Invergordon Mutineer

By

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To the men of the Royal Navy who time and time again

have proved their incomparable courage

in the face of adversity.

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1 In the Boots

I was born into a very poor working class family. Now contemporary critics consider this a very
heavyweight way to begin an autobiography. Maybe it is, but at least I claim originality for my
opening, for it is the absolute truth, something I intend to adhere to throughout the whole of my
story. Autobiographies, like everything else, have changed. Years ago they were rare, usually the
work of some scion of the bluebloods whose claim to an audience was based mainly on the
assertion that a forbear helped Mrs Boadicea to burn Roman London. Nowadays the claims have
a different character, instead of filling page after page with society balls, house parties and other
aristocratic gambols, the autobiographer of today, by a clever piece of word jugglery, gives the
impression of a genteel but somewhat poverty-stricken intellectual who has managed to
struggle through college on a shoestring. Further investigation generally discloses however that
at some stage a rich aunt turned up to foot the bill, in some cases sending her beloved nephew, in addition, a sample of the edible wildlife in her county. Very touching indeed, and one feels one should sympathise with the poverty which prevented the writer from buying a car – his third one, that is. These gentlemen have a strange language for the poverty-stricken, including such expressions as ‘What would you like to drink?’ when some friend drops in for a chat.

In our genuinely poverty-stricken family, eight children and a drunken father, the language was the true language of compulsory shortage. When mother handed us the sugar to sweeten the tea, she always said, in all seriousness, ‘Remember, sugar is for sweetening not thickening’. If one of the older children, that is a wage-earner ventured to suggest that their portion was rather small, mother quickly pointed out that it was even smaller where there was none.

Although not fate, but a lack of knowledge of contraceptives, gave us to an illiterate drunken bully of a father, our burden was eased by a miracle-working mother. On Saturdays, our father would stagger into the little house of three up and two down with a single golden sovereign hidden under his tongue. Rumour had it that it was he who inspired the story of the working man’s wife who warned that carrying one’s wages in one’s mouth was dangerous as there might be germs on the money; to which he replied ‘A germ couldn’t live on my wages.’ How much he really earned neither mother nor any other member of the family knew. All mother knew was that out of that one sovereign she had to feed eight children, him and herself, and find tobacco for him. He smoked a clay pipe stuffed with an evil-smelling twist that looked like the unwashed pigtail of a seventy-year-old Chinese. The rocking chair by the fire-grate was the throne from which this bricklayer’s Ivan the Terrible glowered dire threats at anyone who dared to speak. No one ever did. A well-oiled strap dangling from a nail at the fireplace was a perpetual reminder for us all that the booze-angered deity did not forgive. His method of beating seems to have been adopted by the modern all-in-wrestlers except that there was nothing fake in the punches our father handed out. Brutal beatings were usually followed by the child in question being sent to bed without food. Anyway the junior members of the family were obliged to retire for the night at 6 pm, and then the others in order of age. Only those who were twenty-one got the key to the door, but those who were nearing the age of twenty-one during his tyranny did not wait to test the validity of the key to the door theory but just simply walked out. They had learned by bitter experience that the key to a lodging house was worth two to his door.

In the midst of all this misery stood mother, firm as a rock at the same time as soft and comforting as the warm sand on a beautiful beach. She often had to be a strong bulwark between him and the child who was, in his besotted conception, a wicked and wilful defaulter needing to be thrashed. It made little difference to him that she was the woman who had brought up his two children by a former wife and bore him nine that he blindly created with no consideration for anybody or anything except his lustful satisfaction. If she protected her child with her body, then her body bore the brunt of the blows. When we came home after playing (mainly football with a rag ball on the ‘stadium of the plebeians’, the street, we were obliged to remove our boots and hand them over to the ogre for inspection. Woe betide the unfortunate who had kicked out one of the heavy hob nails he had covered the soles with. But it was mother, not he, who found the shoe factory which was selling rejects cheap – and found the money too, for that matter.

The money was far from easy to find. It entailed slaving over a washtub of other people’s dirty linen from morning till night. In those days washing was heavy work, twirling clumsy dolly pegs in a huge tubful of waterlogged clothes and wringing them out with a mangle half as big as the kitchen. The two massive rollers were turned by swinging with all the weight of the body. As all this was done before a steaming coal-fired boiler, one wonders how a working woman ever
came out of the kitchen with strength enough to climb the short stairs to the bedroom and there be raped by a moron who had long ceased to give her any joy or satisfaction, in bed or out of it.

Amazing as it may seem, our mother not only fed us, dressed us and saved us from the two killers that took so many of my schoolmates, TB and Meningitis, but in that age of no maternity homes or proper medical attention, it was she who brought into the world half the children born around our streets. When a pregnancy out of wedlock occurred, my mother realised it long before it was noticeable to anybody else. It was she who shamed he young man into fulfilling his duties or, if he was married, knew other ways of helping the couple out of their difficulty. But she was no illegal abortionist: that was their affair; she only approached the right people to get the money. Herself, she never received a penny from the unfortunates she helped. She continued her good work almost to the day of her death. On one occasion she stayed by the deathbed of a woman with thirteen children and a drunken husband, and after feeding and washing all those children and tending the dying mother all through the night, she came home tired out and wanting only to sleep. Four days later she was dead. But that is going too fast ahead. When the First World War broke our father’s boozing decreased, not because of any desire to reform but simply because in wartime drink was difficult to get. The beatings, not being affected by the shortages remained at their prewar level.

Just about three years before the start of the First World War, I had made my initial trip to the neighbouring school in the company of my mother. She had one more little boy on her hands who was bidding fair to be an invalid, as polio had caught up with him, and she wanted me at school a year before time. So she talked the headmaster into receiving me at the age of four into the infants’ class of the Catherine Street Elementary School of the City of Leicester, one of Britain’s oldest towns. (Twice recently I wanted to phone this city of almost three hundred thousand people and on both occasions I was asked by the Moscow operator ‘Where is it?’ - an ignorance I attribute less to Russian shortcomings in geography than to the fact that the World Service of the BBC ignores the existence of our major cities, preferring to concentrate on the thirteenth-century music and the stained glass windows in old churches.)

My introduction to the three Rs, which we were supposed to get at least an inkling of so that we might in the future be able to read the murders in the papers and reckon up our wages as one shilling an hour for a forty-eight-hour week, was not very promising. I was dull, scared of every word the teacher said to me as I expected it to be followed by a blow. In fact I soon learned that the Three Rs were more properly Four, the fourth being the Rod of which we had plenty. One of my teachers gave a whack across the hand for every mistake in dictation.

We all spoke with the Leicester accent, not acknowledging aitches, say ‘yo’ for ‘you’ and uttering vowels as broad as the Atlantic, but no effort was made to improve our speech or give us a love for the language which birth had made our right and which a traveller can travel the whole world with. Instead there were stupid singing lessons that nobody needed, in which the teacher spent his time going round with a tuning fork to detect the boys who were striking false notes. He never got beyond me, for by the time he had finished handing out cuts with his cane for my false notes he had no more energy for sleuth work with the tuning fork. It was no good trying to explain that I was a breadwinner and sold the Leicester Mercury on the streets in the evening; or that he who made the best sale was the one whose screech of ‘Eexxtta Mrrrcurrreee!’ reached the furthest corners of the city: an accomplishments which, of course, did not aid the vocal cords to produce the sweet sounds our music teacher demanded.

But in general the demands of the teachers were not exacting. In fact the teachers were no more interested in us than we were in seeing Santa Claus on Pancake Day. They were aliens to us and I suppose we were to them. They lived in another part of the city, the ‘posh’ part, and when
lessons were over they jumped on their bicycles and sailed away to it. Even their language was, in a way, foreign to us and except for the teacher responsible for sport they never used it to converse with us on other than school affairs. I can only remember one of them visiting a pupil’s house. That was when the captain of the school’s football team was dying of meningitis at the age of thirteen.

As for us, we had no desire for homework and nobody offered us any. At that time, when wartime shortages meant effort and ingenuity to obtain something over and above the ration, I had a peculiar form of homework. Every other day I got up at three in the morning and walked through the darkened city to join a huge queue at a shop in the centre which opened at six to sell a pound of something edible on the ‘first come first served’ principle. The other days I got up at six because the shop then opened at nine. Although I did the journey so often, I could never get rid of the fear of walking through the dark streets alone. Our town was as safe as Fort Knox, yet I walked along in the middle of the street, whistling as loudly as I could in an attempt to convince myself that Dutch courage is not only found in bottles.

