

CHAPTER XVCAPTAIN OF 'SLUNA'

I left Ismailia for Cairo, where I had dinner with Prudence Haines - now a widow - and received messages for her father, Colonel Paxton, who was commanding the troops in Khartoum. Next morning I boarded a flying boat on the Nile and we took off in showers of spray, circling over the old city and heading for the pyramids. Owing to some mishap, we did not reach Khartoum that day, as expected, but came down on the Nile at Wadi Halfa, where we slept in tents which we shared with scorpions. We took off again early next day and arrived at Khartoum, where I made my number to Colonel Paxton.

Early in the afternoon I boarded a Hudson aircraft piloted by a Captain Mustard, which appeared to be a very suitable name. After the passengers were in their seats an enormous chunk of aero-engine was manoeuvred into the plane, effectively preventing rapid exit by the only door. Even Captain Mustard seemed somewhat dubious about this rather weighty addition and said, "I suppose I can get her off the ground in this heat", and indeed the air was lifeless and burning hot. At the end of the hard sand runway the engines were roared up until the plane shivered and creaked and then off we went. But rise she would not and we ground to a halt not very far from the boundary fence with the Nile just across the way. Round we went and trundled back to the end of the runway, by which time we were all rather subdued. Once again the engines roared and away we went, bumping and bouncing along in anything but reassuring fashion. This time there was no stopping and we came unstuck a bare hundred yards from the fence and skimmed across the Nile before making a slow turn to climb.

Some hours later, having flown over what appeared to be limitless arid desert with no sign of vegetation, we came down at El Fasher, a staging post in the middle of nowhere at all. Here, because I had not had a yellow fever inoculation, I was incarcerated in an 'anti-amoral' enclosure. This had nothing to do with my mode of life, I hasten to add. Possibly I got the name wrong.

The airport at El Fasher was in constant use as a staging post for lease-lend aircraft being flown across Africa to Egypt and round the perimeter of the airfield were a number of wrecked planes - Marylands, I believe - which looked unlikely to reach their destination. A young American air force captain travelling with us said, "Gee, we shall have to speed up production if the enemy are as good at writing off our aircraft as our friends seem to be!"

El Fasher boasted a tame lion and the story goes that two mechanics were working on a plane and the one on the ground kept complaining that the pet lion was tearing his trousers. After a bit the other mechanic perched up high on an engine said,

"Bob, I hate to tell you this, but our lion is in his cage across the way!"

From El Fasher we flew next morning to Maidugari in the Chad area and then from there set off for Lagos. As we approached the coast a very, very faint tinge of green began to appear below us and this gradually increased in strength until eventually we actually saw trees. Trees in little clumps with round native thatched huts, which quickly became more common and then, in low cloud and beating rain we made our approach over the harbour and ships masts to the airfield at Lagos.

I did not like Lagos. There is a tremendous difference between West Africa and the East Africa I knew so well. Unfortunately we had to wait some days for a clipper from Bermuda to take us on and there was already something of a waiting list. With my American friend, who shared a room in the hotel with me, I went to the races and we generally whiled away the time as best we could. I had a slight touch of fever and felt far from robust.

One day at the races was enlivened by the antics of a witch doctor in attendance on a native chief who was comfortably installed in a stand with his retinue. All wore most colourful garments, the

chief sporting a top hat liberally laced with gold braid. Before each race the witch doctor, who may have been known as 'financial adviser', threw the bones and carried out other mystic rites to determine the winner. Oddly enough, he appeared to be reasonably successful and the fat, jolly chief shook like a jelly with delighted mirth when he won. I don't know what penalties his adviser incurred when his forecast was inaccurate.

Much to our surprise, we were both put on the first Clipper to arrive and with a very mixed crowd of passengers, about fifty, I think, we took off for Bathurst in Gambia. Here we spent the night on board the plane.

Taking off from the wide river at Bathurst we flew more or less parallel to the African coast at a comparatively low altitude and were soon abreast of Dakar, where we could see the French battleship, 'Richelieu'. Our captain, a very experienced pilot with a Dutch-sounding name, which I cannot remember, kept a wary eye out for planes as he said it was not unknown for the French to buzz or even attack any passing aircraft. He also said the leg from Bathurst to Lisbon was the longest they flew - longer than the Atlantic crossing from Foynes to Gander in Newfoundland - about 2,000 miles, in fact.

