The Evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk: Operation Dynamo 27 May to 4 June 1940

I have today, 12 May 1990, been reading an article in *The Times* telling of the evacuation. Soon many of the craft used in that epic operation will take part in a re-enactment, sailing from Dover and Ramsgate to Dunkirk (I use the English spelling) and La Panne to take part in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations.

The fiftieth anniversary means I have advanced in age from 19 to 69 so it is appropriate to record my thoughts before my memory of the event fades, for I have to admit I cannot recall detail as I would wish, which itself is a good enough excuse for inaccuracies.

As a member of London Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) based aboard HMS *President* alongside the Embankment near Blackfriars Bridge, I had been called to the colours in 1939. After some time at Butlins Holiday Camp, Skegness, a reception centre for new recruits called HMS *King Arthur*, I was drafted to serve aboard defensively equipped merchant ships to provide and man light armament whilst the ships were in the coastal waters of the UK.

George Wortham, 1938

Ratings operated from strategic bases at ports around the country. I was at the Sailors Rest, East India Dock Road, Limehouse, which had been taken over by the navy. It was reasonably close to my home in Brockley, so for the first time since my call-up, I was able to get home when I was off duty.

I made good use of the opportunities as they presented themselves, for I had had no leave since mobilisation and the indications were there would be none for a long while. As a youngster, even though I was an able seaman, it seemed I might not get any leave until hostilities ceased and no petty officer or commissioned officer ever tried to convince me otherwise! In fact they set out to impress us all that there was no entitlement to leave even if we were dying of exhaustion!

Ratings were drafted to a ship for a specific voyage. Rarely was I on a ship longer than a few weeks, mostly a draft would only last a few days. Unless there was the immediate prospect of going to another ship in the locality where the ship we were on was berthed, I would wend my lonely way back to base; or I might be taken on the strength of another defensively equipped merchant ships depot to await a draft. It was a solitary life punctuated by introductions and farewells on merchant ships with returns to Limehouse as a highlight; there to meet our friends again, to swap yarns and to relax.

Many ships we served aboard were colliers operating out of the Newcastle area supplying much needed coal for power stations in the south. Battersea Power Station now stripped and awaiting redevelopment as a sports and social complex, but then probably the biggest power station in the country, was supplied with fuel by ships known as flat irons.

Flat irons were easily identified by their low superstructure and they also had a very shallow draught which enabled them to operate on the Thames for the longest possible length of time regardless of the state of the tide. The squat superstructure gave maximum clearance under low bridges, the funnel, which soared high, had to be dipped to clear the

bridges. As the funnel was lowered and then raised again the smoke swirled around the upper deck. The fumes from the coal-fired furnaces permeated everything and the fine soot penetrated deep into the material of garments. The crew emerged dirty and spotted with soot.

During loading and unloading every fourth or fifth day the ship was showered with coal dust either from the shoots of the lofty coaling staithes or by the enormous grabs used to snatch the coal from the ships' holds. Both seemed purpose built devilishly to cover the widest possible area with fine gritty dust and small knobs of coal. No sooner was the ship hosed free of the penetrating dirty by-product of loading and unloading, when once again it was showered with fine coal dust and small knobs of coal.

While we lived very uncomfortably out of kit bags containing the minimum of personal belongings, we were nobody's babies! Baths were a luxury never available aboard the ships on which we served and so were rarely enjoyed except when we were at base. Food was such we were glad to return to base to enjoy what we condemned as naval victualling, and our accommodation was always that rejected by the crew of the ship on which we served — so you will realise it was grim. It was always unattractive, invariably dirty, even filthy.

I struck up a reasonable relationship with the master-at-arms policing the base under the commanding officer and eventually found myself as his writer doing his bidding, arranging the drafts of personnel to ships, the supply armaments and ammunition and transport or travel documents needed to get ratings to the ships to which they were allocated. It was an interesting job, which had a certain air of authority by virtue of the fact I was the 'runner' for the person who controlled our destinies. I was envied my job, but there was no jealousy in those on the outside looking in at the job they would like. Envy can destroy confidence, but I did not find it so in the defensively equipped merchant ships. Rather I found those coveting my job indicated the measure of its desirability.

I kept the records of the personnel based in Stepney, what ship each rating was drafted to, what port it was sailing to and how long it might be before the rating returned to base or was likely to be available for re-drafting — but always under the watchful eye of the master-at-arms, who in the navy is known as the jaunty.

In the early days of defensively equipped merchant ships, ratings called at naval depots and reported to officers who had never heard of us and had no idea how we worked. There we were dressed in naval uniform, accepting discipline of the service very often on our own, without even the lowest rank of non-commissioned officer in charge of us. It was beyond belief and contrary to the order of good naval discipline so essential to the efficiency of the service. That we often reported as individuals, often singly, to ask for contact to be made with our base seemed crazy because ratings arrive accompanied by some responsible person holding specific instructions, when we could not even produce original drafting instructions.

If we were to return to Limehouse we had to have rail warrants and possibly meal vouchers for the journey back to base, so we asked for the documents when service routine stipulated ratings were instructed and were given the documents needed! We were an ill fit for the tight service mould necessary for the efficient running of His Majesty's Senior Service! And in this way I once made my way, on foot and alone up the steep drive to the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. Those I met at that magnificent brick ship for the training of young gentlemen to be granted commissions in the navy were hard put to appreciate I needed and deserved some pay. After much investigation those concerned provided for my needs. When I left I am sure I left those who saw me wondering how such men existed even during a war!

Looking back, the job was ideal for the intending deserter, if for no other reason there was so little day-to-day control. It was tailor made to allow disappearance without trace because it could be days and even weeks before a rating's disappearance was suspected, let alone confirmed. However, I don't

remember any ratings fail to maintain the essential contact with base, to desert or fail to return to base — though some lucky people returned full of glee to relate how they had stolen time to steal home, or visit a girl friend! Perhaps though there is somewhere, someone who has never been found out? Or was it perhaps that we, as individuals and as volunteers, had a heightened sense of loyalty and a wish to play our part in the excitement of war; that therefore we had an integrity some conscripts might have lacked?

At that time morale was high. There was no doubt in our minds the cause of the Allies was just and would prevail — it was only a matter of time. The country had suffered no major reverses for it was the period of the phoney, silent war. It was the period of preparation for offensive actions. There was much activity on the high seas which indicated the measure of marine activity necessary to supply the country with its many needs and to maintain its Imperial connections.

The Royal Navy, ever watchful, was carrying out its protective role admirably and it did so regardless of losses. The Maginot Line was impregnable — or so we thought, for its effectiveness had yet to be tested. The great French Army would resist the enemy. And the French Army, the king-pin of the offensive plan we knew would have to take place, would break through the Ziegfried Line to devastate the enemy supported by His Majesty's Forces. Or so we thought! The speed and devastation of the rout, so soon to be suffered by the Allied Armies was, luckily, beyond our imaginations.

I gradually found myself the holder of what is called a 'cushy number' at the Sailors Rest in Limehouse doing the jaunty's bidding and keeping up-to-date the continuously changing records of the ratings working from the base. My duties developed a pattern of certainty to man what I began to consider 'my desk' in the jaunty's office when I was at the base. And in time my occasional occupation of the desk took on a style of permanency, for as my usefulness improved, the frequency of being drafted diminished. For who in his right mind would draft himself when the jaunty did not seem anxious to send him off to sea?

Besides home, as I have said, was not far away. Eventually I used my bike to cycle to and from the Sailors Rest to home and so make the most of my time off duty. It gave me a feeling of elation and personal freedom. My good fortune enabled me to make frequent home visits, even if I did not get official leave.

The journey home through the grim literally black walled, Blackwall Tunnel to the south side of the river and onwards home was acceptable if not enjoyable. The rough stone sets which shook the bike (and me) almost to pieces did not seem so rough after all. I accepted the smooth wooden road blocks, with all the risks, which when wet were devastatingly slippery and dangerous, as many a cyclist knew to his cost. Those tramlines, which were apt to trap the front wheel of my bike and divert it and me to a direction I did not want, were not so evil, for one learns to nudge the front wheel out of the trap.

