managed to get a taste of most of them.

One night I had been to a party to which the Admiral and Penelope had not been invited and as all our staff slept in quarters at the bottom of the garden, detached from the house,

I asked the Admiral if I could have a key as I should be late. I never carried a key to the house normally. The Admiral agreed and said, "Don't make a noise when you come in, I've got a bit of a headache".

The party was a great success and I arrived back at Admiralty house about one o'clock in the morning, only to find I had lost the key. I did not fancy banging on the door, particularly in view of the Admiral's remarks, so after surveying the situation for some time I decided to shin up one of the iron pillars supporting the verandah, which ran all round the first floor. I chose a pillar immediately below my room but I realised my difficulties would not be over when I gained the verandah as all the doors and windows had wooden jalousies, bolted on the inside, but I would have to deal with that problem in due course. So I started climbing and had just reached the top of the pillar with my head level with the verandah when a voice below said 'Min dar?' and I felt the barrel of a musket poked at my backside. It was our Egyptian guard, who I had completely forgotten. Of course, I made the classic reply,

"It's only me!" which he seemed to consider insufficient and gave me another poke. When I indicated that I would come down he made a gesture of dissent, also with his musket, which looked like some early blunderbuss and I felt must be loaded with rusty nails.

Penelope's room was next to mine so throwing caution to the winds I called to her for help. Almost at once the jalousie doors flung open and Pen appeared brandishing a large vase. It looked as if I was being attacked on two fronts. I felt remarkably silly and helpless. But Pen said calmly,

"Oh, its you Flags" as if I was in the habit of coming home that way and she dismissed the guard with a word of praise and helped me over the rail to safety.

"Now I've got to get into my room", I said, after expressing my very heartfelt thanks.

"Well that's easy enough, you can come through mine", said Pen as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Of course, it happened. Just as we got into Pen's room, the door opened and in walked the Admiral, who quite naturally requested an explanation of what was going on. My story seemed to satisfy, if not please him, and it would be nice to be able to say that that was the last I heard of it but was it, hell! At every luncheon and dinner party for weeks to come, when there was a lull in the conversation so all could hear, the Admiral would say,

"I heard a noise in my daughter's room the other night and when I went to investigate, who did I find there but the Flag Lieutenant. At two o'clock in the morning!"

I felt I paid dearly for that episode and I cannot say that Penelope looked very pleased.

Most of the British girls at Ismailia were daughters of service people or were nurses and quite a number married during the time I was there. Of these, a large proportion were also widowed as their husbands, R.A.F. officers, were shot down in unequal combat. We were woefully short of planes. In fact the Blenheims were doing duty as bombers, fighters and reconnaissance planes in the early stages of the war. These young wives were wonderfully brave and a splendid example of steadfast loyalty to their country. At times since I have wondered whether the country really deserved the devotion it got. Certainly the young generation today who are, we are told, so woefully misunderstood, show little sign of being cast in the same mould. If similar trials came their way they will have to search deeply for the necessary fortitude and beliefs. These

These ideas may be dismissed as 'old hat' but an old hat is a comforting thing to wear in a blizzard.

One of the most interesting establishments at Ismailia was known as the 'House of Lords' and its inmates were:- Lord Aylwin, who was Naval Control Service Officer, the Earl of Carlisle, who was on his staff, Gerald Radcliffe, who was a staff officer and the Hon. William Waldorf Astor, who was Intelligence Officer. I dined with this august company once or twice and the whole atmosphere was rather like that of the Carlton Club. Later on the establishment broke up as most of the inmates ^{took} ~~had~~ houses of their own.

Bill Astor was a most amusing companion and had a somewhat earthy sense of humour. One morning I arrived at Navy Office to take over from him as duty officer and found he had already gone home to change. His very attractive secretary, Hazel Chadwick, rather diffidently handed me a piece of paper saying,

"This is Bill's turn-over".

On the paper was a quite competent sketch of a gentleman in robes and coronet relieving himself in what was clearly the Suez canal alongside a board saying "Kilometer 102". This I had no difficulty in interpreting as a message to say that the 'British Lord' (a tanker) was stopped and making water at Kilometer 102, the inference being that she had been mined, which proved to be the case.

Bill Astor joined forces with another R.N.V.R. Lieutenant, Bill Mitchell, when the 'House of Lords' broke up and I became friendly with both of them. Bill Mitchell in particular was very helpful to me later on when he was at the Admiralty and he is yet another very pleasant person with whom I am sorry to have lost touch.

All the while our army in the Western desert was advancing or retreating and Tobruk was being invested or relieved. Ships would transit the canal, some bound out of the Mediterranean with all their guns shot out, bound for home and a refit. Others would transit north to take their place. By now aircraft carriers arrived and were soon in action in or around Malta and the tragedy of Greece came and went. King George of Greece came to Ismailia and I was introduced and shook hands after Admiral Pipon.

A post mortem ^{the loss of} on Crete was held in Ismailia and I well remember a major of Royal Marines making a striking contribution in which he disagreed with most of the action taken. I must admit he convinced me that we had hardly made the best use of our resources.

From a naval point of view things had gone from bad to worse and I believe it was true to say that at one time our fleet was reduced to two damaged battleships sitting on the bottom of Alexandria harbour.

I heard that as the news of the sinking of one war ship after another in the battle for Crete arrived at the flagship "Warspite" in Alexandria, Admiral Cunningham called a staff meeting. It was about two o'clock in the morning. The Captain of the Fleet arrived in a gorgeous silk dressing-gown decorated with dragons, sleepy-eyed and without his teeth. Cunningham said, "You had better go back and put your teeth in, Aubrey. You are going to want to gnash 'em when you hear what I have to tell you".

A.B. Cunningham was a great admiral, certainly fitted to take his place with the greatest our one-time maritime nation has produced. He did not suffer fools, or for that matter,

Prime Ministers, gladly. When Churchill sent him a signal congratulating him on the award of a high decoration, he replied curtly,

"Thank you. I would rather have had a flotilla of destroyers".

More and more I felt the urge to get back to a seafaring job. I was still only 37 years of age and the battle of the Atlantic was at its height. A young lieutenant in "Warspite" named Taylor had been suggested as a suitable relief and after vetting by Admiral Pipon had been detailed. He came to Ismailia to be given a short introduction to his duties and in August 1941 I reluctantly said goodbye to Admiral Pipon and Penelope. We were by then firm friends and I count myself more than lucky to have served such an efficient and understanding master.