The now-demolished railway station to which the van brought the local newspaper was a scene of great activity every day, for here the soldiers coming home on leave from France arrived, and as they left the train we mobbed them for souvenirs and French money. A certain French coin just fitted into the penny-in-the-slot machine which shot out a small bar of chocolate in return. At the station I also kept a look out for any of my three elder brothers who had all gone to the front, leaving me the only man at home. Early in 1918 father had been taken to hospital where the doctor diagnosed fatty degeneration of the heart, adding tartly that it was not caused by drinking too much lemonade. He lingered for a year and then we got the news that he had died. It was a Saturday. I had been playing in the street and I knew my mother and elder sister had been visiting the hospital. I came into the house for a drink of water and found my mother and sister sitting before the fire somewhat dejected. I asked what the matter was, ‘Your father has died,’ they answered. ‘Oh!’ I said, and walked out to continue my game. I can’t remember whether I told any of my chums but it seems to me that I did not. The game interested me more.

On a bleak January morning in 1919 we all got dressed in black and took him to the cemetery. We were tearless when we went there and tearless when we returned. Eleven years later when I was in the Navy and qualifying in the Gunnery School at Devonport, I received the news of my mother’s death. Unable to say a word I chose a far corner of the barrack room and stood there for more than an hour while the tears poured freely down my cheeks. I cried in silence, not once lifting my hand to brush away the tears, one phrase repeating itself incessantly in my brain: ‘They can’t bury her with that man!’ I will never forget how when I was at sea somewhere and there was a devastating storm over England, she would spend the whole night praying for my safety. Her photograph is before me now, as it will always be.

The war ended and the men teachers returned from the front, more hardened and less averse to letting out a strong word or two, in the absence of the head, of course. Likewise they were more inclined to bring the cane into action. My academic successes were nothing to boast about, but even if they had been I don’t suppose it would have mattered much: my destiny, like my classmates’, was, in the expression peculiar to Leicester, ‘in the boots’. Some of our teachers who disliked our mutilation of the English language and other lowborn characteristics would comfort themselves by taunting us about going ‘in the boots’ with total acceptance of the idea. Nobody ever asked me or anyone I knew what we intended to do in the future. That was the prerogative of the ‘rich’, the children in private schools. As for further education, it was never even thought of.
Just before my father died our teacher decided to run a mock election with two candidates contesting for an imaginary constituency. Naturally the captain of the school, a very popular boy because he played football well and had a father who had been a fairly successful professional boxer, was immediately adopted as the Conservative candidate. Nobody, however, wanted to be the candidate for the very unpopular Labour Party, and it looked like a walkover for the Tories. There was no reason why I should care about this. Our family were anything but Labour supporters, in fact we were all aggressively Tory, and at any election a faked-up photograph of the Tory candidate was put up in our front window. But for some reason I got up and volunteered for Labour. One or two pitying glances were cast at me but on the whole the boys were delighted that there would now be a real contest. The campaign consisted of each candidate coming in turn before the class and making a speech which was to be followed by questions. To everybody’s amazement I wiped the floor with my opponent and answered the questioners almost into the ground. Then the count took place and I had lost by only one vote. All the congratulations came to me and for a time I was the proud peacock.

I had not noticed that the headmaster was standing by the open classroom door during my speech and when some days he presented me with a diploma entitling me to attend highschool I was more shocked than a pauper who has heard he has been left a fortune. I ran all the way home taking surreptitious glances at my elaborately coloured diploma and placed it on the table with an air of ‘now, what do you say to this?’ My pride soon went sliding into the dirt bucket, however for when the family saw that a small payment was required. I was told to take the diploma and tell the headmaster to hang it on the wall in the smallest room of his house. I was wise enough not to deliver this message verbatim but I lost the diploma to the local barber’s son who was counted among the ‘rich’.

A further blow to my election victory soon followed. Our school was shaken to the very foundations by a most extraordinary event for 1919. Not far away, about two miles or so (Catherine Street was then on the outskirts of Leicester), was a small farm, where, one early morning, an aeroplane had chosen to make a forced landing. The whole district was agog, for in those days the egg-crates which our intrepid airmen flew were rarer than hairs on a head of cheese. Nowadays I don’t suppose anyone would bat an eyelid if a flying machine of that size landed on his window-box.

All through morning lessons we were fidgety, and whenever the teacher’s eagle eye turned away we made motions with a thumb in the direction of the farm. We were absolutely sure that just before breaking up for dinner at twelve o’clock a benevolent headmaster would announce that afternoon lessons had been cancelled. Imagine our disappointment when no such announcement was made! We were wild, angry, rebellious and I organised my first strike. Quickly I spread the news that instead of going straight home to dinner, we would gather on an adjacent piece of wasteland and there hold a protest meeting. On the basis of my election speech I was of course chosen as speaker, and my call for a strike was met with loud cheers.

After dinner we gathered again on the waste ground and then set off to march to the fields. We were about half way there when someone gave a shout. On looking back we saw all our men teachers mounted on their bicycles, waving their canes and rapidly overtaking us. Like cowboys in a Western they herded us back to school and corralled us in the drill shed. There stood the headmaster, shaking his cane in a most ominous manner.

‘Now,’ he said, glaring along the row of boys, ‘who is the ringleader?’ There was a silence. ‘Who is the ring leader?’ Not one boy answered. A third time he put the question, and out stepped a boy who had suffered at the hands of jibing teachers for his name, which was Slow. There he stood, head up and slightly inclined to one side, hands clasped behind his back. ‘There are no ringleaders, sir,’ he said, his voice level and firm. ‘We are all of the same mind.’
There he stood, the plebeian, 'when-did-you-last-see-your-father,' boy, calmly facing the roundhead schoolmaster. Of course he got the biggest share of the cane but he took it with the same fortitude as he had answered the head's question. Six months later I sat with his mother by the side of his bed and watched him die of meningitis. It was terrible, the way he suffered. Although I later saw men die of ghastly wounds and strong men die of starvation in the siege of Leningrad, no suffering has ever left such a deep impression on me. I left the house and made a collection among his schoolmates to buy a small spray of flowers. When, on the day of his funeral, I placed them on the coffin lid I saw the brass plate with the words 'Harry Burdett Slow'. They remain forever in my memory.

A month or so later the circus came to town. It was a poor, shabby affair and its appearance was not heralded by the usual parade of camels and elephants with scraggy loungers in patched motley riding aloft. As the trucks drove on to the ground all hands joined in the hard labour. It was at this moment, with the debris of disorder strewn all about, that I came on to the field. Evidently the big top had just been raised for it stood in the centre of the chaos, mute and bleak, waiting for the bunting, the lights and music to breathe life into it. My appearance there on a school day was more accidental than deliberate. I had not planned to come and did not even dare dreaming of being the 'daring young man on the flying trapeze', giving the breathless crowd a pain in the neck as its eyes strained upward to follow my sensational dives across space. When the school bell clanged out its summons I left home to answer it, as I had done for almost nine years. But somehow instead of turning right in the direction of the school, I turned left in the direction of the circus field.

By the partly open entrance to the big top stood a man who was unmistakably the boss. He wore an almost-new suit of a strange beige-lavender colour, in the middle of which a promontory stuck out, giving the impression that his chest had slipped and the waistcoat with its long row of buttons was there to prevent the slip becoming an avalanche and landing his chest at his feet. He was a big man with a hooked nose and to one side of it, covering one of his eyes, was a monocle. Despite the gaudy get-up it was difficult to take him for a clown, for with the mechanical regularity of a ventriloquist's doll his mouth opened to emit sounds of command suggesting an automatic potato peeler filled with bits of sheet iron.

This was my man. I stepped boldly up to him and asked if he needed any help. 'How old are you?,' I answered. It was no lie, just an overstatement of the truth by about six months. That six months, however, made it illegal to take me on as a worker. The boss turned into the top and pointed at a pick lying on the grass. 'Take that pick,' he said, 'and go round the ring loosening the turf for the horses to get a footing.' Then without waiting for my response, he left the tent and began issuing his far-from-musical orders again.

I looked at that pick and wondered if he thought he had engaged a weight-lifter. Except that it had a wooden shaft, it looked like an anchor for a battleship. Years later in Devonport Naval Dockyard the huge seven-ton anchors lying about immediately called to mind that pick. Evidently circus owners and dockyard officials have something in common, perhaps a sense of humour. For both the pick and the anchors bore a notice 'Not to be taken away.'