We got a wonderful view of Lisbon and the River Tagus as we approached and having got ashore I immediately contacted a relation of Admiral Pison's, Marcus Cheke, who was a senior member of the British Embassy staff. I was invited to lunch at Estoril and afterwards we were entertained by a rather amusing, elderly man with some very expert conjuring. It was a delightful change from the last week or so, during which comfort had not been high on the list and apart from my American friend, the company not very entertaining. Yet here was a sudden transition to a very elegant house, charming people, delicious food and an entirely civilised atmosphere. It did not last for long unfortunately.

The next leg of our trip from Lisbon to Foynes in Ireland was generally considered somewhat hazardous, as Focke-Wulf patrols were usually on the prowl for unarmed aircraft and quite a number had been shot down, Leslie Howard, the actor, included one of them.

We took off after dark, the long flare path of bobbing floats making an eerie glow on the jet black water of the Tagus. It seemed to be a very long run and I think our pilot had quite a job to get her unstuck; but she came off at last and we banked away seawards and up into the comparative safety of the night air.

Not long afterwards our captain came aft into the little forward compartment that half a dozen of us, all navy or air force, were occupying. In his hand he had a tray with half a dozen tumblers, each with a very large tot of whisky.

"We are now in enemy territory" he said, "And in the absence of any arms with which to defend ourselves, I thought you might care to have the best substitute we can offer". It was a most kind thought and we drank health to him and his crew with some warmth. I think we all slept quite well.

At first light we were approaching the south-west corner of Ireland and this was our most vulnerable time. But Ireland's lush greenery came smiling to meet us and we were soon nosing down onto the broad waters of the Shannon.

First man on board was an Irish customs officer and our large contingent of R.A.F. officers, mostly recovering from wounds, who had not had the advantage of our whisky the night before, immediately enquired as to whether he had brought any whisky with him.

"Whisky", he says, "And where would we be getting whisky in these days?"

"What about all this poteen we hear about?" says one young

flying officer (heavily disguised as a civilian, of course, since he was in a neutral country).

"Poteen is it?" says the customs man, "Sure we never drink poteen. We only give it to our friends!" We had no doubt we had arrived in Ireland.

Having got ashore, we had to pass the Immigration Authorities. All serving personnel had been given civilian passports and told not to wear any *articles* of uniform. Most of the R.A.F. contingent had merely removed insignia ~~and~~ badges of rank but could hardly have been taken for anything but what they were, except by a blind man. Many were in fact carrying R.A.F. greatcoats.

I was at the end of a line of about a dozen R.A.F. pilots, a number of whom showed obvious signs of combat. As each approached the Irish immigration officer he produced a passport and in each case the routine was identical.

"This is your passport Mr. X?"

"Yes"

"You are, I see, an engineer"

"Yes"

"Thank you Mr. X"

So it went on until he came to the man ahead of me, a very young pilot who had lost one arm at the elbow. He had some difficulty in managing his greatcoat so that the insignia became clearly visible. The routine started.

"This is your passport, Mr. X?"

"Yes"

"You are an engineer?"

"Yes" The young officer's mind was obviously miles away and he held out his hand for the passport. The patient immigration officer had obviously had enough.

"What sort of an engineer are you, Mr. X?"

This brought the young pilot back to earth with a rush and he looked round wildly for inspiration.

"Oh", he said at last, "I screw up nuts and bolts and things". The Irishman looked at him in disgust.

"And a very interesting occupation, if I may say so", and he slapped the passport in his hand. He hardly looked at me or my passport. I was a 'Company Director'.

We were driven to the Adare Arms Hotel, where we had a splendid breakfast and then embarked in a coach to drive to Dublin airport. On the way we frequently passed railway stations, all clean and newly painted and looking like a model railway. I said to our driver that I had rarely seen such a neat, efficient looking railway and asked how often the trains ran.

"Why never at all", he said pityingly. "There is no coal at all, at all. But its the best railroad you'll ever see".