For all the problems, when home there was comfort, home cooking and freedom from the routine, I, in my small way, was helping to impose on others. When home I could even slip into civvies, a luxury every serviceperson enjoys, the more so because during the war the wearing of uniform was compulsory at all times. Therefore, its converse, removal, was the ultimate release. One had only to ensure there was no chance of detection.

Then one day there was a strange atmosphere at the base. The master-at-arms was closeted with the commanding officer much longer than usual; they were tense when they reappeared. They were not communicative.

Captain McDougall (even if all other names of people I was involved with fade that one never will) was also tense. He was in charge of a number of soldiers who had similar duties to our own aboard merchant ships. He was tall with the upright bearing of one of the guard's regiments. His chest supported lines of medal ribbons from the First World War and he was partially lame from injuries he had obviously suffered during it.

Those in charge were obviously preoccupied and tense and so gradually awareness of the big draft took shape for us. Because of my

exclusive position I was instructed to prepare the draft and make the necessary arrangements for all hands with guns and ammunition for transfer to the senior naval officer, Dover, but the part we were to play in the dramatic action was withheld. I found myself in the curious situation of having to draw up the list and query if my name was to be included. And it came to pass that I dutifully wrote my name at the very bottom of the list, not only because my surname begins with W but also because I left it until the last — Wortham GLJ Able Seaman LD/X 5048. I had achieved the honour of drafting myself!!

We left for Dover with all our belongings, Lewis guns and all available ammunition in open lorries. We left the base deserted except for the commanding officer, Captain McDougall, the master-at-arms and the catering staff who were civilians.

My memory of Dover is poor, but I am sure, because all normal accommodation was occupied we were housed overnight in the caves owned by Fremlin's Brewery, which ran deep into the white cliffs of Dover. We were allowed shore leave that night and so spent it in a pub, where I saw a brave drunken seaman, demonstrating his party piece, licking a red hot poker without burning his tongue. Bets would not encourage us to emulate his example.

The following day, we defensively equipped merchant ships ratings, added to the chaos on the dockside where the allocation of men to ships was taking place. Three ratings and I were handed over to Lieutenant A Gray RN, who seemed hardly older than me. In company with a seaman petty officer, a couple of seamen and stokers, we became the ship's company of a Dutch skuffler, the MV *Hilda*, which the navy had just commandeered. The Dutch crew were discharged after a swift hand-over, but we were hardly conversant with such an unusual ship and there was much experimentation before the best, or perhaps it was the worst, was got out of the ship.

Our not very aggressive armament was two twin Lewis guns, one forward and one aft. I with another rating — I cannot remember who — were allocated forward to the eyes of the ship, where we mounted the gun with what seemed a reasonable supply of ammunition. The other gun was mounted out of sight of us, down aft behind the bridge structure.

MV *Hilda*, a style of ship known to the Dutch as a skoot, was about 800 tons with one hold and a boom crane. The bridge structure was right aft and contained all the accommodation and facilities which I never had the opportunity to use. The ship's engine room was situated immediately beneath. She was powered by diesel and was to chug along happily with her new crew under the very new brightly coloured white ensign.

When the time to slip our moorings came, we knew we were bound for the French coast and the resort of Dunkirk for the evacuation of military personnel, but I don't think even our skipper knew how desperate the situation in France was. So as we headed out to sea, passing the breakwater, we looked back at the white cliffs and Dover Castle, wondering when and in what circumstances we would next see our homeland. Even then we did not realise this was 'for real' and that we were about to take part in what was to become an epic evacuation of an army trapped by very superior enemy forces.

Because of my special position at the base, the preparing of the draft had been so swift and had so occupied me I had not even been able to say goodbye to my family, or even to write to them — in their eyes I had just vanished, as I told them I might when I was drafted. The drama was not for them to know. And my bike was abandoned at the base.

The weather was fine so we sunned ourselves and made the best of life as it was given us. My position in the eyes of the ship to ensure I was where I was needed when trouble came, meant my companion an I were far from comfortable for we had only a steel deck and steel fittings with the anchor cable running close by, not even any wooden decking to lay on. We had only a couple of oilskins as covering against the elements and to keep us warm and dry.

The journey over was uneventful. No course was steered for we were one of many boats and ships travelling in one direction intent with our own thoughts of the prospect which

would soon face us. Each was a unit separated by space from all the others, but our aims were one and the same. Firstly to avoid a collision in the great confusion of vessels, secondly to make the coast of France as quickly as possible; there to act out our destiny.

For those responsible for navigating MV *Hilda* it was very much a case of avoiding a collision in the confusion of so many dissimilar craft — no two alike — all with different capabilities and speeds. And they were crewed by a motley collection of civilians, yachtsmen, men of the merchant marine and royal naval personnel, travelling with all speed to the French coast now mostly in German hands, where we would get further instructions.

The helmsman of the newly commissioned MV *Hilda* had good vision from the wheelhouse for these Dutch skufflers were made to be operated with the minimum number of crew. The helmsman was expected to use his judgement in taking avoiding action without specific instructions from the officer of the watch.

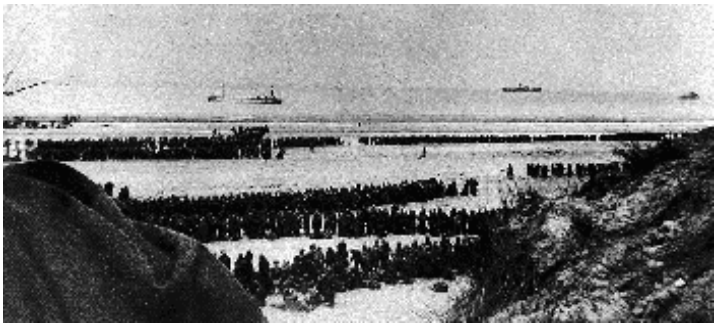
No one thought of food; we ate what was available, all uncooked. We smoked heavily and discussed what we anticipated was the job on hand with some apprehension.

I remember seeing smoke hanging over Dunkirk long before we reached the coast and well before we could identify the shore installations, for the great oil tanks were already burning unchecked and fiercely. As we approached the coast we saw the fine stone moles at the entrance to the harbour of Dunkirk. There were ships alongside and soldiers were being taken aboard.

I well remember the commanding voice of a man who we assumed was the sergeant major, marshalling the soldiers who were only too keen to leave France. The memory of the man lives with me even now, for it proved the ability of one man to make himself heard above the turmoil and noise of war and so take command of those around him and make them obey his orders, without question. For as long as we were on the coast we were aware of him, seemingly always at his post, alert, organising and giving his commands clearly to ensure the safe evacuation of others, but never, it seemed, himself! His thoughts and duty did not include the possibility of escape. He had a job to do and he was doing it!

As night closed in on us the burning tanks lit the scene with an eerie pulsing light. We could see the shadowy figures and silhouettes still passing along the mole to the waiting ships: we could hear the commanding voice to mind the gaps in the mole where shells and bombs had burst. Soldiers embarked hurriedly and awaited quietly for first light when the vessel would to sail to England.

Because our ship had a shallow draught, we were sent along to the west of the fine sandy beach, there to run inshore and pick up as many soldiers as possible then ferry them to larger ships standing off in deeper water where they could manoeuvre. The method our captain used was to drop the ship's anchor (so it could be used as a kedge anchor) and run inshore paying out the cable as we proceeded. Then when we had our complement of soldiers, the ship would be put astern and the anchor could be used to help winch the vessel off the beach. With our human cargo it needed all the effort we could muster to get off the shelving beach.



The men who were evacuated from Dunkirk waited in ranks stretched across the vast beaches

There was one gun along the coast, which regularly fired into the German lines, even throughout the night. Because after dark there was nothing we could do, the captain anchored ship and we huddled together for warmth, security and what sleep we could get. At first we awoke each time the gun fired. But our brains adapted, so when the gun fired we were attuned to it and so able to continue sleeping. I think it was about the third night off the coast, when trying to make the best of our opportunity to sleep, of a sudden we were all jerked wide awake. It was breathtakingly silent! It took time for us to realise the gun had not fired at the time our brains registered it should. For so long had our muscles tensioned each time it fired, they had automatically counterbalanced the anticipated shock of the noise. We had indeed now been violently awakened because the gun did not fire!