Somehow I managed to do the job but I must admit that it was not me who brought the pick down to cut the sod, but the pick which brought me down almost to kiss it. He was a live wire, that boss. No sooner had I delivered my last blow than he stuck his head in the door to order 'Go and help the strong man', jerking his thumb in the direction of a ragged curtain in one corner.

This was where all my illusions about the circus in general and their strong men in particular were devastatingly shattered. My years of study at the street-corner school of philosophy,
where the dons give lessons in how to send smoke down the nostrils, artistic cursing and their own lurid sexual experiences, most of them imaginary, had absolutely convinced me that circus strong men were fakes and that the huge dumb-bells they threw around with the greatest ease were rubber. This one was huge and flabby, like a Japanese heavyweight wrestler who cocks his leg as if he has been bitten by a dog and cannot get out of the habit of leg-cocking. He pointed at the dumb-bells and told me to roll them over to the side. Trying to impress I made a dive at the bar, intending to set them rolling with a mere thrust of my arms. When I did connect it was with such a jarring blow that I thought my arms were broken in several places.

The strong man never blinked an eye but threatened to cuff me if I didn’t stop playing the fool. Clearly he did not like boys, especially me, and several times he stuck his massive fist under my nose to remind me that the cuffing was always near. But I did discover a number of fakes in the short time I was at the circus. The sharp-shooter, who shot out of the air anything and everything his stooge threw into it, used buck-shot; he could not miss. He was a bald-headed runt, dressed, cowboy fashion, in a pair of motheaten hairy chaps several sizes too big for him, because, instead of being bow-legged as a cinema rustler should be, he was knock-kneed. He always appeared in the ring unshaven, believing this made him look like Joe Ryan, then the screen’s most beloved bad man. The lion, into whose maw our young lady tamer put her blonde-painted grey locks, must have been the grandson of the character Daniel chummed up with. When nobody had time to put it in its cage, it just strolled around among the company, and if it got in anybody’s way, they simply gave it a cuff and it slunk under what was available as cover, like a cur caught scrounging in the dustbin. The clown said the fierce teeth it displayed during the performance were rubber, and if, after yawning, it shut its maw sharply, it would bounce open again.

My efforts to make fame, if not fortune, came to an abrupt end when I saw some rehearsals with the other performing animals. In rehearsal the sugar given as a reward at the performance was replaced by the whip. To see a huge grizzly bear, its maw viciously clasped in a metal muzzle, grovelling on the ground as the trainer stands over him and slashes him about the head is an ordeal. Nobody remonstrated, in the belief that at the first sign of weakness the trainer would perish. The idea that it would perhaps be better not to have performing animals if their training involved so much brutality never entered their heads.

So I walked out and home. Apart from anything else the promised cuffs from the ham fists did finally land on my person. I was often beaten at home but home-made beatings are always more tolerable than other people’s. I crept into our street a little hero to my schoolmates, who thought that my adventure in the circus had raised me to a status they could never dream of. I returned to my own home to be fed by my sister, hugged and wept over by my mother and thrashed by the schoolmaster. He had long ago given up the idea that my budding promise as a politician would ever bear fruit.

A few months later I left school, having achieved nothing, least of all in my studies. But good luck met me in the labour market. By chance I noticed a little factory down an entry to a yard. It was a factory for building hosiery machines and though three stories high employed only about eight workers. The owner Mr Arkwright, who was still working at the age of eighty, was a direct descendant of the original Arkwright. He took me on as a tea-boy, errand boy and non-indentured apprentice for the fabulous wage of ten shillings a week. My mother was delighted,
for at this time hundreds and thousands of workers were being laid off to join the biggest queue anywhere in Britain, the queue to the Labour Exchange.

However a year of tea-making and errand-running on the one hand, and learning nothing and receiving no increase in my princely salary on the other made me think of moving on. I was finally convinced by one of our workers. He had once kept a pub and had been deprived of his licence for not observing the time laws. By some misfortune he discovered that a certain inspector in the City of Leicester police was my mother's brother and therefore my uncle. Moreover this was the very officer who had caught him serving drinks after closing time. He decided to blame me for the unpleasantness that my very officious uncle had brought down on his head - and for the loss, to his pocket, of what, in those days, was considered a gold mine. I took advantage of the fact that my sister had recently married a man employed at the huge Wolsey works, and managed, with his help, to get taken on there.

But the persistent deepening of the depression with its attendant growth in the army of unemployed could not pass our works by, no matter how huge they were. More and more often we were sent home because there was nothing to do. How long it would be before we were sent home never to return was anybody's guess, but everybody guessed perfectly correctly that one day or another it would come to pass. Somehow I became the possessor of a little pamphlet called How To Join The Royal Navy. Naturally there was the usual slogan 'Join the Navy see the world', but, equally naturally, there was no mention of the old sailors' bitter addition 'Serve twelve years and see the next'. Not knowing any sailors, old or young, I was little troubled by this. Sailors were such a rarity in our town that the appearance of one on the streets caused heads to turn. Perhaps that is why no ship of the Royal Navy has ever been christened 'HMS Leicester', although neighbouring Nottingham appears on the stern of a cruiser and I doubt if there are many more Nottingham men in the Navy than Leicester men. At least our city has one Naval hero. In 1926 a Royal Naval sloop was sunk in a hurricane in the West Indies after an heroic struggle by all the officers and men against fearful odds, in seas which made impossible the launching of the ship's boats. One man remained at his post sending out distress signals as the water flooded his wireless office and, when all power from the ship's engines had broken down, continued to send out signals from a battery powered set. He went down with the ship, a Leicester man whose father kept a well-known pub in the city called Spitall House.

But no one will suppose that a sixteen-year old boy was moved by ideas of heroism to read a pamphlet on how to join the Royal Navy. In my case the urge was certainly the ominous spectre of unemployment. I despatched my letter to the nearest recruiting office, which was in Nottingham, and in a few days was invited to come to that city and try my luck. I needed luck. The physical examination went well enough. It was when I was faced with the ordinary, standard seven examination in arithmetic that I flopped. I was already preparing myself for a repeat performance of my empty handed return from the circus - not this time as the prodigal son to be cherished by those who had worried, but as the son who had failed the most simple exam.

However, the recruiting officer, an ex-naval chief petty officer, was reluctant to let me go, possibly because all other showings had been in my favour - or maybe because he was working on a commission basis. Anyway he quietly showed me where I was going wrong, tore up the disgraced paper and gave me another try. The next morning, with no more school tests to face, I was on my way to London for a more stringent medical examination. Whatever those doctors thought about the contents of a candidate's head, they were determined to find out the most minor defect of his body. All day we were passed from one doctor to another, each dealing with some little part of our anatomy in which he was obviously a specialist. Short of turning us inside out there was nothing they did not do, and when, towards evening, they concluded their
collective examination not an authority in the world could doubt their conclusion that we were physically fit for service in His Britannic Majesty’s Royal Navy.

About 8 pm we left Liverpool Street Station for Harwich, bound for the Royal Navy Training Establishment at Shotley.

2 We’re in the Navy Now

As I stepped out of the train on Harwich station with the five other boys enrolled with me I exclaimed ‘What a strong smell of salt!’ Whereupon one of my companions looked scathingly at me and replied, ‘What did you expect? This is the sea, you know’. Not wishing to appear a complete moron I remained silent. It would have lowered my prestige to the lowest mark on the prestige barometer to have told him that for the first time in my sixteen years I was about to set eyes on the real live sea. (Later I was to be struck by a strange feature of the British. For them, to travel thousands of miles by foot or ship is a mere pastime, and all over the world one can find Britishers in the most outlandish of places, but to take a half-hour journey by train is difficult. London was then only two hours by train from Leicester but if any of our friends made that trip he was looked on as the achiever of a remarkable feat.) Now I felt very far indeed from my home and the street which had been my playground.

Before I had time to become philosophical a man in uniform approached us and without ceremony told us to follow him. We were to discover that he was a chief petty officer but the sight of his uniform, differing little from that of a commissioned officer, so filled us with awe that he might have been an admiral. Out by the jetty it was dark. The little steamboat we boarded was the biggest steamboat I had ever seen although the forecastle they squeezed us
into was so small there was hardly room to change one’s mind. Half way across the water, it paused by a sloop, HMS *Tring*, on board which we would make our first trip to sea; but that was more than a year later. Following our guide, whose vocabulary seemed to consist of grunts of ‘Right’, ‘Left’, ‘Quickly’, we came to a long low building, facing a wide roadway, and were hustled through a door into the presence of some other petty officers, and one officer with two thick gold bands on his sleeves.