In Dublin we were given a sumptuous lunch in the Gresham Hotel, pretty well the best meal I had ~~had~~ in six year's of war and then we were driven to the airfield. Here we embarked in a Frobisher aircraft which had all the windows blacked out for security reasons. This had an astonishing effect on our R.A.F. pilots, who said they could not stand taking off without knowing what was going on and indeed they really seemed to be in a high state of nerves. By ~~the~~ time I had given up worrying about how, when or where I just travelled and did not even bother to hope for the best. We took off quite safely and after a short flight, landed at Whitchurch near Bristol, where we landed in the late afternoon.

Owing to a misunderstanding, I did not leave the airfield until long after everyone else and arrived in Bristol after the last train to Worcester had gone. My family were then living at Tenbury Wells with my wife's parents. The idea of spending a night in Bristol when so near home, or at least near my family, was not at all to my

liking so I wandered round the station enquiring as to whether there were any goods trains in that direction, in the hope that I could persuade a guard or engine-driver to give me a lift. As usually happens, if one is persistent enough, I was lucky and an engine-driver told me there was a train for munition works~~es~~ leaving Bristol for Worcester about 1.0 a.m. I found this and got aboard in company with a rather uninhibited lot of female munition workers. It was a lively journey.

Somewhere around three o'clock in the morning we arrived at Worcester and I then started enquiries as to how I could get to Tenbury Wells, some twenty miles away. A friendly railway man suggested asking one of the postmen who were collecting mails and I soon found myself talking to the man who made the delivery to Tenbury. I told him my story and he agreed to take me in his little 5 cwt. ~~van~~. "You'll have to ~~lie~~ low in the back, though", he said, "I have to go ~~back~~ to the Post Office first". So I got in the back behind some mail bags and remained there until we were clear of Worcester.

After a long journey taking in various farms, where we dropped not only letters but bags of meal and various other items not officially forwarded by H.M. Post Office, I eventually arrived at Tenbury Wells at five o'clock on an August morning. My younger daughter, Angela, now aged seven, let me in without any expression of surprise. It was nearly two years since I last saw her.

My wife seemed to have made a good recovery from her nearly fatal illness but really needed a 'tidying-up' operation as the emergency one had covered only what was necessary to save her life. Unfortunately, she did not have this done until fifteen years later, during which time she suffered a great deal of probably un-necessary pain.

Apart from rationing, there was not much to remind one of war in Tenbury Wells and I had a very pleasant and peaceful three or four weeks leave. I had asked for a seagoing command and hoped to get a corvette but My Lords seemed to think that rather presumptuous after two years in Egypt and appointed me to one of the new Admiralty trawlers, which were rather like a corvette in miniature. This ship was still building on the Humber and I was sent on an anti-submarine course at Campbeltown first. My journey from Campbeltown to Hull was a long and tiring one. My train started late and ran intermittently with air raids in progress all over the place. After a very uncomfortable night - there were no sleepers on the train - I awoke with a stiff neck in the early hours of the morning and enquired of the guard as to where we were. "I have no idea", he confessed. "We have been shunted about all over England and don't seem to be getting any nearer Darlington than we were two hours ago". But we arrived at Hull sometime during the morning after a journey of about 14 hours.

Here I was fortunate in meeting an R.N.V.R. Lieutenant named Lough-Lacey, who was an old friend of friends of mine in Ismailia. He soon found me some very excellent digs, at Kirkella, just outside Hull, with a very pleasant young married couple named Brooksbanks.

"Sluna" was fitting out in the docks and her 1st Lieutenant, named Smith, and one or two key members of the crew were already standing by.

I suggested to my wife that she should travel to Hull and see my new command and rather rashly she agreed to do so. It was a formidable war-time journey from Tenbury-Wells in Worcester to Hull and when I went to meet her train early in the evening I was told it had been delayed. When it did arrive an air raid of some consequence was in progress and the station was completely blacked out. I stood by the ticket collector and hoped I would be able to

recognise my wife by the light of the dim blue lamp he was holding. Most of the passengers shot by without bothering about tickets as various bits and pieces were hitting the station roof and an occasional 'crump' indicated something larger in the vicinity.