But then we had to ponder, did this portend something more sinister happening? We listened and looked along the beach only to realise the gun had fired its last defiant round at the Germans. The ship was alive with comment and anxious anticipation, but eventually, isolated from useful information, we settled again to sleep. We were never to know if the gun was overrun, blown up or just abandoned, although I find it hard to imagine those manning it would have left it for the enemy to turn it against out own troops. We did not hear it fire again.

Some smaller boats were ferrying soldiers to us, but many had to swim out to our ship. They waded out until, with chin just above the water, they launched themselves and swam. It was a pitiful sight. For them the strain of many days on the defensive in retreat, continually giving up the apparently safe position to fall back again and then again, had taken its toll. Nearly all those saved were silent and gaunt, the strain of their experiences showing visibly in their appearances.

They were saved — they were safe but they did not realise safety is a relative term. Or perhaps they did. But we knew, for them safety was many hours and miles distant, and our ship was vulnerable to shell and bombs, even collision with another ship intent on the same errand of mercy, as all ships manoeuvred in crowded and confined conditions. But for the soldiers it was a haven from what had gone before, even though the ship was devoid of comfort, warmth and food.

For us it seemed we had nothing to raise their spirits. The meagre rations, mainly dry ship biscuits, were shared haphazardly by the petty officer, a noisy man, who persistently tried to encourage them to take some by saying ‘Come on, chew one of these, you silly b....r, they will stop your b....y teeth from chattering’. The soldiers were wet, cold demoralised and no doubt suffering from exposure and shock, so to speak to them like that was crazy. We encouraged them to use the dark cheerless hold of the ship and the upper deck, which was preferable, for the weather was sunny and bright, but there was no real comfort in either.

The small donkey engine for the anchor cable at first was easy to start. Unscrew the cylinder compression key, with no compression to turn against, crank the starting handle as fast as possible; quickly close the valve and the motor would commence its puffing beat. As time progressed it became more and more difficult to start until at its worst, we devised a system of unscrewing the compression key, which had a recessed end into which we could fit a burning cigarette. One person would get the engine turning, while another puffed at a cigarette, then breaking off the end inserted it into the recessed end of the valve and then rapidly screwed it back into its housing. The engine exploded into action!

Often we had to shift berth during the dark hours and then before dawn we would weigh anchor to make ready for the day ahead. None of us at night expected to see the ship’s cable in a translucent light, as it was heaved in. Even the captain was aghast to realise our every movement was exposed by the eerie bioluminescence. It was evident on the anchor cable being hoisted, in the bow wave as we moved and the wake of the vessel astern. We could see the bow waves of other ships! Surely it was obvious, visible to the enemy and we did not know how close they might be. We

were exposed and very vulnerable. We became mentally and physically scared of being seen by the enemy at night. During the day it was easier to accept the risks which existed. But at night, in the dark we had hoped to be invisible to the enemy. And now we knew we were not!

At night when we were cold our spirits were low, we huddled together for warmth and mutual support, but luckily with dawn came the redeeming warmth of the sun to cheer us and the weather was warm during the evacuation. For those waiting patiently on the beaches, warmth was a vital ingredient for morale. But their numbers never seemed to fall as those finding their way to the beach replaced those being taken aboard ships.

We had heady moments: the moment we first realised we had been picked out by an infamous Stuka dive bomber. It turned to dive ... but when is the best moment to start emptying the drums of the Lewis gun into it? Would it have any effect? Which aircraft should we fire at? There was no one to select a target and direct our fire, or in any way produce the most effective defence. All we did was haphazard. We were all of us individuals, each doing his best, hoping our effort would protect us from the drama of a direct hit. Above all we hoped what we did would cause infinite damage to the enemy and kill as many as possible. And when we saw others suffering, we held our breath for them.

HMS *Skipjack*, a fleet minesweeper, was close to us when she was hit by the bombs of a Stuka dive bomber. I saw the bombs leave the aircraft: she was under way and had taken avoiding action by turning hard to starboard and even when struck she continued to turn, until listing heavily, she lost way. She was left stationary and sinking, when abandon ship was sounded.

We picked up many of her survivors: many injured, some with their flesh burned and covered with stinking oil fuel, but they were glad to be alive. We helped them aboard to lie on the cold comfortless steel deck, but could offer no succour — not even blankets or towels for the survivors to dry themselves! We had no medical attendants to tend them and no dressings for their wounds and burns. For the wounded our only comfort was the spoken word of concern. The injured lay or sat on the deck without request or complaint. One naked man looked over the guardrail without complaint and he spoke not a word. He asked for nothing. He just stood, naked staring ahead over the ship's side!

I watched injured sailors from HMS *Skipjack* in the oil-covered water, trying to reach our ship and climb up the scrambling nets. I considered myself a reasonably strong swimmer who could hold his own and life save to some extent. Should I dive in to give assistance? Should I give encouragement from the same element, instead of shouting instructions from the safety of our ship? The survivors were already exhausted yet there I was trying to will them on to make another superhuman effort, isolated from the fears they had already experienced. I could smell the oil lapping the ship's side and I watched the survivors wondering which of them was failing.

Should I expose myself by diving in the water? Was my main duty to the people already aboard MV *Hilda*, there to man the guns for which I was responsible or should I dive into the oil-covered sea to help those worse off than myself? I decide my greater duty was aboard, to secure the safety of the ship and those already aboard. I have re-examined the problem often since but have not come to any firm conclusion, for when facing such possibilities of life and death, one cannot have the certainty of its success and therefore the correctness of one's action. I do not think anyone died as a result of my failure to act. But is that a justifiable excuse for not entering the water to help those worse off than oneself?

Once I was manning the guns or I was reaching down to grip a hand or clothing to help survivors, the physical effort left no room for the pros and cons of alternative action. Certainly my likelihood of seeing the white cliffs of Dover was enhanced by my failure to do what I considered I might have done.

Those saved from HMS *Skipjack* displayed the extraordinary popularity of their captain, for as soon as they were aboard they started asking where he was; had he been saved? I had no idea for the rest of the ship might just have well been on another planet. I knew only what happened in the eyes of the ship; my vision and knowledge did not go beyond. I had not even been down aft since we left England, several days earlier. Even aboard so small a ship at that time, down aft might as well not have existed. But the word got around, that their captain was safe and aboard MV *Hilda*. Some of the crew began to sing their rather bawdy ship's song which was swiftly taken up by others until the captain appeared on the bridge to acknowledge his ship's company and he too joined in the singing. The survivors of *Skipjack* cheered their captain, a lieutenant RN, making plain their concern, respect and consideration for the man who commanded them. It made us feel better and we smiled. It was an emotional happening during the dangers of war, which proved the value of trust is an overriding influence for good.

It was after we took aboard the survivors of HMS *Skipjack* that we were ordered to Ramsgate to discharge those on board and then to return to France.

Ours was a slow ship. I think lack of knowledge of the ship and rough handling was taking its toll. Destroyers, paddle steamers and other vessels left us so far behind, I doubt we overtook any vessel. The oil tanks and other installations ashore were still burning fiercely and the smoke lay thick and low over the sea trailing lazily towards the English coast. It was a thick, black, oily curtain which our captain considered was the idle screen against being spotted by planes. Our course was set to make as much use if it as possible. And so we reached Ramsgate late in the day. There helpful people swarmed over the ship to take our passengers and encourage us while we set to, to make the vessel shipshape before returning to Dunkirk. And in the background a hot meal of sorts was rustled up and eaten, the first we had eaten since leaving Dover. We singled up and then slipped our lines, to head back on our errand of mercy

We had Frenchmen take passage, unwillingly forsaking families and homeland, convinced that they should continue the war against Germany. And we ran short of ammunition.

The last fact made us realise how improvident we had been. Many soldiers had come aboard without their arms. Some may have been glad to throw them away; others threw them away in a last desperate gamble when they staked their lives by swimming to the ship. Some may even have dropped them over the ship's side once aboard, which we did our best to stop by giving explicit instructions. But most, true to themselves and their training, would not be parted from their arms and ammunition. However they gladly gave us a share of their ammunition, if not all, when they knew of our need, and they willingly set about loading the magazines as we used them. It was then they took an interest and blazed away at hostile aircraft with their rifles when there was an attack.