The first question almost took our breath away. It was ‘How much money have you?’ Wanting to be accepted as honest boys each one of us gave a truthful reply. Those who had more than half a crown were obliged to surrender the surplus to a petty officer, receiving in return a receipt. Boys in this establishment, we learned, were not allowed to have more than half a crown in their possession at any one time. The next question concerned cigarettes. If murder was the most heinous crime in civilian life, smoking before the age of eighteen had priority in this establishment. The anti-smoking lecture occupied, I think, the major part of this midnight pep talk, which finished with announcement that there were only two kinds of people in the training establishment, the Quick and the Dead, and that it was hoped we would hurry to join the Quick.

We were told a little history. The road outside was, by tradition, known as the quarter-deck and ‘boys second class’ (such was the exalted position we now enjoyed) were not allowed to walk on the quarter-deck but must always cross it at the double. This, we were to find out, was one of the many naval words which we all and sundry had to learn, and it meant run.

In a few minutes we were following our petty officer across the holy of holies, walking. He brought us to a long narrow street with a corrugated iron roof. ‘This’, said our guide, ‘is the Long Covered Way.’ Was there somewhere a Short Covered Way? The morning would do to find that out. What I, at least, was struck by was the complete silence that prevailed. It was so infectious that we talked in whispers and tried to tread as lightly as possible. It was this silence that first impressed me with the high degree of discipline in the school. On either side, long one-storey buildings, separated from each other by neat grass plots, stretched away into the darkness, the gable ends with the entrance doors giving on to the ‘Way’. In those buildings four thousand boys between the ages of fifteen-and-a-half and seventeen were sleeping. I could not imagine any public school or similar civilian establishment being so completely engulfed in perfect silence. Anywhere else some of the young inmates would have been having a romp or a pillow fight, but not in the Shotley Training Establishment. Moreover we met no guards or proctors lurking in the hope of catching some breaker of the peace. Such upholders of the law were not needed here.

When our leader ducked into a door somewhere in the middle of the ‘Way’, we did likewise, although no words had been spoken. It was the showers. In a small ante-room six heaps of naval clothing lay on a long bench. When we had showered, these clothes would replace our civilian dress and turn us into naval property. Although clean, the clothes were far from new and came, of course, off the peg. Nobody had bothered which peg, so the little chaps got the big sizes and vice versa. We didn’t grumble, after all we weren’t going to a Royal Review. So with a little swapping and plenty of subdued laughter we managed to soften down the gawky scarecrow look, though the soft-looking little pork-pie hat, lacking the famous ribbon with golden HMS on it, undid the improvement. Before putting on the real thing we had to prove ourselves ‘boys first class’, and that was almost a year and a half away.

Showered and dressed we continued our walk through what seemed endless territory. Calling at the cook house (we did not know that here it was called a galley), we collected some big pans, then entered one of the dormitory houses where a single light illuminated a long table with forms on either side. Never shall I forget that first supper. Never shall I forget that first supper. I almost whooped with pleased surprise. Tripe and Onions! The aristocrat of plebeian dishes, the first violin in the working man’s culinary orchestra. Fish and chips may be in greater demand but
compared with tripe and onions they are base, for fish and chips are eaten with the fingers from a newspaper, whereas tripe and onions are served on a plate, with a glittering knife and fork. By the time we had finished we were convinced that if the Navy always ate that, then just as an army marched on its stomach, so a fleet sailed on its galleys.

Then to bed, as Mr Pepys wrote, though being Secretary to the Admiralty he should have known enough naval parlance to write 'turn in'. We added our unconscious sounds of sleep to the cacophony produced by about sixty other new entrants who had arrived in the previous two or three days and who, like us, were now known as 'Nozzers'.

It was only in the morning that we got an idea of how immense was this school. Where the rivers Ouse and Stow meet to pour into the sea between Felixstowe to the north and Harwich to the south, they form a promontory. About three miles up from the mouth of the river a huge wall reaches from one side of the promontory to the other, and behind this wall lies the Shotley Training Establishment, equipped with every facility. Within its territory were, besides the living quarters, numerous specialist buildings, a swimming pool, a church, and several acres of playing-fields.

The complex included not just one school but several, and what was most praiseworthy about all of them was that they taught nothing unnecessary. There was a gunnery school, a school of seamanship, a school for academic subjects, a signals school, a wireless school and, not least, a physical culture school. A class consisted of sixty boys divided into two groups, A and B, who together filled one of the long dormitories. For each class there were two permanent instructors, one for gunnery and one for seamanship, who were also responsible for the cleanliness of the dormitory and the behaviour of the boys. For academic subjects and in the gymnasium there were special teachers who had nothing to do with conduct in the dormitories.

The day was divided into four lessons -schoolwork, gunnery, seamanship and physical culture – with each group taking one or another subject in turn. From four o'clock, when studies finished, until supper at seven the boys, who had already had a daily two-hour lesson in the gym, spent all their spare time on the playing fields. Food was regular and plentiful, in confirmation of which claim I would like to draw attention to the fact that it was impossible to get volunteers to help in the galley. The number of volunteers in the kitchen of an organisation is the best indication of the state of its food supply.

It was the ideal school. Only one thing prevented it from becoming the best and the best-known school in the country. That thing was nothing other than class prejudice. Nobody will venture to suggest that a school so well equipped and run, and with a permanent contingent of four thousand pupils, could not produce skilled and erudite people who would eventually develop into first-class naval leaders. But the boys from Shotley were not destined to rise so high. Informed people may argue that every boy had an opportunity to be attached to the Advanced Class. This was true. The period of basic schooling was twelve weeks. Those who at the end of this period failed to pass any of their examinations gave up academic subjects and thereafter devoted all their training time to the other subjects I have mentioned. Should a boy pass all his exams, he was shifted to another class and remained in the school maybe six months longer. But in the long run it meant nothing. When he left to begin life in the Navy, he was a 'boy first class' like the others who had never done advanced studies. His further advancement depended entirely upon himself. It is legitimate to wonder what the Advanced Class was for.

I have remarked that the standard of discipline in the school was very high. It must be emphasised that although the cane was an official form of punishment, it was far from being the basis of this discipline. The cane was restricted to certain crimes, such as smoking, and only the
The discipline appealed to me. Only a few days after I had begun my classes (interrupted by the very bad effects of a vaccination which kept me in the hospital for six weeks), I realised that I liked what I had seen of the Navy up to then, and my liking grew as I progressed. From the beginning I felt a change for the better taking place in me. The rapidity with which everything was done, the order that existed everywhere, the regular good solid food, the endeavour to improve our physical strength and agility—all these were acceptable and pleasant. Furthermore the training in the intricacies of seamanship and the technicalities of naval gunnery were bound to widen the horizon of even the most backward boy, and I did not consider myself in that category. My interest in sport also grew. Each dormitory had its football and cricket teams and I played in both, which was an innovation for me. Moreover I found myself making good progress with my lessons. At the first examinations I topped the class in gunnery, a position I kept to the end.

Another influence was pride in the Navy, gained mainly from romantic stories of a life on the ocean wave. The school itself taught us to be proud, but about things which in later years always seemed to me superficial. We had to be proud of cleanliness, both of our persons and our surroundings. We were taught to be proud that the parquet floor of our dormitory shone like burnished steel, that the row of thirty beds was in every detail a perfect line, that even the...
tooth, clothes and hair brushes on our bedtables formed their own separate perfect line. Our clothes were another object of the pride taught in the school. There was a gauge for every length, a gauge for the width of the bell in the trousers, a gauge for the cut in the jumper, even a gauge for the distance between the three rows of tape on the blue collar.

That was the `pride` instilled in us in that school, and nobody could change it, for it had been ordained by My Lords of the Admiralty. These highly educated specialists, with enough gold braid between them to gild the statue of Nelson, had devoted tremendous mental energy to this vital problem of defence. One wonders if the Lords carried gauges themselves.

Certainly the petty officers did, and whipped them out the moment they saw a suspect article of clothing. I personally have witnessed a naval commander turning a pair of duck trousers inside out to see if the little fob pocket was washed white. But the pride which was absolutely essential to such a force as the Royal Navy – in its history, its most outstanding achievements, what it stood for, how it had grown to its present powerful position – was completely ignored. Only once in one and a half years at that school did I hear an officer lecturing boys about the Navy, and that was a farce as the officer was not a commissioned officer but a warrant officer and he tried to tell us the old chestnut about every sailor carrying an admiral’s barge in his ditty box. (I cannot say baton because admirals do not carry them, and I am sure if they did, the sailors’ awe of them would soon give way to laughter at the sight of full admirals in full dress toting a decorated stick of Blackpool rock.)