I cannot remember quite how I did it but I grabbed my wife as she surged past with her fellow passengers and somehow or other we got to Kirkella, where Mrs Brooksbanks had a splendid meal ready complete with her delicious Yorkshire pudding. Jimmy Brooksbank the budgerigar contributed to our welcome. But the raid or raids went on most of the night, the house shaking with the reverberations and the room lighting up eerily with the flashes. I think my wife would have preferred to have been in Tenbury Wells but next day she inspected and approved my ship, which in fact I think she thought rather tiny.

'Sluna' was commissioned with due ceremony and a rather bleak communion service on the dirty quayside in drizzling rain. We did gunnery and other trials, embarked our 'duty free' and prepared to sail for what was as yet to me an unknown destination.

We dropped down the Humber at dusk and anchored under the shelter of Spurn to await the arrival of a northbound convoy, which we were to join. About midnight the German planes came in again on a mining raid of the river. It was quite like old Suez canal times. It was not a very peaceful night.

At first light we got under way and joined the convoy off the mouth of the Humber. As we steamed out a number of magnetic (we assumed) mines went off in close proximity. What surprised us was the fact that they appeared to have detonated themselves as there were no other ships nearer than 'Sluna'.

It was quite a large convoy and the weather was bad. We were detached off the mouth of the Firth of Forth and proceeded to Port Edgar,

where we became attached to H.M.S. 'Lochinvar', the minesweeping school. This was very good value and we spent a week or more running our oropesa sweeps and generally getting used to our sweeping gear. My number one, Smith, had done a fair amount of sweeping and although a farmer by trade, inclination and appearance, he was not a bad seaman. My navigator was a young sub-Lieutenant named Cole and the other sub^{was} a rather dandified young gentleman, whose name I have forgotten. He was by no means a bad hand, however, and I have no doubt did well as he gained in experience and stature. Cole was a schoolmaster and suffered agonies from sea-sickness. Yet he never gave in and I vividly recall how ghastly he looked after a prolonged spell of bad weather, having eaten nothing for some days, with great dark rings under his hollow eyes. Some months after I left 'Sluna' he wrote to me to say he had been through a cyclone in the Indian ocean and had not been sick! He was as proud as if he had won a D.S.O.

My crew, a number of whom were fishermen, put down the large amount of bad weather we had in 'Sluna' to the fact that I had them over the side scrubbing off the dirty marks from the Humber. "No good ever comes of scrubbing a ship's side" they insisted. You have only to look at the average trawler to see that this is a widely held belief.

Working out of Port Edgar naturally reminded me of my destroyer days in 'Viceroy', but I could not help comparing 'Sluna's' pedestrian rate of progress with the dash and expertise of the 2nd Flotilla.

At the end of our minesweeping work-up we sailed down the Firth of Forth to Methil, where we were supposed to pick up two L.S.T's and escort them to Aberdeen. Goodness only knows what they were going there for. We never learned, as they did not show up and we joined a convoy bound north with instructions to go into Aberdeen where we would be supplied with charts for the rest of our passage. This was now disclosed as to Tobermory, a working-up establishment for escort vessels, officially H.M.S. Western Isles

and under the command of a retired Vice Admiral serving as a Commodore and known to all and sundry as 'Monkey' Stephenson. He had the reputation of being a holy terror who put everybody through the hoop and obtained a high standard of efficiency.

'Sluna' had yet to be subjected to the trials of Tobermory and once more we went out into a gale of wind which made things pretty uncomfortable. When we were detached off Aberdeen there was a big swell running in from the north-east and with another trawler now under my command we stood in towards the shore in very bad visibility.

Gradually the seas began to pile up astern and it looked as if we were going to have a nasty time entering the harbour - if we could find the entrance. Suddenly out of the murk a signal lamp started to blink high up on our port bow.

"Harbour closed. Proceed to Scapa Flow, sir," reported the signalman on watch.

"How kind. I suppose they know we haven't any charts" I remarked and round we went and back into the swept channel. The other trawler, 'Rosamund', followed us round and her captain, who was a trawler skipper in peace time, signalled 'I thought so'. He told me afterwards he was just trying to make up his mind whether to follow me in or turn back when the shore signal station told us the harbour was closed.