The size of the ammunition for the Lewis gun was 0.303 inches, whereas much of the ammunition we were getting was 0.3 inches. In our desperation we accepted both and if the smaller bore rounds rattled in the barrels of our Lewis guns, then they would make a larger spread of pattern to hit the offending aircraft we fired at!

I was told that our two companions manning the aft guns had been killed, and I believed what I was told for I had no opportunity to go to see for myself. On such a small ship it may sound impossible, but we were unable to confirm the fact for a very long time; in fact until we were returning to England for the last time. Then there was an opportunity to go aft and investigate and there we found them happy, well and alive. The reunion was joyous and noisy!

Eventually, as the number of soldiers arriving on the beaches lessened, we were instructed to retreat. We headed back to England exhausted. Strangely we set course for London, a fact I found incredible at the time, but now realise it

might well have been a strategy to keep ships and personnel away from the Channel ports for they were chock-a-block. For me it was a good omen. As we sailed up the Thames there was a noisy reception from river traffic, and a soldier gave me a cigar as a keepsake of his rescue. I hid it for a suitable quiet moment of pleasure when I could enjoy it to the full. During the warm evening that followed, we docked right in the heart of London. We were given our first relaxed meal aboard. It was not lavish, but I was able to prove to myself that hunger is 'the tastiest sauce'!

To celebrate the end of our duties, the skipper 'spliced the main brace'. I am quite sure that bonne bouche was repeated until the supply ran out. And I rather think Lt Gray RN ignored the possibility of anyone being drunk on watch. I relaxed, and lit my cigar. I felt replete in the warm evening air. Laying on the hatch covers with my gas mask under my head, the evening was so warm, I fell asleep.

The sun was well up and had warmed the air, by the time I awoke and for all I knew there had been no sunset the previous day nor sunrise that morning. Those ratings from Limehouse, of whom I was one, were discharged to our base, which was not far away.

It was good to see the jaunty who informed us all our kit was still in Dover where we had left it. I had only what I stood up in. I hadn't washed, shaved, cleaned my teeth or changed my clothes since we left the base many days earlier. I was given my first leave of the war, a 48-hour pass. I travelled home on public transport. I knew I stank, but those around me knew where I had been, for they complimented me as an acknowledgement of what had been achieved. A vast army of over 300,000 men had been evacuated from the Continent.

I arrived home and rang the bell. My Mother answered the door, but did not recognise me!

Historical Notes

MV *Hilda* never sailed the seas again. Her future was to be a barrage balloon ship, swinging round a buoy in the Mersey River, where I saw her some time later. I was told she was worn out and not worth refitting by the time we left her.

After writing this account, I was able to read *The Miracle of Dunkirk* by Walter Lord, published in paperback by Penguin. There are four references to MV *Hilda*. I learned that the Dutch called these vessels skoots; we called them skufflers. The naval officer in command was Lieutenant A Gray RN. I have added both details since I wrote the original text.

I am bound to add this note, having been lent a pamphlet by Ian Smith which relates some interesting facts about the Dunkirk episode, which adds interest and some dates to my story.

HMS *Skipjack* was sunk in the early hours of 1 June 1940. I thought it was later than that. That evening the then Captain Tennant sent his historic signal from Dunkirk 'BEF evacuated'.

The whole evacuation took about a week, which means I went over earlier than I imagined.

On the afternoon of 4 June the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, said to a packed House:

> When a week ago, I asked this House to fix this afternoon for a statement, I felt it would be my lot to announce from this box, the greatest military disaster in our long history.

Instead Churchill was able to tell the House of the miracle of Dunkirk.

Over 380,000 troops were brought back; that is all the British expeditionary force plus 139,000 French troops.

693 British ships took part. The price paid was:

- the British Army lost virtually all its heavy equipment;
- 188 small craft sank;
- 18 passenger ships sank;
- 1 hospital ship sank;
- many trawlers and minesweepers were lost;
- a sloop was lost;
- of the 40 destroyers which took part, only 13 remained fit for immediate service and 6 were lost.

A journalist who took part wrote:

> It is given to few men to command a miracle. It was so given to Bertram Home Ramsay, and the frail iron balcony that juts from the embrasure of the old casement in the Dover cliff was the quarter deck from which he commanded one of the great campaigns in the sea story of Britain.

Second Front 6 June 1944: Operation Overlord

Whatever the reasons one has for recording memories and impressions of events which happened many years ago, there must be motivation. For a very few lucky people motivation is a natural and consistent asset, but even for those lucky people passage of time blunts its sharp edge! Then the influence and interest of others is needed to re-awaken motivation and so it is for me.

Not having been blessed or cursed (for motivation can be one or the other!) with restless nagging motivation regarding this matter, I have to acknowledge the influence of two people who have encouraged me to record the events leading up to and including the allied assault, code named Overlord.

The prime mover in encouraging me was Ian Smith, who quietly and consistently over a long period, said I should record the event. He even impressed upon me that I had a duty to my wife, Monica, and our family, for there are not many people who were present at Dunkirk for the evacuation and were also involved in the armada of Overlord for the second front. And the second person was Rob Gabbot who wrote encouraging me after he read my Dunkirk report, which might well be considered as the beginning of this story. I acknowledge Ian and Rob's contribution; their encouragement provided the motivation I needed to tackle a task, which I hope will be as worthy of the event as their confidence in me!

Overlord was an operation planned to mount a sufficiently large offensive with all the arms, equipment and logistical support needed to confront the might of the German Army, on the very soil the British Expeditionary Force left so hurriedly in 1940. It was to be the greatest operation of its type ever, for an incredible effort was needed from all the Allies, which had to include continuous air superiority to clear the Luftwaffe from the skies over the Normandy beaches and keep them out. That was the aim of Operation Overlord.

Psychologically it was to be a jab in the arm for allied moral and a shattering blow to German pride and might, which would make and keep open a seeping wound, which would never heal, but get progressively worse with time as our armies fought their way across Europe.

HMS *Emerald*

I was a temporary sub-lieutenant RNVR aboard HMS *Emerald*, a cruiser of a class of which only two vessels were built. Her sister ship HMS *Enterprise* was of a somewhat improved design.

30 January 1944 (Indian Ocean)

At the time of the Armistice in 1918 HMS *Emerald* was under construction when work was halted. So it was not until 1928, I think, she was completed, commissioned and brought into service. I have no accurate information of her displacement, but it must have been some 7,000 tons. She was obviously not as large as the heavier cruisers in service during the war

The main identifying features of HMS *Emerald* are her three funnels, two together and one set apart. This photo was taken in Kilindini.

There is an undoubted impression of power and speed: she looks lean, low and racy. That she could do well over 35 knots is impressive, considering she was designed during the First World War when coal-fired ships were at their zenith. Then to attain and maintain such speeds meant many sweating stokers shovelling vast quantities of coal evenly over the whole area of the furnaces, keeping the fires clear of clinker, removing ash and avoiding making smoke; the last to ensure the ship would not be seen from afar, even possibly by vessels below the horizon. To improve efficiency and to ease the workload she had been converted to burn oil by 1939.

She had a main armament of seven six-inch guns in single gun turrets of which two turrets were one each in the port and starboard waists. That meant the main armament broadside was of six guns bearing. Her secondary armament was 'bity' because it was provided as need, demand time and availability allowed. She acquired four-inch high-angle guns with a high-angle control tower. There were pom-poms and oerlikons installed as well.

The silhouette of the ship did not flow, as do the lines of most ships, they were angular and irregular. Aft of the foremost funnel, she carried a biplane on a launching platform. In pre-war days it must have been something for a cruiser to have an operational aircraft to catapult into the sky.

My Appointment

On 5 January 1943 I was appointed as one of the maintenance crew on HMS *Emerald* when she was being refitted in Portsmouth Dockyard under the command of Commander Denman RN.