So this wonderful school with its huge intake of young material, the kind that every government considers the most apt for educating in its own beliefs, gave a training that though effective was limited – not by the ability of the pupils but in the social conception. This limitation could be summed up in the words `we and you`. Of course we had met this attitude in our elementary schools, but there we did not live with it and consequently it did not bother us. Here in the naval school we were side by side with it every day.

Of course the naval authorities did not admit to class feelings, not at all. In their view they were doing us a service. We were being trained and, up to a point, educated absolutely free of charge and moreover were being paid for it. All that was true, but what were we being trained for? The young man who pays high fees to go to college is not tied to that college for the remainder of his active life. On graduating he chooses his own occupation, and nothing except his own ability or lack of it will prevent him from making a success of it. We in contrast were being turned out to fill our allotted slots in the Royal Navy.

From Shotley came that extraordinary figure so essential to the efficiency of any military arm, the non-commissioned officer. The Navy had technically expert non-commissioned officers because the Navy’s mobile unit, the ship, allowed the carrying of large-scale systems of instruments more complex and highly developed than land armies could carry with them. As a result the non-commissioned specialist had to pass a series of training courses that in sum total added up to a number of years of intensive study. Gunnery instructors and torpedo instructors, for instance, had to do five training courses, each longer than the one before and the last taking almost two years, and between each course they were required to put in a minimum of two years’ practical experience. Moreover the gaining of qualifications had to be timed with promotion in rank, so that any qualification beyond the second could be granted only to a leading seaman or a petty officer. Thus it was that with three years’ study of very intricate subjects behind him and after many years of service and experience, a man rarely went higher than petty officer and, more humiliating still, was obliged to stand to attention, salute and say `sir’ to a sixteen year old midshipman.
Even this much promotion was difficult to obtain. World War I had led to the creation of an excessive number of petty officers – some examined one day and officially rated the next - with the result, in the late twenties and early thirties, that it seemed a seaman had little chance of making petty officer rank before he took up his pension. To rise from able seaman to leading seaman a rating had to wait six years after having passed the exam, and to make sure he had no charges of misdemeanour against him. Another factor was the parsimony to which the then government was resorting in its financial troubles. After the first gunnery course a rating was obliged to wait two years before applying to enter the second unless he had obtained more than eighty-five per cent in his first examinations; and the examiners were verbally instructed that no one should get more than eighty-three per cent. The cheese-paring then affecting the service not only inconvenienced individuals but was certainly a contribution to some of the Navy's setbacks in the early days of the Second World War.

Should any former pupil of Shotley reach the highest rating possible for a lower deck man and attain full specialist rating (known significantly as 'non-substantial'), it was of no help to him on reaching pension age at forty. However high his non-substantial rating, he received no official confirmation of it and had nothing to show for having spent years working for a qualification. Of course, as far as gunnery ratings were concerned it mattered little, for his qualifications were of no use to him in civilian life. But to get a torpedo rating one had to be a qualified electrician, and an engine room specialist had a profession much in demand in civilians. The truth of the matter was that civilian engineers with diplomas might complain that they had paid money for their education, and that government subsidised specialists would be a serious threat to their employment. The Wizard of Oz hit the belaying pin right on the head when he told the straw-stuffed scarecrow that he had brains all right, it was the piece of paper that was missing.

This may seem a digression from the story of my own progress through the training ship, but it is in fact closely related to it. When the fifteen- or sixteen-year old recruit signed his very one sided contract, he agreed to a clause stating that his period of service should begin at the age of eighteen. That is, he served on average two years which were not accounted to him. The authorities' justification for this was, again, that he was being trained free of charge; and again the question was ‘What for?’ Certainly not for the Bluebell Chorus, for all the skill and know-how that his training gave him was for the exclusive use of the Navy. So the very first contract the recruit signed set the pattern of limiting him in numerous ways.

If this school had been used to develop freely the talent of the most outstanding pupils, uninterrupted by class prejudice, there would naturally have been a closer understanding between the wardroom and the lower deck, and one of the factors that made Invergordon possible would have been removed.

In spite of these shortcomings, most of the boys undergoing training were satisfied with their lot. There were some runaways, but their rarity only confirms my claim. During my time there only one break-out occurred and the participants were strange bedmates. One was a reform school boy whom liberal minded do-gooders thought the Navy might straighten out and the other was a weakling who often lay in bed at night quietly crying for his mother.

As for myself, I can only say that the Royal Naval Training Establishment gave me the physical and moral strength to live through the terrible adversities that for a number of years were to dog my steps.
About the time that our class took its final examinations, the Admiralty called for ten volunteers for training in the Submarine Service. By naval regulations boys were not accepted in the Submarine Service and even Abs [Able-bodied Seaman] had to have a non-substantial rating, preferably Seaman Torpedo Man. In spite of this, ten volunteers were taken from the Training Ship every year to be sent for three months to the Submarine School at Gosport and then to a serving flotilla, where they were attached to a submarine, ostensibly for practical experience.

In defiance of the horror stories about ‘death traps’ in which the men who dived below the waves never knew if they would come up again, I found myself lined up with nine other volunteers outside the building where eighteen months earlier I had surrendered my surplus cash and listened to grave warnings about smoking. Then I had been wearing my one and only suit which mother had talked a local tailor into making at the lowest HP terms ever bargained for. Now I was in full naval uniform complete with cap ribbon inscribed in gold letters HMS Ganges – the name of the old wooden wall which was the foundation of the school. The dream of every Shotley boy was being realised for the ten of us, whilst deep in the covered way groups of other boys, not as yet qualified for this great privilege, stood watching us in silent envy. A regulating petty officer came out of the building carrying our papers, a railway warrant and a warrant for food to be spent when we changed trains in London. He looked along the row, stopped when his glance fell on me and said, ‘Wincott, if you go on in the way you are now, you will be an admiral’. Prophetic, but not in the way he meant.

With an official-looking paper in my hand, allowing one dinner for ten men, I walked proudly through the imposing portals of the restaurant on one of London’s larger railway stations, my ‘subordinates’ (for I had been put in charge of the party) grouped behind me. We stared around at the marble pillars and elaborate décor suggesting the anteroom to a Roman baths. In return one or two of the diners stared at us as if we had arrived from another planet. Then I saw, moving in our direction, a very pompous gentleman with a rather long frock coat, the tails swinging with his strides. On closer scrutiny his face looked like a plate of mashed potato with three prunes stuck in it. It wore a supercilious expression. ‘What do you want?’ he demanded, gazing to one side as if he expected an answer from the people at the far table. I thrust the paper under his button nose and he drew back as if it were a dead rat. It struck me that this person was something to do with the waiters, but in a slightly more exalted position than the ones who did the serving. He twiddled the paper in his hands, looking about the place for some lower menial to attend to us. But he had missed his cue, and at last he crooked a finger and a waiter with a number on his lapel came over to where we were standing. The new arrival took the paper, spent a considerable time reading the contents, and then in a sad disappointed voice said ‘Follow me’, and made for the door through which we had just come.
Neither he nor his chief had deigned to address potential customers of this high-class establishment as ‘sir’. That of course was nothing new to us, but if a policeman must address a criminal as ‘sir’, cannot a sailor of His Britannic Majesty’s Royal Navy expect that courtesy from a flunkey? We were due for further indignities. He led us out of the station building through a side door into a dirty street where trucks were unloading and crates and other luggage were spread all over the causeway. In his immaculate white front and creased trousers our guide stood out like a shop-window dummy in an attic. Then he swung down unswept, stone steps to lead us into a semi-dark basement where a trestle table with no cloth stood between two long benches.

‘Sit down here and wait’, he said, and without further ado hurried back to his white table cloths, crystal and polished knives and forks. In a minute or two appeared a boy who must have been the fourth assistant to the boots. He carried a huge jug of beer, collected some glasses from behind a partition and started pouring it out for us. At last we had obtained service, the service to which, according to the snobs of the railway company, sailors were entitled – down in the basement because that was the only place suitable to our position, and beer because whoever heard the word ‘sailor’ pronounced without the prefix ‘drunken’? None of us had drunk beer before. We were only seventeen and in those days young boys seen inside a pub were considered bad characters. There was an old man scraping barrels in the basement. When we complained to him about this treatment he said, ‘You’re lucky. I was kicked out of a place like this when I came home from France in early 1919. If you want to eat with the toffs, you’ll have to wait for another war. Then they’ll pull you in.’