To begin with all was well. The swept channel was marked by lighted buoys and for some time we were able to see from one buoy to the next. But during the middle watch, after I had turned over the bridge to No. 1, he suddenly found that the next buoy did not show up. I had given him a course to Duncansby Head and with 'Sluna' on this he continued for some time - I was in my cabin, dozing in a chair when the voice pipe from the bridge gave its throaty whistle. I answered it.

"Yes?"

"We've lost the swept channel buoys, sir, and I have seen what I think is a shore light close on our port beam. The echo sounder shows three fathoms".

"Hard-a-starboard and put her on the reciprocal course. I'm coming up".

On the bridge it was as dark as the inside of a bowler hat. There was no sign of any lights anywhere. The echo sounder appeared to have the hiccups.

"We were closing the shore at a very fine angle", said No. I "Don't you think we ought to head straight out to sea?"

"Where is straight out to sea? We don't know. All we know is that if the original course did bring her inshore, the reciprocal ought to take her out again, so we will leave her on that until daylight".

At daylight we were in a deserted sea with an unbroken horizon all round us. I put the ship back on her original course. An hour or two later a large convoy appeared over the horizon. As the leading destroyer on the seaward side approached us I said to the signalman,

"Make to her. Can you give me a bearing and distance of Duncansby Head?"

Number I, who had come up on the bridge a moment or two earlier exclaimed in horror,

"You can't do that, sir, he'll think we don't know where we are!"

"Well, do we?" I asked. "I think I know but if your suggestion that we were nearly ashore was correct, then I don't. It never pays to stand on your dignity at sea in these circumstances".

By this time the destroyer had replied and the signalman was waiting with a grin to report,

"Destroyer's reply, sir. 'Wish to God I could, haven't seen anything for three days'."

We stood on and exactly when it should have done, making allowance for our time on the reciprocal course, Duncansby Head showed up fine on the port bow. I came to the conclusion that No. 1's shore light was in fact a swept channel buoy going by close-to and the echo sounder had chosen that moment to go haywire - or someone had altered the setting. Ever since that day I have always taught my navigation classes that it does not pay to stand on your dignity - and have told them the story to point the moral.

Having entered the Pentland firth, a cross-grained stretch of water I had learned to treat with respect in my destroyer days, I decided to put in to Scrabster on the mainland rather than join most of the British fleet at Scapa, which was somewhat out of my way to Tobermory. 'Sluna' had some condenser trouble and we were very short of fresh water for drinking, as well as for the boilers. We did not get much of a welcome in Scrabster and although we eventually got some water we were drinking some pretty foul stuff before it arrived.

We sailed again after about two days in Scrabster and made our way along the north coast of Scotland and round Cape Wrath. We saw very little of any other vessels but met a small convoy in the Minches. Then Ardnamurchan point showed up to port and we altered course for the Sound of Mull. No. 1 and I discussed a plan of campaign to deal with the possible pitfalls 'Monkey' Stephenson might have prepared for us.

As we entered the little loch at Tobermory we received berthing instructions by lamp from 'Western Isles' and having rehearsed the drill we did not make a bad shot of picking up our buoy and shackling on our cable. As arranged with No. 1, one of our small boats was in the water as soon as mooring was completed and a rather scratch crew rowed me straight over to "Western Isles" to make my number to the great man.

If he was impressed with this piece of seamanship, he did not show it but welcomed 'Sluna' in quite friendly fashion and said, in effect, our trials would start tomorrow. From stories I had heard, I assumed this was a way of lulling us into a false sense of security and that he would probably board us in the night, sound the alarm gongs and throw the whole ship into the utmost confusion.

It might be as well to emphasise here that 'Sluna' had no power boats and any boat work was carried out under oars. We had no sails, either. This meant that in an open anchorage like the Tail of the Bank in the Clyde or even in Milford Haven, we were virtually cut off from the shore in bad weather and in fact on more than one occasion we were marooned for some days at a time. All the same, my time in 'Roger Bick' at Swansea proved of great value and as a result of studying Skippers Hamilton and Screech at work I was able to coax 'Sluna' in and out of odd places I would not have looked at otherwise.