I occupied a cabin in the bridge structure which was infested with rats! Lying in my bunk in my temporary cabin in the bridge structure, I watched their silhouettes as they paraded on the air trunking at night! I could also hear them scuffling about in my waste paper basket and found their droppings on my bunk!! I advised the ratters, only to be told they had already caught three rats in my cabin the previous night! Hardly reassuring, but one has to accept what one cannot change and I did just that. For all that was done the ship was never free of rats. Some of the ship's company who were below deck the first time the main armament was fired, reported rats fell about them in great numbers. They (the rats!) were so frightened they rapidly scuttled away out of sight and hid. All the time the ship's cats were so well fed they did not consider rats as enemies, or even as a possible meal, but rather as friends to share their ample rations.

I was the forecastle divisional officer, which meant that I was responsible for the well being, complaints and requests of all the sailors working the fo'c'sle. I was also responsible for the cleanliness and orderliness of that part of the ship. I was to feel very important when I called the division to attention for inspection and made my report to

my senior officer. And apprehensive when I knew all was not as it should be, for there could be no excuse.

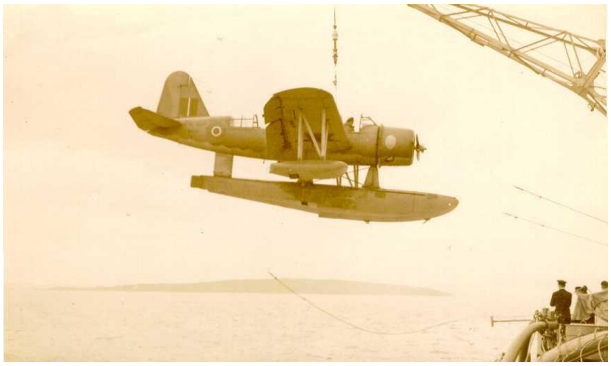
On the appointed day for commissioning, the remainder of the ship's company, consisting of many hundreds of men, marched from Portsmouth Barracks to the dockside. There each rating was told to which part of the ship and to which mess he was allocated. This simple instruction identified where each person would eat, work and sleep and, it followed, where he would be while entering and leaving harbour and also at cruising and action stations. Lastly it detailed what watch he was in: red, white or blue. The watch system of four hours on duty and eight off was relaxed somewhat in harbour. It was at the commissioning I first met Petty Officer Green, the senior petty officer in my division and the person upon whom I had to rely to ensure orders were carried out.

When Captain Wylie RN took command 'clear lower decks' was sounded and the ship's company, now complete, was assembled and called to attention by Commander Denman for the first time to introduce us to our captain. For this he saluted and reported 'Ship's company, present and correct'. Captain Wylie gave the order 'Stand easy' to address us. He was very human; a gentleman, a tall, lean man with strong features and a commanding presence. I am sure he would have identified his concern for those who served under his command, linked with the exigencies of the war.

They were happy days at Portsmouth. Very easy watch-keeping duties afforded my brother officers and me the opportunity to visit friends somewhat out of the area when off duty. We enjoyed the best of Southsea and our favourite pub, the Barley Mow, could offer. With duty-free alcohol already available in the mess, we primed ourselves there before going ashore, to keep the cost down and only returned after the playing of *The Bronze Horse*, the record always played at closing time in the Barley Mow.

HMS *Emerald* had compass alignment (called swinging the compass) and put to sea for Scapa Flow where we were to do our working up — the process of familiarisation which ensures the ship's company gets to know the ship, its officers and its capability. This ensures that the response to orders is always immediate and that the action is taken with understanding and enthusiasm. Teething troubles are ironed out during long, rigorous, training exercises both at sea and also in harbour.

During this period the engineering officers exercised their sailors (who were still known as stokers) to familiarise them with the machinery they had to work. They had to get the best results from the power unit and other machinery for which they were responsible. Then there were all the variations of damage control, to ensure if there was damage to the ship it could be identified quickly and restricted to cause the minimum disruption. Such action included monitoring the opening and closing of watertight doors, for failure to ensure this aspect of safety could always jeopardise the ship.



We took aboard our aircraft, a modern American-built Kingfisher 0 53 V manufactured by Voght. A seaplane with a radial engine and a single main float with stabilising wing-tip floats. It was recovered after landing in the sea by being hooked on and swung inboard on the ship's crane.

A Lancastrian, Lieutenant Ekersley RNVR flew the plane. To aid and abet him, and also to ensure he did not get lost in the featureless sea, was an incorrigible New Zealander, Lieutenant Wilkins RNZVR. Free of most duties and all watch keeping, and with the ear

of the commanding officer at all times, we kept and entertained them, so they could enjoy to the full an interesting and exciting life flying the plane on rare occasions when it suited them!

When Captain Wylie had satisfied himself he had an efficient fighting unit he would have advised the Admiralty that the ship was ready to go to war. Only then did we proceed to Casablanca.

We Put to Sea

While in Casablanca I was able to sample the luxury enjoyed by the American forces, ice cream, and the sample I tasted while with the RC Chaplain was so good! We in the wardroom were lucky to taste such food occasionally to titillate our palates, but the lower deck never saw it unless they bought it ashore! But our lower deck had a rum ration the Yanks envied. The wardroom and gunroom had alcohol readily available, whereas the Yanks had only coke.

But there was the unwritten law which, as far as I know was rigidly adhered to, that no watch-keeping officer ever drank alcohol while at sea. I know what I preferred! I do really believe the story told of the American ships, that the bubble in the pure alcohol in which the compass card floated, was evidence of the alcohol drained off to provide the essential ingredient to convert coke to 'gyro-juice'. One way or another men will get alcohol, when it is withheld by law, as it was in USA during prohibition days!

As we put to sea we saw President Roosevelt arriving for the Casablanca Conference with Prime Minister Churchill and Joseph Stalin. Captain Wylie ordered the appropriate salute. The ship's company was called to attention by the bosun's call, faced to starboard and the captain raised himself in his bridge chair to salute the President of America as the ships came abeam. And there was President Roosevelt in his wheel chair, wearing his famous cloak and large-brimmed hat. Standing around was his retinue of advisers and his son in naval uniform. He raised his hat in acknowledgement. As 'carry on' was sounded HMS *Emerald* increased speed and backed away to the south.

We were travelling south down the west coast of Africa, when we were ordered to proceed with all possible speed to Freetown. The ship's speed exhilarated us as she pounded into the waves, then rose to cast off the green seas which enveloped her. The ship vibrated as its bow rose hurriedly to shake aside the weight of water; then as it dipped its head towards the next wave, the propellers raced because they were clear of the water. Their sudden release reminded us of the massive motive power needed to drive the ship through the water at speed in such conditions and again the ship vibrated, as if to confirm its eagerness to exercise its power.

Later when checking the optical instruments it was found the vibrations were so violent that many of the prisms and lenses were out of true and quite useless. That meant the ship was not fit for action because her armament to a large extent was useless. The gunnery officer had to indent for replacements so, instead of hurriedly refuelling and proceeding on our way, we enjoyed a much-longer-than-expected spell in Freetown before continuing on to Simonstown.

While we frolicked in the sun on the tropical beaches of Freetown, another lucky ship's company took over the job we should have had, which we believed was to go to Fremantle to work with the Australian Navy.

Each week, usually on Saturday mornings, the captain made his rounds and visited all mess decks. He was accompanied by the commander, the first lieutenant (known as Jimmy the one) and a retinue of officers and of chief and petty officers, of which the officer for the part of ship being inspected, was always one. He had always to be on hand to take the flack handed out as errors and omissions were identified and, of course, to receive plaudits when they were due! The commander kept notes for future reference.

We had been in commission many months and it had become obvious that those in my part of ship did not like herrings in tomato sauce,

commonly called ‘herrings in’. At first tins were probably thrown over the side and sank without trace in deep oceans! Perhaps it is even possible the shine of the tins excited their inquisitive cousins, still alive and able to enjoy life! However the number of tins grew.

The leading hand of one mess, having seen all the crockery and cutlery polished bright and laid out decoratively on the table with the mess fanny, a large container used for rum issue etc, thought the tins should tell their tale. Herrings were not liked and were too frequently issued! So he had them polished and then embellished the mess table with them by building a metallic offering to ‘herrings in’! The arrangement was smiled at during rounds. But as the altar grew larger the smiles were replaced by stony glares. But no one said anything about it. However, eventually the design took over the mess table. It had become a monster, which could no longer be tolerated. The captain made known they had to vanish — and they did!