We were not old enough to appreciate his irony, but at least we were consoled to feel that our shabby treatment did not have the entire support of all the railway people. Coming up from Harwich to London we had been exuberant, joking and singing songs in our joy at having finished the training period successfully. Now all those high spirits had gone and we were half way to Portsmouth before we returned to normal. But by the time we entered the portals of HMS Dolphin, the Naval Submarine Depot, we had forgotten all about it.

Two petty officers, our future instructors, conducted us to the living quarters of the crews. This was an old wooden ship without masts but with a number of sheds on the top, whose sloping roofs made it look like Noah’s Ark. We occupied two large rooms on deck, with the boats’ crews a deck below us. At the other side of the jetty were secured several submarines, mostly L-boats, and some distance ahead of our Noah’s Ark two World War I submarines were tied up. With the aid of these craft our instructors, old submarine hands who had been all through the war, we were to learn what makes a submarine dive, surface, remain at a given depth, and the rudiments of all its other mysterious workings.

As we had direct contact with grown sailors, a privilege strictly forbidden in the Training Ship, we soon began to learn what was special about a submariner. There is no doubt that the peculiar life they led, the physical closeness in the confined spaces of the boat plus the actual danger that existed in those days, went to make these men of a very different character from general service men. Not very long before we arrived, the disaster to the L-24 had taken place. Off Portland Bill the boat had surfaced right before the bows of the battleship Resolution which had cut it in two with the loss of all hands. One felt that this tragedy had left its mark on the remaining crews in an exceptional manner.

Most members of submarine crews were married – it was for the extra money needed to keep their families that they had chosen this service. In addition most of them were what was known in the Navy as ‘natives’, that is their wives lived in the ports where they were stationed, although if the husband was drafted to a foreign station, the wife returned to their home town. Submariners’ wives were always at the gates to meet their husbands coming ashore, especially
when they had been to sea on exercises. As a result, many of the men’s wives were known to
other members of the crew and even to other crews. When the news of the L-24 tragedy hit
Portsmouth, the wives of the crew rushed to the base to confirm the report. It may seem
strange, but they wanted to be told by the men from the other boats – the men who knew their
husbands, who had been perhaps the last to see them alive, may even have spoken by
Semaphore only minutes before they dived to oblivion.

It is not difficult to understand that in this close-knit community the sailors’ reaction to what had
happened was known only to themselves. They were not morbid, there was no rush of requests
to be returned to general service, a right they had because in those days service in submarines
was entirely voluntary. Neither were there expansive demonstrations of sorrow and dismay. The
nightly singing which always began spontaneously ceased without a hint or a word from anyone.
But the conversation, if subdued, was not about the tragedy. There was none of the horseplay
that sometimes broke out on the mess deck, but neither was there a word of the catastrophe. It
was only later that I witnessed how profoundly they had taken the sudden death of their
comrades.

About a month or two had passed when a ‘Sale of Dead Men’s Effects’ was announced. Such a
sale was a tradition after the death of any man in the Navy. All his kit was spread out on the deck
or, if in the depot, on the ground. A Writer stood by with the pay-book and then the most able
amateur auctioneer began to dispose of the articles, trying to get as much money as possible;
for the proceeds of the sale must go to the widow or mother of the dead man. No money
changed hands. The bidder just offered a sum and if he was not out-bidded, the Writer marked it
in the pay-book to be withheld from his pay. When the kit of one of the L-24’s crew, Leading
Seaman Dempsey, was auctioned, a large crowd of his former comrades gathered round. The
regulating petty officer held up the first article and immediately bids were made way above its
actual worth. Not one first bid took an article, but time after time it was increased to what was,
for sailors, a fabulous sum. I stood entranced and watched a pair of ordinary scissors bought for
the sum of five pounds and then thrown back again to be bid for once more until this one pair of
scissors realised twenty-five pounds – and that in the values of 1924. I knew from the way they
were bidding that several of the men would not go to the pay-table at all that coming pay-day.

In this way they expressed their sorrow at the loss of their comrades, and they were quite happy
to think that when the widow received the money realised by the sale, she would not know who
had contributed to it.

The special relationship between submariners was demonstrated even more clearly when I had
the opportunity to see officers and men sharing the confined space aboard. If the officers were
dining and a rating needed to pass from one end of the boat to the other, the only barrier
between them was the rating’s ‘Excuse me’. But the affinity between everyone in the boat was
not based on close physical contact alone, but upon the deep understanding of their
dependence on one another for their safety. There could be no room for a mistake even by the
rating with the simplest of duties. Commander George Grider of the US Navy tells how in World
War II a rating turned a switch in the wrong direction, almost blowing to destruction the
submarine and its crew – and by then there had appeared two generations of new boats fitted
with safety appliances never dreamt of in my day. The cramped space, the permanent proximity
of officers and men, and the dependence on each man’s quick thinking certainly brought about
an understanding of each other which, had it been fostered in the Training School, might have
been an attribute of the whole Navy and not just the peculiarity of this specialist branch. It may
be argued that in two wars the Navy met almost insurmountable adversity and came out
victorious, and that therefore the old system proved itself. No one will attempt to denigrate the
Navy’s triumph, but there were other factors in the winning of World War II, one of which is
summed up in the words of Shaw: ‘The big mistake Hitler was that he frightened the British people, and you cannot frighten the British people.’ Although not a language expert as Shaw was, I venture to add what he meant but left unsaid: ‘and get away with it’.

But let us be honest: in both wars the British Navy had numerical superiority. The question of today is whether the Navy, no longer numerically superior, can face the forthcoming trial, a trial far greater and more devastating than any of the past.

The Training Ship had made me well disciplined and physically fit and had given me a much broader mental horizon. The Submarines, however, infused me with ideas which general service could not have supplied. During my time in the submarines I was close to two incidents which came near enough to tragedy to make the unforgettable. In one I experienced that atmosphere of tense waiting when a boat has dived and not reappeared on schedule – an atmosphere perhaps more nerve-racking than the actual confirmation of a tragedy. Luckily the missing boat surfaced in the end, but for almost two hours our boat took part in the search, watching a huge red flag tied to a submarine’s periscope making great circles on the waters of Torbay while the boat hunted underwater for its companion. It looked like a film of some religious visitation. On the parent ship and the surrounding submarines every eye was glued to that visitation whose presence seemed an order for silence covering the whole area. The waters of Torbay are not noted for their enormous depths, but trapped in a submarine at any depth the men are in grave peril.

It was this peril that always strengthened the men’s unity and determination, as was illustrated for me one day when our second captain, in the manner of an Englishman observing that ‘it looks like rain’, remarked to the coxswain: ‘Do you know, Smith, our batteries are giving off a high degree of arsenic gas’. No panic, not even large eyes looking in fright for the way out. Just the most casual manning of stations to begin a search for the cause, with one or two jokes bandied about hinting that perhaps the smell came from somebody’s unwashed feet.

The submariners were full of anecdotes about their life and duties. One was about a signalman on the conning tower of a boat leading a flotilla steaming line ahead, whose hat was caught by a gust of wind and sent flying away astern. The signalman turned and with his fingers semaphored to his hat, now floating in the water, ‘Return to harbour’, then turned to face forward where his eyes should have been all the time. Half an hour later the captain ordered him to signal ‘Line abreast’, but when the signalman turned, not one of the five boats of the flotilla was to be seen. The ever-vigilant signalman of the following boat had picked up the instruction directed at the hat, taken it for the real thing and passed it down the line.

Each year there was a competition for a cup given by Admiral S, in which, at a signal from the parent ship, the submarines were to crash dive, surface, fire five rounds from the 4.5 gun, crash dive again and surface. The whole operation was stopwatch-timed by a team of umpires. The most delaying and annoying part of this operation demanding speed and perfect team-work was the removal of the gun sights. These extremely delicate telescopes have to be treated like so many new born babies. To dive with gun sights shipped would be to destroy a most expensive instrument. In the competition, therefore, it was necessary to unship them carefully, place them into their individual boxes and take them into the boat at a walk. One day just before the contest, two well-known jokers told the captain that they had thought up a scheme to reduce the operation with the sights to a minimum. The captain was sceptical, even more so when the men said they could not disclose the whole plan to him, but when they gave their word that if the sights were ruined they would pay for them out of their own pockets, he finally acquiesced. In the competition that boat had completed the whole operation before rival boats were halfway through it. Most impressed, the admiral sent a stream of signals demanding an
explanation from the captain. When the captain called the authors of the victory to him, the men looked at each other, grinned, and then one opened his closed fist: ‘We put one of these on each end of the sights, sir, and dived with them shipped’. The captain looked down at the extended hand and burst into uncontrollable laughter, for there lay a certain rubber good.