Tobermory was much as predicted. Every day we got a schedule of activities from improving on night vision to shore raids, full calibre shoots and lots of anti-submarine work with real submarines to practise on. Our usual sparring partner was Dutch and it must have been a pretty boring job for the crew, being chased up and down the Inner Hebrides by enthusiastic amateurs.

One could claim with truth that there was never a dull moment at Tobermory. Everybody was infected with the enthusiasm and driving force of the Commodore, "Western Isles". Those that were not did not stay long if they were on the staff or made a long stay if they were visitors. No ship left Tobermory unless 'Monkey' was satisfied with their determination and ability to find enemy submarines and sink them. Or, preferably, capture them intact. This last was always an interesting possibility and as far as I was concerned, preferable to drowning a lot of human beings, however

misguided. Not that I should have hesitated to do so if the opportunity arose as I knew only too well it was them - or our merchant seamen.

One day we got a signal to land an armed party to deal with "enemy paratroops" on shore. Trawlers are not really equipped for this sort of thing and such exercises were more a test of enterprise and ingenuity than anything else. We armed as many men as we could with the old fashioned rifles and pistols we had on board, unshipped our two .5" Browning machine guns from the bridge and sent the outfit away in our two small boats. Next thing we knew, the Commodore was coming on board and he gave instructions to recall our landing party. Fortunately, I had given instructions for one man to maintain communications or the whole lot would have disappeared into the blue, or at least until they found a pub.

When they returned, the first thing I noticed was that they had not brought the machine guns back with them. No doubt, finding them somewhat heavy to cart about they had dumped them on the shore and forgotten about them! Fortunately, 'Monkey' did not send us to aircraft action stations or he might have noticed that our entire anti-aircraft armament was missing. The guns were surreptitiously retrieved after dark.

All hands had been trained to put every ounce into all activities and one particular seaman named Harris became most enthusiastic, treating the whole proceeding as if he were competing in the Olympic Games. As he was loader number for one of the depth charge throwers, we were at some pains to restrain him from doing anything silly like firing the thing if he got there first, which he always did. "What ever you do", we enjoined, "wait for the leading hand". Sure enough the day came when the Commodore arrived on board and promptly exclaimed, "Action stations. Enemy submarine on the starboard beam".

Off went the alarms and like a bullet from a gun Able Seaman Harris shot up from the forward mess deck, hurtled along the alleyway leading aft and finally crashed to a shuddering stop against the starboard thrower, right at the feet of the great man.

"Well done", said the not easily impressed Commodore, "But don't just ~~be~~ there. What do you do next?"

Harris gave him a knowing leer, as one who is far too fly to be caught.

"I waits for Charlie", he said simply.

A great deal of the instructing at Tobermory was done by Warrant Officers. Mature, hardened seamen with many years of experience in their particular line of business. Our anti-submarine mentor had the fine old-salt name of Cringle and he certainly knew the ropes, if not the sails. In company with our friend 'Rosamund', we were despatched to Loch Lathaich on the west side of Mull to do our full scale attacks on the Dutch submarine.

The weather was bad, with a full gale from the south-west. I kept 'Sluna' inside the Treshnish Isles and Staffa for what shelter there was, which was not much. We were all glad to reach the calm of Loch Lathaich but there was very little swinging-room for two trawlers and I did not spend a very restful night.

Next day we spent hunting the submarine, which most of the time towed a small buoy. The asdic operator could not see this from his position and only Mr Cringle knew how good or bad our attacks were. We got a good look at Fingal's Cave on Staffa and a lone rock known as the 'Dutchman's cap'. Later on we carried out towing exercises and other manoeuvres to test the ability of the ship's company. It was hard, tiring work and over long hours but one soon began to feel very confident of the ship and her crew.

Then came the day when all vessels at Tobermory were to proceed to sea, together for a shoot.

In the pitch dark of the early morning with all ships darkened and not a glimmer of light showing it was an anxious time for all ship's captains as they let go from the buoys and turned their vessels short round to head out of the little loch. I remember two corvettes, White Swan and Snowdrop, I believe, were very close to us and I could clearly hear the helm and engine orders of their captains so at least I had some idea of what they were doing.

Suddenly from our engine-room came the most excruciating grinding clatter and our engines stopped. The engine-room voice-pipe whistle went.