But there is a sequel to this story. During Operation Overlord it was soon noticed ‘herrings in’ had a market value. The Americans enjoyed the food as a change from their hated spam! Many tins were traded over the ship’s side and each party seemed content with the exchange!

HMS *Emerald* in Mombasa

During the commission we were at first based at Kilindini, virtually part of Mombasa, the major port for Kenya. Later we were based at Trincomalee on the north-east coast of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) while the ship operated in the Indian Ocean. We were there when we learnt we were to return to England via the Mediterranean. We were delighted and set about trying to find those things to delight the ladies in our lives. One officer who was to marry, but could not find the silk he knew his future wife so much wanted, assured us she would have to be satisfied with a bolt of canvas and talcum powder for chafe!

One night, whilst in the Atlantic on the way home unaccompanied, our ASDIC (the submarine detection equipment) operator got a positive echo of a submarine, which in time produced a course, speed and depth. We were able to confirm it was not one of ours. The ship’s company was closed up at action stations. Our captain played cat-and-mouse with the submarine, he ordered alterations of course and speed, sometimes to avoid and sometimes to close, but always at a respectful distance, and then waited for the unknown vessel to respond. It always did, and all the time the echo was clear and constant.

Although cruisers carry depth charges they are neither built for nor intended to attack submarines, they are only for self-protection. So while contact was maintained the captain had to decide whether or not an attack was justified and what were his likely chances of success. Also should he break radio silence to call in more suitable vessels to take over the chase.

His thoughts for the safety of the vessel and all aboard prevailed. Eventually he ordered an increase in speed and turned the ship’s stern to the point where the echo indicated the vessel was, to disengage. Soon after ‘stand down’ was sounded. As we made our various ways to bunks and hammocks, we discussed how we wished the captain had chased and depth charged what we were all certain must have been a German submarine. But we were making unwarranted and irresponsible statements, for we had not the responsibility of HMS *Emerald* at stake, nor had we the safety of the ship’s company to worry about.

As fo’c’sle divisional officer, I had to stand with the first lieutenant in the eyes of the ship, without greatcoats, exposed to the bitter winds

of April, as we sailed up the Firth of Forth to our first British port of call, Rosyth.

Back to Britain

In Rosyth seven days leave was announced for each watch. Just after the first watch left, leave was extended to fourteen days so telegrams were sent to the address each rating gave as his address whilst on leave.

I received a return telegram from Petty Officer G's wife. But my surprise was as nothing compared to hers, for she wrote, 'Do not understand your telegram stop my husband has not arrived home'. There was nothing I could do except await his return, for the telegram meant I could not know where he was! On the day of expiry of the original seven days, Petty Officer G came smartly aboard. He saluted the quarterdeck and confirmed his return from leave. I took him to the commander's office and showed him the copy of the telegram sent to his wife and her reply. I asked no questions. He vanished so quickly I had to wonder if I had seen him on board earlier and I was left to ponder where he would continue his broken leave! Two things I know, Rosyth is a long way from the place where his wife resided and he did not ask for a travel warrant. It is interesting to note, neither did he give a new address.

After having given leave for all watches, we left for Scapa Flow, there to exercise with the fleet and on our own executing all manner of strange manoeuvres and unusual mock up problems for what we later realised was to do with the opening of the second front.

We fired the main armament at towed and stationary targets, we fired torpedoes and we exercised damage control. We visited Greenock a couple of times but always returned to Scapa Flow. And I was chosen as a guinea pig!

The ship's surgeon was instructed to give someone two stiff tots of undiluted rum and after a suitable time to test and record changes in the person's ability to perform a series of tests. This was so that a decision could be made as to whether or not 'splicing the main brace' could be considered before going into action. I was the person chosen by the surgeon.

Splicing the main brace is the only time every member of the ship's company, including officers, are given a tot of rum and it is well known that such things as 'sippers and gulpers' were frequently given between friends! But even more important it was known that some members of a ship's company always got more than their fair share of rum, which could have disastrous results. I was given my double tot of what is known at 'neaters' and I was watched as it was consumed during as short a time as possible. I was then left to my own devices for about half an hour before my responses were checked. I was given messages which I had to pass on accurately and swiftly. And my powers of observation were checked. Whether or not I was alert and what my responses were like after the tots of Nelson's blood, I will never know. The doctor would not discuss it with me, but upon it was to be decided whether or not to 'splice the main brace' which affected every person on the ship. It is deeply imprinted in my mind I was the reason ... and yet I felt in such good spirits after the tots!! But splice the main brace was not sounded.

A ship's company is always aware of movements in and out of their ship because all comings and goings are observed and recorded, even if only mentally by the quarter-deck staff, consisting of the officer of the watch, petty officer of the watch, the bosun, the messengers and, not far away, the marine in charge of the keyboard. All are prepared to pass on what griff is gleaned.

All comings and goings of unknown officers are noticed because of the ceremony of 'manning the ship's side'. Such officers are required to state their name, ship and who they wish to see after being piped aboard. Much is recorded in the ship's log, even when in harbour. Then again, if an officer leaves the ship, he requires a boat and directions must be given to the coxswain by the officer of the watch. So, many people, regardless of rank, know what is going on. Calling the quarterdeck staff to attention, piping the

person over the side and repeating the process on his return, highlights the activity.

Secrecy only underlines the security aspect and even enhances the importance of the known detail. If a signal for a boat is received, the signal passes through the signalman's hands and is recorded and the boat is then passed on for action. Even an officer wanting to return to his own ship has to arrange the boat to get him there, as well might be the case, any unidentified boat it hailed and has to identify itself. And all the while the log records the facts and the movement out of and into the ship with naval brevity and accuracy.

The Second Front

When the captain, accompanied by the engineer commander, the navigator, the gunnery and the torpedo officers, all went to the flagship, the battleship HMS *King George V* and then returned with many files, we knew something was afoot. But what we did not know did not worry us. Indeed the whole country was asking not **if** the second front would be opened, but **when** and **where**?

The advance of the Allied Armies was pushing back the German and Italian Armies in Italy and Greece, for all their spirited defence, so we had to wonder where the attack would be. I cannot remember when we first knew by announcement over the tannoy; it would probably have been when we were steaming down the west coast of England to join the gradually growing armada of ships and boats, all making their way to the Channel and thence to the Normandy coast.

On the way south we called at Greenock, where shore leave was granted, I was one of the many people who went ashore. On my way back to ship that evening we had the hairiest boat trip I have ever made or could imagine. The ship was moored in mid stream, secured to buoys ahead and astern exposed to the full force of gales and the weather was getting up. I think the bottom must have fallen out of the barometer, for by the time us liberty men were waiting for the last liberty boat the weather was appalling. We tried to find shelter on the exposed quay from the most inhospitable weather Scotland could offer.

When the boat arrived it was rising and falling alarmingly even in the lee of the quay, but we all managed to embark, without mishap. Conditions worsened as we headed out to the ship with the boat dropping what seemed like five feet into the troughs of the waves. When we arrived alongside the ship it was impossible to hold the boat to the gangway with boat hooks or lines and fend it off in order to disembark. The rise and fall and buffeting against the gangway was so violent, the boats crew were fully engaged fending off the boat to prevent damage and probable sinking.

Eventually the cox brought the boat as near the ladder as he dared and shouted at us to jump when the liberty boat was at its highest. Then the lucky people jumped, gabbed the ladder and scampered up. Meanwhile the cox steered the boat round for the next run. The ship's boat could not be secured at the boom that night but was taken to its davits and hoisted inboard. A very close watch was kept on the moorings.

Evidence of some of the heavy weather we encountered on board HMS *Emerald*

An inquiry the following day came to the conclusion the boat should not have been in the water for the last trip. Arrangements should have been made for the libertymen to be accommodated ashore for the night!

In fact I think it was after that ghastly boat trip we learnt for certain we were on our way to the second front. Making the announcement then meant there was no chance of any leak of the information to others, for there was no further chance of going ashore or phoning anyone.