Whether this story is true or not is of not great importance; what matters is what the story illustrates – the incomparable ingenuity of the submariner, the man whose devotion to duty so all-engulfing that it marks even his moments of frivolity.

Although I was almost on the threshold of eighteen when I left the Submarine Service, and therefore in naval understanding very junior indeed and with no right to an opinion, I had already learned enough to see that the ‘drunken sailor’ was no longer drunk enough, and not often enough drunk, to live up to his place in folklore. True, he had a long battle before him before he could change the ideas of badly-informed writers and old-fashioned singers who somehow persisted in believing that English breweries worked for the Navy alone. To me it was obvious that I had joined a band of men who were in the first place sober, sentimental home-lovers, whose frequent absences from their closest bred in them a firmer tie with their homes than many people who come home from work every day care to show. A married submariner, for instance, always carried a photograph of his wife and family in his ditty box and whenever he wrote a letter, which was often the box stood before him with the photograph on top for him to look at.

His patriotism was not of the bombastic dulce et decorum est pro patria mori sort, but the more sensible dulce et decorum est to live pro patria.

I passed out of the Submarine Service very reluctantly, as General Service then seemed some kind of degradation. But the Navy never throws its boys, second or first class, to the lion until they are eighteen.

Being about five minutes from that age when I joined a cruiser I was victualled in the separate mess for boys where the ruling power was the PTI [Physical Training Instructor]. For some reason never explained, it was deemed that this rating had the magic power to protect boys from contamination by the big-mouthed, boozing, brawling blue-jackets come three or four years older than us in the crew. On a three-thousand-ton cruiser it is hard to realise any form of separation, but that was the rule. Six months later I passed through the stage of OD [Ordinary Seaman], the most despised rating in the Navy, and attained the exalted position of AB. So, at the age of Eighteen years and six months, I had the right to indulge in all the vices, real and imaginary, which the PTI was supposed to have defended me from only a short time before.

My attaining this position at the age of eighteen-and-a-half was a tremendous achievement at that time, for My Lords had decided that in the interests of economy, that most abused word in any language, no OD could pass for AB until he was nineteen. By a bare two days I missed coming under the axe of naval parsimony. The author of this measure must have dreamt every night about saving the country’s finances – at the expense of the lowest paid, of course. One morning he must have woken screaming ‘Eureka!’, or whatever it is that people shout when making monumental discoveries, for in his brilliance he had discovered a means of saving enough money to build one bumboat in one year. The bony fingers of the grim skeleton of economy seemed to have gripped the Admiralty financial experts by some particularly sensitive nerve at that time, for just then new pay scales were introduced for all lower deck ratings joining after 1925. These new ratings, registered as X ratings against the J ratings on the old scale, were to be recruited according to the requirements of each year. In time the J ratings would be phased out altogether or would at least be heavily outnumbered; at which point the financial
experts, confident that a protest from the remaining handful of J ratings would get no support, could level the Js and the Xs.

What these financial strategists failed to take into account was the iron-clad fact that the crisis was global and was not to be deflected from its relentless course by half measures taken by the British Navy. Time and the deepening crisis were to force them to abandon their long term plot of Js and Xs, and to plunge them into a reckless gamble which even in a panic no player should have risked. But six years had still to pass before this gamble was attempted.

For us, the men who had joined at the pre-1925 pay rates, the new arrangement meant nothing. We took it that, as far as we were concerned, the old rates would go on unchanged, until the last man receiving them reached retirement age. When the ratings on the new scales first appeared on the ships, a year or two after their recruitment, nobody on the lower deck paid any attention to them. Only when, in 1931, the pay question became a grim reality did I discover that the company of my own ship, the Norfolk, had quite a large contingent of the post-1925 entrants.

Before I could make that discovered, however, the Navy willy-nilly furthered my education in the devious ways life is lived, not only in Britain but in many other countries. Having been sent from the cruiser to the RN Barracks at Devonport, I found myself right in the middle of the General Strike. Detachments, squads and even bigger units were leaving every day for different parts of the strike-bound Britain. Luck on a small scale, which always seems to accompany me, put me in a small detachment with a petty officer and a very young lieutenant in command. Our destination was, of course, unknown to us, but the fact we left the barracks in a truck suggested we were not bound for a distant target: the RN Barracks at Devonport has its own railway platform and major land journeys by seaman always begin there.

As we left the barracks our officers quietly ordered us to put our rifles and bayonets on the floor of the truck, explaining just as quietly that it was unwise to make our arms too obvious as we drove throughout the streets of Devonport. This rather surprised us. We believed we were going about our legitimate business. But we were all under the influence of `Theirs not to reason why`, and did as we were told. Things became even more intriguing when we discovered our destination to be the C-in-C’s main wireless station, standing in isolation on a cliff above the entrance to Plymouth harbour. There we pitched two bell-tents and kept a round-the-clock guard on the installation. Nobody explained the purpose of this very extraordinary measure. But camping out in Cornwall’s beautiful scenery, feeding high and rarely bothered by our lieutenant for anything except guard duties, we were having a good time and did not trouble much about whether there was any point to it. We were there about three weeks and in all that period I was the only guard compelled to demand `Halt! Who goes there?` A low rumbling voice answered me out of the darkness, and when its owner came within my vision I realised I was looking into the face of a Negro.

I was doubly disappointed – first when I learned he had been born in the district and except on fairgrounds had never seen a coconut in his life; and second, because the sight of him had filled me with wild ideas about the invasion which I was to bear the brunt of. Apart from the sudden appearance of the Negro, the whole three weeks passed without incident. Then, in the Detailed For Draft Office, somebody discovered us. It is said that the people in this office despatch individuals to various ships and establishments by the method of the shut eyes and the pin. One of them must have used a railway spike to get us out of Cornwall. However they may be, it was suddenly decided that our job was one for the marines, so we piled our equipment and ourselves into the truck and back we went to where it had started. All over Britain the General Strike was raging as students drove buses, unloaded hips and in general did their bit towards strike-breaking while we guarded them. Strange that these same students should have fathered
those who today stand in picket lines, march in demonstrations and teach otherwise peaceful workers how to stick a boot in a policeman’s face.

Then a whole battalion of seamen from the depot were despatched on an aircraft carrier to the Clyde for the purpose of guarding ‘important objectives’ - that is, the mines and factories belonging to private individuals where the workers were on strike. We were dumped on the Hood which was anchored off Clydebank and there for six weeks we stood guard over holy-stones and wash deck gear until again somebody remembered our existence and brought us back in comfortable railway carriages. It was at that time that the question of reducing the sailor’s ‘over-generous pay’ was being considered - no doubt to make up for the vast cost of our useless round-trip to Scotland.

On returning to the barracks I read a notice calling for volunteers for service on the China station. It took but a few seconds to write out my request, and soon I was in the middle of all the rigmaroles connected with going on draft. I found myself with about six weeks’ advance money and seven days’ foreign draft leave. The leave finished a dead heat with advance, and, in a flurry of goodbyes over numerous glasses of lemonade, I returned from home broke, but full of enthusiasm for the glamorous East.

4 China Station

My enthusiasm suffered a sudden check at the sight of the ship which was to take us out to relieve another crew. This ship was not exactly one of the fleet that Julius Caesar brought over to see what lay behind the white cliffs of Albion, but how it had stayed afloat during the war was a mystery. A couple of shells dropped within two hundred yards must have sunk it. It was a half-oil, half-coal fuelled, four-funnel cruiser, aboard which, against all naval traditions and regulations, the officers lived forward. The first few miles at sea explained why. The funnels poured out a mass of smoke and debris, so that within a short time the quarter-deck was covered with a soft warm layer of soot and cinders. So the officers were given the forecastle whilst we had the pleasure of the holy of holies, the quarter-deck, with the additional joy of digging ourselves out of the ashes when, in the heat of the tropics, we slept on deck.

