

CHAPTER XIXFINAL APPOINTMENT

Having settled my private business as recommended by my solicitors, on a basis of getting all my costs and a nominal amount for my shares, I reported once more to the Admiralty for an appointment. While waiting I was asked to give a lecture at C.O.H.Q. on my experiences in Russia and this was attended by most of the senior and junior officers and other interested parties, including the late Professor J.D. Bernal. The lecture went down very well and Professor Bernal congratulated me afterwards saying he had no idea I was such an accomplished lecturer, which I felt was praise indeed. I remember one of my colleagues on being asked how Bernal could be identified, replied,

"He's the man with a head like a lavatory brush", which was a fairly accurate description of Bernal's hair style, a fashion in which he was possibly some years ahead of his time.

I was offered one or two possible appointments, including that of executive officer of a naval supply ship at Leyte in the Pacific. I felt I had done enough travelling for the time being and with the war nearing its end had to think about getting a job so I opted for a home appointment as commanding officer of H.M.S. 'Northney III', a Combined Operations establishment on Hayling Island. This proved to be a pleasant enough job consisting of receiving naval parties returning from the Rhine crossings and other jobs on the Continent and re-distributing or demobilising them. I had pleasant quarters in a large bungalow and the establishment itself was previously the 'Coronation' holiday camp. My first lieutenant was Geoff Walthew and the other officers included Pop Herrick, an ex

schoolmaster, a lieutenant named Anderson and a little Scot Jimmy ... My Secretary was a young Third Officer Wrens, Ethel Young.

I soon decided that there was plenty of time for sailing and managed to prise three whalers out of the dockyard at Portsmouth and some friendly marines built us an excellent pier in Fishery creek. Amongst the petty officers in the camp was a barge skipper named Wills and we had some splendid sailing matches.

When the school holidays started my daughters, Jill and Angela, came down and stayed in a bungalow next door. They spent a good deal of their time afloat, and were I think spoiled by all and sundry. My wife also came down but had to return home as her father was seriously ill.

The Hayling Island Sailing Club premises were occupied by the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties, a canoe organisation which had done some splendid work guiding assault craft on to the beaches. Like us, they were at something of a loose end and we organised some imaginative competitions both in canoes and whalers. Nick Hastings, son of Sir Patrick Hastings, was their commanding officer and we soon became firm friends. Nick was particularly good to the girls and saw to it that they were never bored, providing young officers to escort them as required. The girls soon got the hang of handling a whaler and some of the young officers were quite embarrassed by their own inability to crew as successfully. I was quick to assure them that there was nothing to be ashamed of - my daughters had had an expert instructor, me! I did my best to teach any of the officers or ratings at Northney III, who showed any

desire to learn to sail and I hope some got some benefit from it.

V.J. day arrived and we held a brief thanksgiving service in the drill hall and I told the troops that apart from those necessary to maintain essential services they could all have a 'make and mend'. But I also said very firmly that any riotous behaviour would be dealt with as on any ordinary day and any breakages in the camp would be charged against the whole ship's company and paid for by stoppage of pay. The result was excellent and I believe Northney III was one of very few establishments which did not have to report considerable celebration damage.

Shortly after the hands were dismissed, I received a 'phone call from Nick Hastings to say he had an official visitor, Prince Iba Saud from Arabia and as they had exhausted the show pieces of C.O.P.P depot, could he bring the illustrious gentleman over to my establishment? Of course, I agreed and Nick said they would be coming by water, since the tide served, and would be at our pier at noon. Geoff Walthew and I immediately commenced preparations for their reception, which included a guard of honour - all volunteers and strong ones at that - a ceremonial hoisting of the appropriate flag, which happened to be the gin pendant, and a bouquet of dandelions to be presented by my daughters.

Sharp on time a flotilla of odd craft arrived and for a moment I wondered whether the whole thing was a joke or not, for the 'Prince' when he disembarked, was obviously possessed of a genuine dark skin and imposing black beard and he was dressed in impeccable whites with an eastern headdress. The attendants restored my confidence as one was dressed in rugger shorts and stockings and carried a dangerous looking scimitar. Another wore a dog collar, clerical vest and a bowler hat.



We greeted his highness with normal naval civility and piped him aboard. He accepted the bouquet graciously and with what were no doubt a few well chosen remarks in his own language (we learned afterwards that it was Afrikaans) and with the bugler playing some sort of fanfare, the flag was hoisted. Then, at a signal from me, the guard of honour broke ranks and unceremoniously threw the whole entourage into a nearby pond. As they climbed out, covered in slime, they complained that they thought they had really fooled us but I suggested that they should have understood the language of flowers and the dandelions obviously indicated a wetting. Over the five months I was at Northney III we had a lot of fun and games with Nick and his party and got to know them all very well. The 'Prince' of the V.J. day episode was one Jerry Kuyper, a South African, who was a talented artist, whose paintings still decorated the walls of Hayling Island Sailing Club the last time I was there.