The captain received instructions that D-Day was to be delayed for 24 hours because of bad weather reports. Speed was slackened and delaying manoeuvres were executed to waste time off the estuary of the Mersey, while apprehension built up because delay increased the possibility of the enemy sighting the gradually assembling armada. Seeing it, the enemy must have realised its purpose and would have kept watch on it from afar. What was always possible seemed probable to us as we steamed south; a casual sighting by the enemy could perhaps foretell the attack and open the second front before it could even begin.

We were sailing in an old out-of-date ship in company with many others of great sophistication, which carried the officers of the highest rank charged with carrying out the great offensive. We felt like the ugly duckling and we were at some stage made aware that HMS *Emerald* was expendable. The meaning was plain and left no room for misunderstanding.

As we journeyed up the English Channel, the number of craft and variety grew in an orderly fashion; unlike the Dunkirk evacuation this was an orderly affair with absolute radio silence! The photograph below gives a good impression of the scene as we crossed the Channel in close company with so many ships, which we were overtaking to get on station for the softening up bombardment of the French coast. It is possible to count some fifty balloons, each of which is secured to a vessel of some sort, and there were many vessels which had no balloons. The whole gives a good impression of the vast armada. Most vessels were tank landing, antiaircraft or personnel landing craft.

Steaming to the Second Front

Normally when action stations is sounded aboard ship, urgency imposes its own order out of chaos as people scurry about, each to get to his action station as swiftly as possible. But as we closed the French coast, in these circumstances it was a deliberate movement of compliance by the ship's company. The reason and timing for us going to action stations was of our own choosing. We took items we thought might relieve monotony, for we did not know when we would next leave our action station and be able to relax. It might not be for a very long period.

My action station for the event was in the main armament plotting room. Marine bandsmen manned it and they are a jokey lot. Their wisecracks relieved the monotony. To feed us and keep us awake we had jugs of the famous 'pussers' thick cocoa.

Darkness fell but we in the plot were not aware of the fact because we lived in artificial light. We were told a special section, probably the Royal Marines Special Boat Service, were already on the coast to clear obstructions and to anchor buoys for specific ships to keep station on. I was told, but never saw, the buoy for HMS *Emerald*, which was very appropriately green.

On station we waited quietly for the order to commence firing for we were to take part in the initial bombardment. The wait seemed to go on forever. Once the action started we took a keen interest as the once clean sheet of slowly moving paper recorded the salvos fired and where they were meant to land. When the landings commenced and daylight lit the scene

we were passed assessments of how those with the commanding view from the ship's spotting top saw the progress of action. Then those listening to radios, probably the signal ratings listening to BBC broadcasts, passed information on to the captain, who ensured it was passed to all hands using the tannoy system. And indeed in our sector, Sword Beach, the news was good!

HMS *Emerald* firing a salvo

The anticipated, frighteningly frantic reaction of the enemy did not materialise. For we all expected immediate counter attack by aircraft, bombardments by gun emplacements which formed the German's Western Defence System, and assaults from ships and torpedo boats. We expected all hell to be let loose.

About 10 miles away to the west was Le Havre, a major port which must have been heavily defended, and sure enough shells began to land in the perimeter of the landing forces. HMS *Malaya* was detailed to lob 15 inch shells back. She slowly turned broadside on to fire a salvo; then she turned bows on towards Le Havre and steamed menacingly towards the port. But the enemy had her position well plotted for the waterspouts from German salvos bracketed the ship. I imagine there were some smartly barked orders for we could almost see the great ship come to a shuddering stop and then start backing away whilst A and B guns continued their onslaught. The challenge had been swiftly taken up!

We were at action stations for several days, but as the Germans were driven back from the coastline or were taken prisoner, the same high order of preparedness was not needed and the condition of being closed up was relaxed. We had to remain close to our action stations ready to stand to when needed, but we were allowed to relax on the upper deck in reasonable numbers.

In the early days I did not see the light of day or breathe fresh air for I had been allocated to the plot, that is where all the relevant information for firing the main armament is collated and passed to the guns. The plot was located under not very thick armour plate, deep in the bowels of the ship. To maintain interest I was given periodic reports by the officer in the spotting top, situated 70 feet above the ship's water line, so from his panoramic view of all around, we were given an idea of what was going on.

HMS *Emerald* played its part on nearer targets in immediate support of the troops landing on the beaches. Our task was to cause maximum damage to the enemy and make them keep their heads down.

It was quite obvious to us the Allies were having success in our sector at Arrowmanches, actually Sword Beach. I was told, and later I saw, German prisoners of war in great numbers herded to the cliff top overlooking the beaches, because there, their only way of escape was inland, which was held by English forces who had only to guard the inland perimeter. No doubt the German prisoners looked aghast and wondered at the array of ships they saw making the assault, but could now do nothing about it.

We saw the *Mulberry Harbour* at close quarters being towed into place slightly to the east of our station. As the valves were opened each section gradually settled on the seabed. Ships began using it for berthing alongside and then discharging their cargoes, which could be run straight ashore on lorries. But we did not think it was the success hoped for. I don't think it was as close inshore as was intended, or that the sections were as closely linked to one another as they should have been. So although it provided shelter for ships and boats and a means of landing supplies, it never provided for the rapid and easy flow of supplies from ship to shore.

We had our eerie moments, our position deep in the ship was not the ideal place from which to have to abandon ship for there are a lot of watertight doors, each with six clips which can be stiff to operate, and gangways to pass through.

We heard near misses, for sound travels fast and clearly through water and the noise of an explosion strikes the steel of a ship with almost explosive force. The noise alone is more disturbing because one cannot be forewarned by sight of what is going on. Then too, when shrapnel strikes the ship's side, even if it does not penetrate, it gives a chilling metallic ring for all to hear, particularly for those between decks, for there is always the inclination to fear the worst. We had as far to go to gain freedom as any one, including the engineers. One near miss spilt a cup of cocoa. I deliberately recorded 'as due to enemy action!' … not that anyone would notice it!

Fear can enable people to perform extraordinary feats. We in the plot had our appointed places, with me in charge under the ladder to the hatch to the deck above, the only way in and out of the compartment. No one was without a job to do and each person had only a limited amount of space in which to stand.

As the heat increased, the canned air was unable to keep the compartment fresh so I got permission to open the deck head hatch. There was an exceptionally loud explosion, which made our hair stand on end. One man was so swiftly off the mark, he was able to squeeze past several bandsmen, reach the ladder and was practically up it and running before I could grab him and haul him back to thump on the deck. He went back quietly to his station, which was as far away from the hatch as it was possible to be. To get back to his station, he had to squeeze past four people and found it difficult. Yet going the other way he managed it without anyone realising what was happening and without anyone blocking his way. He was the heaviest and least agile member of the band. We quietened him and suggested in future if he wanted to go to the heads (toilet), he must ask permission before setting off. Such are the risks associated with isolation and confinement for long periods without relief, or the chance of it, when stress builds up to breaking point.

As the Allies secured their hold on the beaches and penetrated inland our role changed and we were called to give support farther from the beachhead. The 21st Airborne Division was landed by parachute near Caen and we were allocated to give them cover with an Army Lysander plane to spot for us. Having been given co-ordinates the information was passed to the guns which were loaded and firing commenced, only to have frantic calls from the spotter to cease firing because our shells, which could be identified by the colour of the burst, were falling in the area our troops occupied. It was what would now be called friendly fire! But there was no time to enquire how or why it happened. We could only get on with the job and, when we had time, to pray no injuries had been suffered.

We saw hundreds of aircraft passing overhead to bomb the enemy and later aircraft, with gliders in tow, brought troops in. The British had complete air domination in our area. We were delighted to see the defensive shield used to clear the Luftwaffe from the skies and keep them out. I don't remember any concerted air raid of real importance in our sector, though obviously there were some. In fact we were heartened by our air superiority to the extent we began to feel we were having it easy.

The BBC reports impressed us. The fact the enemy failed to make any effective counter attack using armour was a surprise we could not understand, until we learned long afterwards the enemy thought Overlord was merely a diversionary tactic; the enemy's expectation was the real assault would be made further east. Hitler forbade the use of the available tanks already in the area. He unknowingly played into the Allies hands, paving the way to the Allied victory by preventing use of his very effective Panzer Divisions! At no time did we feel so hard pressed we felt in danger.