"I've a wee bit trouble and will have to stop the engines for a while" said our Scottish engineer.

"Well you can't stop for long or we shall all be in trouble; there are ships all round us" I exclaimed a bit sharply.

The other vessels began to move off and left 'Sluna' on her own and a few minutes later the engine-room reported ready to proceed.

"Are you sure it won't happen again?" I asked. "We don't want a break-down off Ardnamurchan or even in the Sound of Mull for that matter".

"I think she'll do now" was the somewhat unconvincing answer but I could imagine the effect on 'Western Isles' if we did not go, so rang down for half-speed.

There was ~~fast~~ a glimmer of daylight as we passed through the narrow entrance to the Loch and as if to order the same terrifying cacophony brought the engines to a grinding halt once more. This time I was at the voice-pipe first.

"You can't stop here, we'll be aground in a matter of minutes" I shouted and told No. 1 to have an anchor ready to let go. Squeaking and grunting like pigs in torment, the engines started

up again and just about gave 'Sluna' enough way to turn and enter the loch again. About a couple of cables from our buoy the engines expired for the third time and, I had little doubt, last time. The boat's crew were ready and soon ran a line to the buoy. In the now fairly clear light of day we moored up safely.

"Fire in the magazine" came a shout and sure enough out through the mess deck hatch, which also lead to the magazine, came a burst of smoke. "Oh, no!" was not in common use at that time or I daresay I should have said it. As it was I slid down the ladders from the bridge and on arriving at the foredeck already found No. 1 at the flooding valves.

"Shall I flood, sir?" he asked.

"No, hang on a moment, I'll go down and have a look. But if you are in doubt, flood".

As I reached the open magazine hatch the gunner was just ahead of me and we dropped down through the smoke into the little lobby outside the actual magazines. Some odd bits of material were burning, not very fiercely and the gunner soon stamped these out and removed the debris in a bucket. The magazines themselves were not affected and the only signs were some scorching of the paintwork. I breathed a big sigh of relief. The 'on the spot' enquiry showed that our friend Harris had been lighting the messdeck stove and had used some 'cleaning fluid' (probably petrol - strictly forbidden on board) to assist the ignition. On lighting the fire there was a flash back to the 'cleaning fluid' bottle, which he promptly hurled away down the magazine hatch. This was open in conformity with Tobermory rules requiring all ships to be in the first state of readiness.

I was faced with a problem. If I reported the incident officially there would almost certainly have to be an enquiry and goodness knows what other gerfuffle. If I did not report it, the fact might leak out, in which case I would probably be courtmartialled.

I took the middle course and went over to 'Western Isles' and laid my problem on the lap of the commander (not the Commodore) and asked if he thought I should make a written report. Much to my relief he said 'No'. No damage had been done and everyone had learnt a lesson. I must deal with the culprit in my own way. Nevertheless it was a day I am never likely to forget.

After a very pleasant dinner in 'Western Isles' as the guest of our tormentor, I was informed that 'Sluna' had passed her tests and would be proceeding south to Plymouth. Exchanging signals of mutual good-will and appreciation with 'Western Isles' little 'Sluna' steamed away down the Sound of Mull in failing daylight bound, in the first instance, for Glasgow where it was required that we should have our de-gaussing checked.

At Glasgow on the de-gaussing range the officer in charge exclaimed in horror,

"Your coils are cross-connected" he said "You are just one big magnet. Lucky you have not been near any mines".

I recounted our experience coming out of the Humber, when mines were exploding inexplicably some distance away. He said this was quite likely due to our influence and that we were lucky all the same. I thought so too.

From Glasgow we sailed unaccompanied over to Bangor in Northern Ireland. I am not sure what happened to 'Rosamund' but I think we left her at Tobermory. I was sorry to part from her as her Captain was an extremely pleasant chap and her crew very friendly. She had a petty officer who had been a Sergeant-Major in the 1914-18 war. He was also a trawlerman, I think from Fleetwood.

At Bangor we found a convoy bound south and eventually put in to Milford Haven. As we rounded the Smalls a Hunt class destroyer passed us bound north. No sooner had we moored up in Milford Haven than she returned, listing and down by the stern, having been bombed by a Heinkel soon after she passed the convoy.