Now that the war was over on both fronts the question of a job was becoming urgent. I had asked A.C. Hartley of Anglo-Tranian if he thought there was any chance of employment with his firm and he approached John Jameson, the chairman, who invited me to lunch one day and offered me the post of <sup>his</sup> personal assistant, ~~to him~~. Unfortunately, he said, I would not be able to commence duties for about twelve months as the company had to find jobs for their people being released from the services before taking on newcomers. When I asked him what sort of prospects a personal assistant to the managing director had, he said:-

"Well, I was personal assistant to the managing director".

About the same time the Admiralty said they could find me a job with the Control Commission in Germany and also said they



had made an appointment for me to see Commander Vaux, Chief Inspector of Life-boats for the R.N.L.I. I immediately replied that I did not think the R.N.L.I. job would be any good to me as I had been in line for a District Inspector's job fifteen years ago and felt I needed something a little more remunerative at the age of 41. However, my Admiralty contact, Captain Manning, R.N.V.R., asked me to keep the appointment with Vaux now that it had been made officially.

I was now in something of a dilemma, as to tell the truth I did not really fancy any of the jobs on offer. I did not think I could wait twelve months to join Anglo-Iranian and I knew it would mean a good deal of time away from home, in Abadan and other oil areas. I had not seen a great deal of my family during the last six years and I felt I would like a more settled home life. The control commission job attracted me not at all. The idea of living in Germany with a beaten foe struck me as being unlikely to make for harmony and peace of mind and I did not really think it would suit my wife and daughters, even if I were allowed to take them there. That left the R.N.L.I. and I barely gave the idea of a district inspector's job a second thought. It was sixteen years since I had aspired hopefully to that position and it was less than ambitious to want something a good deal better today. Then I was a sub-lieutenant; today a commander of nearly three years seniority and earning £1,000 a year with allowances. However, I had promised Captain Manning I would keep the appointment and so in due course I found myself being ushered into the office of the chief inspector of life-boats at 42, Grosvenor Gardens.

Philip Vaux, a retired commander R.N., had been released from naval service some months previously in order to set about re-organising the R.N.L.I. after the war. He gave me a friendly welcome and I weighed in at once with an apology for the fact that I had only come along to say that I was not interested in the job

and I told him why. There can surely be no more certain way of getting a job than by saying you do not want it. Philip Vaux immediately pointed out that the advertised age limit for the two district inspectors' posts offered was thirty-five. The present inspectorate, with one exception, were all much of an age and would be due to retire in seven or eight years time. (This in fact was somewhat inaccurate as he himself had about ten years to go to retiring age and some of the other inspectors a year or two longer). His point was that it would be necessary to have an officer of some years and experience available for the post of Chief Inspector when he went and it was for that reason it had been decided to approach the Admiralty asking them to nominate a suitable candidate in the early forties; I was forty-one. He went on to say that the salary, at that time £540 per annum, was under review and would undoubtedly be increased. Eventually he persuaded me to go away and think it over, after telling me that it was, or at least had been, the practice of the committee of management to award retiring district inspectors a pension amounting to half pay.

I went home and discussed the situation with my wife before returning to Northney III. We had no money in the bank; in fact, I had an overdraft of about fifty pounds. The girls were growing up; Jill was 14 and Angela 11 and clothes and schooling were obviously going to cost more. Schooling was not really much of a problem as Jill was already pretty well settled at Preston Manor County School, a co-educational establishment she had chosen herself after interviewing the headmaster and putting a number of pertinent questions to him, which he answered with great tact and good-humour.

Angela had expressed a wish to go to the same school so there was no spectre of heavy fees to consider. At the same time I could not afford to hang about looking for a well paid executive job and I still hankered after a job which kept me in touch with the sea. At the time I was also of the opinion that the sooner one got a job the better, as there would be a great deal of competition from the younger men when they came to be released. This, I believe, proved false and the people who hung on in the services did very much better. There were 270 applicants for the two district inspectors' jobs at £540 a year, in 1945. Since that time I do not believe there have ever been more than a dozen legitimate candidates and on occasions only two or three. In fact, on one occasion there appeared to be only one. Later on I met two of the unsuccessful candidates who applied when I did and both were in very much better paid jobs and expressed some satisfaction that they were not chosen as district inspectors.

After a good deal of thought, I decided to leave the matter to chance. In other words, to put in my application for the post and if accepted, take it. Having informed Vaux of my decision I returned to Northney to prepare and send in my papers and await events.

One of our favourite games at Northney III was flood-lit croquet and, providing there is not too much dew on the grass, this is a game to be recommended. Naval croquet is a rather vicious game and it was not unusual to have ones ball croqueted deep into the laurel bushes surrounding the lawn. This was naturally a favourite pastime when Wrens or other lady visitors were playing and search parties were apt to be difficult to recall. There were occasional complaints from the dragon in charge of an adjoining Wrennery that the noise of mallet on ball and hilarious



laughter kept her charges awake so we normally drew hoops at midnight or thereabouts.