Not far to the west were some launching sites for V1 rockets, so called doodlebugs. On one

auspicious occasion while I was on deck we watched one head out over the Channel towards the English coast, then for some unknown reason it turned 180 degrees to head back from whence it came. We listened with delight to the engine's pulsing note as it made its way to explode in German-held territory.

We had reports of manned torpedoes being used by the enemy so were kept closed up with close-range weapons fully manned. Then there was a report of two-man submarines being within the perimeter. Inevitably when there was a suspicious sighting from our ship just before dawn, we immediately thought that it was one of these weapons. The object was heavily engaged on the starboard side by oerlikons and small arms fire, but it did not go away. Our fire could not destroy it. As dawn approached the mysterious object could be seen … it was two men clinging to some timber. Eventually we retrieved them from the water. They were two Poles, survivors of a cruiser which had been sunk some distance from us. They were in a pitiful state but uninjured by our fire! Our surgeon treated them in the sick bay before sending them to a better-equipped place. Unfortunately one man died.

War is a fearful means of killing foe and friend alike. Man when he is at risk, does not have time to think logically and carefully. Nor does he have the luxury of time on his side to hold his fire while he ponders the validity or justification of his intended action, for speed of reaction is the lifesaving formula. I feel sorry for the members of our forces in places such as Northern Ireland, whose actions are called to question in what are life threatening situations where speed of reaction is essential.

The wastage of materials of war was self-evident to us aboard ship. Our ship procured a DUWK by throwing a grappling iron on to it as it floated by empty. It served us well as a means of water and land transport throughout our stay off the French coast. For as long as we were at Arrowmarches we had use of that curios craft and our captain, who was second in command of naval forces by virtue of his seniority, used the vessel on numerous occasions, whereas the ship's boats were never lowered into the water. Half boat half land vehicle it served us well. When we left we handed it over to another ship. We saw masses of material apparently abandoned and realised the vital requirement in war is not to reduce demand, but to ensure there is always more than enough so that what is not needed can be left to rust.

When ordered to return to Portsmouth we were glad to turn our backs on France and race for home, to relax after the semi-alert state we had lived under for so long. Compared to the problems the Americans had establishing their beachhead, we had it easy in the Sword area. They were on the western flank and had great difficulty breaking out of the beachhead. I understand, on occasions they even had difficulty finding the correct beaches! We were not far apart but could not prejudice our position by offering support. In fact apart from the odd report I don't think we heard about their problems until we returned to England. I can give no indication how long we were in the area but by the time we left I'm sure Caen had been virtually razed to the ground to liberate the town. We certainly gave supporting fire on more than one occasion.

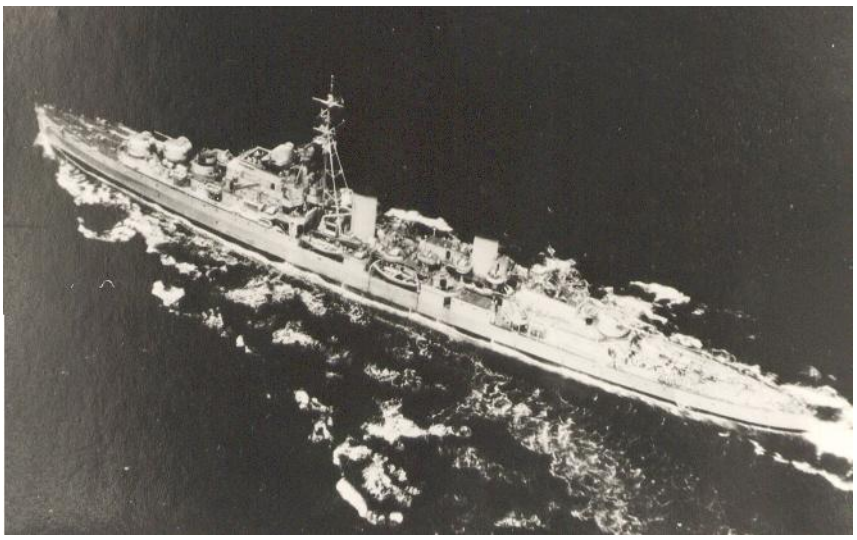
There was no jubilation, just empty relief at the thought of seeing the English coast again. We were weary in mind and body and elated only because we knew we had done our job well and things were going well for the Allied cause.

In Portsmouth we were secured to two of a run of buoys, actually astern of an American destroyer. We were very short of food, so short we could no longer have proper meals, so the opportunity to victual ship was requested. In an act of generosity towards our American cousins we invited their officers 'to drinks BEFORE dinner' for drinks were plentiful. No alcohol had been drunk while we had been operating off the French coast — in fact none had been drunk since we had left Scotland! Our guests arrived in force, very happy and very early to consume their fill. As time progressed they showed no inclination to depart. Eventually we started to make our excuses; that we were hungry and the

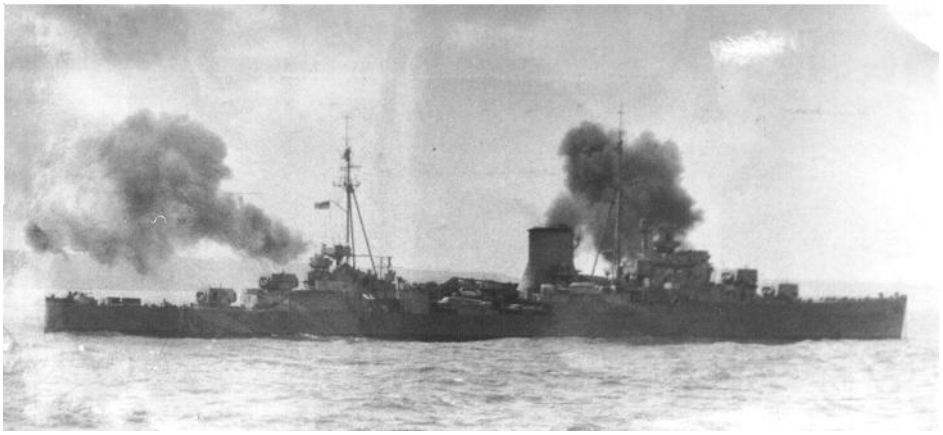
invitation was to drinks before dinner. Regretfully we were short of food, so could not invite them to join us. To which they replied cheerily, they had their meal before they came across! We left them to make use of our mess bills! So much for generosity on the one hand and expectations of guests on the other! We sat down to our frugal meal and then had to return to entertaining our guests, when we would have preferred to have showered and turned in.

We did not ammunition ship but took aboard the minimum of stores for we had been ordered to Rosyth, there to deammunition and decommission ship. HMS *Emerald*, the expendable ship, was no longer required for active service. She was taken to Grangemouth where she was decommissioned and stored in case she might be needed once again for service. Later she was sold to be broken up for scrap. I went on leave pending reappointment.

Some Photos of my Navy Days



HMS *Royalist*



HMS *Ajax*

Surrender of the Japanese at Singapore

HMS *Royalist* entering Portsmouth Harbour wearing her paying-off pennant. She looks very trim having been painted in naval enamel paint found in Singapore Naval Dockyard after the Japanese surrendered. HMS *Royalist* was the first cruiser to enter Singapore after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I was on her at the time.

These two photos were taken in March 1946 just before Wilfid and I went down to Devonport from Paignton to be demobilised. And thereby hangs a tale!

I arrived back in England from the Indian Ocean in March 1946, after the Japanese collapsed and surrendered. I was sent on leave and told to ring Queen Anne's Mansions in London to learn what I was to do. I did so and when asked my name said Wortham. Who ever it was, went away to get my file and returned to ask confirmation 'Lt WA Wortham?' 'No' said I 'that is my brother. I'm GLJ Wortham.' 'Oh! He is on indefinite leave, but he won't be for long! I'll get your file.'

As a result Wilfrid and I were the first brothers to be demobbed together at Devonport — we might even be the only ones!

Me with Wilfrid (1946)