It seems strange that the Heinkel did not attack the convoy. As the escorts were mostly trawlers there would not have been much effective opposition.

We spent two or three days in Milford, during which time it blew a gale and made boat work impossible, even for harbour launches, so we were virtually marooned.

One night about midnight a large trawler, 'Pearl', came up and asked if they could lie alongside as they could not pick up a buoy in the sea that was running. I agreed and we got to know one another quite well, both here and at Plymouth. 'Pearl' was subsequently lost in the Atlantic, I believe with all hands.

Our next orders were to join a convoy from Cardiff somewhere east of Lundy and in company with 'Pearl' we sailed out into a very lumpy Bristol Channel. While we were 'dodging', waiting for the convoy to appear, 'Pearl' signalled to us,

'Your asdic dome looks nice and clean'.

The asdic dome was a metal bulge situated about a third of the way along our keel from forward. The antics necessary to bring the dome out clear of the water can be well imagined. I expect poor Cole, my navigator, was very sick.

The convoy arrived very late and the result was that all the shore lights, ordered for the minimum time for the convoy to pass, had been extinguished. 'Sluna' was on the port beam and seemed to me to be getting pushed nearer and nearer Hartland Point, no doubt because the escorts on the other side of the convoy were determined to keep off Lundy. Every now and then an enormous bulk would loom over us and sometimes we would find one ship close ahead and one close astern, both towering above 'Sluna'.

We were detached off Plymouth and were soon berthed in Millbay dock as part of the port minesweeping force. We were given weekend leave and I had a brief but happy re-union with my

family.

Sweeping was quite good fun and as senior officer of a group I usually had four or five ships under my command, although we did a certain amount of sweeping on our own. A fairly usual routine was to sweep the channel out of Plymouth in company with the magnetic-minesweepers and then proceed to sweep the channel to Fowey. We would spend the night there and sweep back and into Plymouth next day. Then we would sweep from Plymouth to Dartmouth, spend the night there and sweep back again next day. It was quite a pleasant existence. Both Fowey and Dartmouth are very attractive places and we enjoyed our night in port at each of them.

On one occasion I led a group of sweepers across Lyme Bay and met sweepers from Portland half-way. This was rather like cutting a tunnel through a hill from both sides; the question was, would we meet in the middle? I got a noon latitude and was reasonably certain of my position so when I found we were slightly north of the Portland group I signalled "You are south of the swept channel". When the other group commander asked 'How do you know?' I gave him a noon position by observation, which completely silenced him. In fact, we both made very good courses to end up so close with oropesas running. Normal navigation is nothing like so precise an art as some people make out.

After Christmas leave we had to have some modifications made to our sweeping davits and one or two other defects attended to. Air raids on Plymouth were a bit of a nuisance to us because we had to leave Millbay and anchor in Jennycliff Bay, as the Great Western railway would not have us in their docks during raids because of our depth charges. I always had a great affection for the G.W.R. until then.

Occasionally we had a full scale exercise and one of these was a night shoot. 'Sluna' was detailed to fire starshell and as we loosed off the first one I heard one of the gun's crew say,

"I think she has stuck on the re-coil". Although our twelve pounder platform was fairly close to the bridge I could not see what had happened but something made me sing out the appropriate order not to fire, "Check, check, check". A quick examination showed the gun had stuck in the recoil position and had it been possible to fire the next round, which is doubtful, it could have resulted in a bad accident. So we went into the dockyard for this to be put right.

Then about the end of March 1942, came the news that 'Sluna' was to proceed to Madagascar! Shortly before she was due to sail I was relieved by a Lieutenant R.N.V.R. and received an appointment to Combined Operations Headquarters on the staff of Lord Louis Mountbatten as Experimental Officer. (In view of possible other interpretations I may say this meant the officer responsible for experimental work!)

On arrival at C.O.H.Q. I found I was relieving a Commander, Royal Navy, and once more found myself plunged into an entirely new and strange occupation. Fortunately, my time on Admiral Phipps' staff had given me a good grounding in staff work and I was soon immersed in reams of paper on all sorts of astonishing subjects.