I received a letter from the R.N.L.I. saying I had been put on the short list and not long afterwards appeared before the selection committee, presided over by Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Henry Oliver. One of the members of the committee said:-

"I see you served your apprenticeship in the Union-Castle company. Did you ever meet a Captain Strong?"

I replied that I had never met Captain Strong but I remembered his initials were R.D. and that he commanded the Balmoral Castle in my day.

"I am Captain R.D. Strong", said the gentleman, "You must have a good memory.

I was thankful I had not fallen into the trap and said he was an old friend of mine.

I was chosen by the committee and so was Lieutenant Commander W.L.G. Dutton, R.N.R., who had been with the General Steam Navigation company before the war. In due course we appeared before the full committee of management who confirmed our appointments.

There is some satisfaction in being chosen out of a large number of candidates and I felt some relief at least to have a job, even if it only produced ten pounds a week. During my visits to the R.N.L.I. offices I met Michelmore, who had 'pipped me on the post' at my previous attempt and he seemed very pleased to see me. He made no mention of the incident and I discovered afterwards that he did not know that I had been nominated by the P & O Company or, if he once knew, he had forgotten it. He was now deputy Chief Inspector and gave me a good deal of useful advice.

Another ex P & O officer, James Upton, was Superintendent of the stores depot at Boreham Wood. We had met at Cowes during Ranchi's epic visit as James Upton had brought a motor life-boat over from the troopship 'Assaye' at Southampton, to augment our boat service.

Northney III was on the point of closing down and I was able to arrange for my release from the navy at the end of November, 1945. My officers gave me a farewell party and presented me with a large wooden razor, signed by all of them, no doubt as a hint that I should remove my beard.

There were considerable quantities of stores in the camp. Thousands of blankets, many chairs and tables, rugs, carpets and so on, not to mention china and cutlery. Also there were the three whalers I had prized out of the dockyard. I tried to return these but was told they were going to be transferred to Sea Cadet units and were to remain on their moorings. I said I hoped they would be allowed to remain until collected by the Sea Cadets but I doubted it. In fact, I learned that they disappeared within a day or two of Northney III closing.

I was worried about the stores and got each officer concerned to give me a written statement that they had all been checked and were safely locked up. As responsibility for Northney III was being taken over by Northney I, I had copies of the stores statements sent to the commanding officer there 'for information'. It was just as well I did as within three weeks of my release I received an ominous letter from C in C Portsmouth informing me that large quantities of Northney III stores were missing and saying that I would be required to attend an enquiry into the matter. I replied promptly with copies of

all my officers' statements and my letter to Northney I. That was the last I heard about it. I think some commanding officers were less fortunate.

My medical examination on release was, I suspect, a put up job arranged by some of the young medicos I knew. Two immature looking surgeon-lieutenants arrived at Northney III and announced that they had come to give me my medical check up on release from the service. I expected them to feel my pulse look at my tongue and say 'You're all right'. Oh no; I was stripped to the buff and made to run around, jump up and down and generally degraded. I had my blood pressure taken, eyes tested, urine sampled and was prodded, poked and minutely examined in all departments. I still do not know whether it was a joke or not. My young friends told me that it was done so thoroughly in order to forestall any attempt on my part to claim compensation for war damage. This struck me as a very cynical way of looking at things and a poor reward for six years war service but I saw the point.

I now had four weeks leave at home before starting my new job as western district inspector of life-boats on the 1st January, 1946. I do not remember any salient points about the leave, except that we had an excellent Christmas with a first class turkey originally destined for Christmas dinner at Northney III, and brought up to Waterloo station by Ethel Young, my Wren secretary. As far as I can remember it was completely un-wrapped and Ethel arrived carrying it by the neck, which caused some amusement.



On the 1st January, 1946, I commenced my duties with the R.N.L.I. and joined Captain Innes, R.N. for a tour of some of the 31 life-boat stations I was taking over from him. Captain Innes had retired in 1929 and had volunteered his services again for the duration of the war. He was now 72 years of age and his name appeared that day as one of the new holders of an O.B.E. for his services.

I was 41 years of age, still owed about seven hundred pounds on my house in Ruislip and had about £180 in the bank, which represented my <sup>war</sup> ~~new~~ gratuity and naval prize money, ~~With~~ about twenty years of a normal working life before me it was clear that I was never going to achieve riches but could I provide for my old age? At this stage I had not been given full details of the R.N.L.I. pension scheme so I could only hope that the promise of half-pay held out by Commander Vaux would be fulfilled. In the event it was not and I retired with rather less than one third of my salary. Now I was just starting a new life. Not so very different from what I had been doing over the war years, with a modicum of danger and a fair amount of discomfort at times. It was a good job for a seaman and the next twenty years were to prove full of interest and some excitement. But that is another story.

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