The sailors’ bathroom was so small that if one asked a friend to wash one’s back, the friend was obliged to stand in the corridor and wash through the door. If he scrubbed too hard, the unfortunate man being washed was in danger of having the skin scraped off his nose on the opposite bulkhead. The ship was badly undermanned and instead of four watches we were compelled to work two, so throughout the trip nobody got a good night’s sleep, for during the day we had our usual work to do. In addition to all these minor discomforts, the Admiralty, in its wisdom, delayed our sailing by twenty-four hours and changed our captain. Instead of sailing with the quiet, submarine VC-holder, with whom I had served on the cruiser, we were presented with one of the most unpopular captains in the Navy.

So we set off on the six-week journey to Hong Kong and it did not take us long to run into trouble. In the Red Sea a stoker was hauled out of one of the bunkers where he had been trimming, in a state of
utter exhaustion. The time of year, early September, the hottest season in the Red Sea, did nothing to improve his condition and within three days a healthy young man of thirty-odd was dead, leaving a wife and children. Not only those working in that hell, the bunker, were affected by the heat: even the civilian manager of the canteen dropped and died. The officers’ forecastle was soon a hospital with no less than six cots rigged up for men whose lives were in danger. They had not only the double awning of the quarter-deck to protect them from the broiling sun, but each cot had a whaler’s awning rigged just above it.

In that same sea we picked up the most primitive of distress signals, used only when no other means are available. It came from a merchant ship that would have looked small on one of England’s minor rivers and which, with a crew consisting of a captain, a mate who doubled as boatswain, three stokers and two upper deckhands, was on its way to Australia. When the captain fell seriously ill the crew hoisted Red Ensign upside down. We lowered a boat with the doctor, who ordered that the captain should be taken aboard the cruiser. The amazing thing was the attitude of our own captain, who ignored the desperate situation the remaining men were now in. Between them the captain of the merchant ship and the mate could navigate in turn, taking a short rest between watches, but with only one ticketed officer on board, the ship was now left to its fate; for no officer could keep a watch from the Red Sea to Australia without leaving the bridge, it was not humanly possible. Not to bring the ailing captain on board our ship was likewise impossible, but was it imperative to leave such a ship in the care of a single man with a crude knowledge of navigation and no radio at his disposal?

Perhaps the reader will ask what should have been done under the circumstances. To which I must reply that I do not know. I was only an AB, and a very young one at that. The answer lay under a service hat with one gold laurel wreath on the peak. But in contrast to this episode I can describe the treatment accorded the self-confessed murderer Prince Yusupov when he, his family and his suite were taken aboard the British battleship Emperor of India on the collapse of Wrangel’s army. Half the officers’ cabins were placed at their disposal, and at the entrance to the passageway stood a massive, bearded Cossack, with his sword at the ready. If anyone attempted to pass him the Cossack, who knew no English, simply dropped the sword across the passageway, hoping that his guillotine like weapon would effectively express his intentions. Any rating who had cause to go along the passageway had to put on his number one suit, even if he was only going to repair an electric fitting or wash the floors. Yusupov’s sojourn on board was more than irritating to the lower deck; but the final indignity came when one of the crew died. Against all tradition the captain refused the man the honour that, in this moment of equality, is accorded to everyone from boy to admiral. He refused to let the man be buried over the quarter-deck and instructed that there should be as little ceremony as possible: apparently such a melancholy spectacle might have offended the tender susceptibilities of the exalted prince and murderer. What entitled Yusupov to all this sickening kow-towing is difficult to say: perhaps it was his princely title, which, by that time, was not worth an obsolete farthing, or perhaps it was his British title, Lord Elston. In any event it prompts the question: ‘How many hard-working British merchant seamen are worth one unemployed foreign prince?’

For all our discomforts – the emergency sick bay on the forecastle, the unconscious stokers being pulled from the bunkers to have hoses turned on them as they lay on deck – we considered ourselves fortunate after our meeting with the distressed ship. If by some miracle that floating coffin

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2 Murderer of Rasputin Grigori Efimovich (1871-1916), Serbian peasant-monk and ‘Holy Man,’ who was influential at the court of Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandria.
3 Baron Peter Nikolaievich Wrangel (1878-1928), general commanding White Russian forces in Crimea. He was defeated by the Bolsheviks in October-November 1920. (Actually he was defeated largely by the Ukrainian Insurgent army led by Nestor Makhno, who had a brief alliance with the Bolsheviks, before the Red Army tried to liquidate them in the aftermath of Wrangel’s collapse. Reddebrek]
ever arrived at its destination, it should be included in the annals of amazing voyages. However our own troubles were just getting into their stride. We turned east and were half way across the Indian Ocean to Colombo, alone in the burnished sea, when the tired old engines revolted. It was not a sit-down strike, which we could have coped with quite easily. It was the over-heated shaft bearings meeting up with a liberal leaking of oil that led to an inflammable conflict, or in other words a fire at sea. The news spread round the ship just as rapidly as the flames spread towards the bulkhead separating them from a magazine.

It was the magazines, carrying a consignment of munitions which explained our presence on the ship. Usually relief crews were sent out by passenger steamer, second class, a much cheaper expedient than commissioning a warship for the round trip. But merchant ships and passenger ships do not carry munitions, and this consignment had to be delivered at the same time as us. So there we were together. The proximity had not bothered us at all. Ships’ magazines are fitted to deal with accidents, and nothing could send munitions, ship and people to kingdom come except a shell right inside the magazine, or a fire. By now the flames were affectionately licking the bulkhead of one of the full magazines and the ship’s boats were turned out in readiness. But there was no panic. One of the safety precautions of a magazine is an automatic flooding device which acts as soon as the temperature reaches a certain height. In addition, the ocean was behaving itself as it a steam-roller had passed over it ahead of us.

Then came the cheering news that on the very bulkhead being embraced by the flames a box of powerful detonators was screwed, and since the box was watertight no amount of automatic sprinklers could help us. A single detonator was powerful enough to supply the Indian Ocean sharks with meals of roasted British sailors for some time to come. Still there was no panic. There was anxiety certainly, but anxiety in a British sailor is transitory and after a few seconds is replaced by that quality called determination. Determination beat the flames by a short head.

In quelling the fire, however, we half-filled the compartments with water, and now the overworked, tired and somewhat disgruntled men faced the additional burden of pumping the water out by hand. We pumped continuously, day and night, and before we arrived in Colombo the ship was high and dry. There we met further trouble, but by then we were so used to it that not one grumble was heard from the world’s champion grumblers, the seamen of the Royal Navy.

Despite the shortage of hands, the extra watchers, the unforeseen troubles I have described, and despite the fact that at Hong Kong a new crew would come aboard to take the ship home and there put her in reserve, our captain wanted to run the cruiser as if it were newly commissioned from the stocks. It just so happened that the man doing the sounding for our entry to Colombo harbour was one of those prematurely hatched petty officers that the war created but no school ever bred. He got the sounding line tangled round his neck, he could not call the depths as he had no idea what the markings meant, and in addition he gave this display of inefficiency right under the eyes of our martinet of a captain. Instead of punishing this one defaulter, the captain ordered every seaman to go through training in heaving the lead in his ‘spare time’. Coming on top of all our other misfortunes, this might have had serious consequences, but maybe the thought that we had only Singapore to call at before saying farewell to that tub kept the men’s resentment off the boil.

That was the last incident of a voyage which reads like a sailor’s nightmare in six short sketches.

Evidently our pleasure cruise had sent news ahead of itself, for the men we had come to relieve were already looking rather glum at the prospect of repeating our Odyssey, although they were going home after almost three years on the China Station. Our new captain, Commander Alun Poland, greeted us with the words, ‘Your living conditions will be better than those you had coming out’, which news we received in silent but sincere thankfulness.
Our ship was an old CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) passenger vessel, converted into a submarine parent ship. Old in every way, she was fitted with a single screw and obsolete reciprocating engines which, when they decided to work, could push us along at about ten knots. Fortunately, it was a long time before we could check on these statistics. When we arrived to take her over, she was in drydock having a long refit, and there she remained for another year until it seemed we might repeat the Victory’s achievement in Portsmouth and be fixed there forever. Later we did four or five trips to sea on her, and on one of these we had a breakdown.

Ancient as she was, the Ambrose was the real Casey’s Navy for us, although we did not, as naval legend would have it, take a noggin with the captain or smoke his cigars. The Ambrose was wide and roomy, with plenty of decks to promenade on and plenty of time to promenade. Alongside the dock was a full-sized football field which, in the course of time, almost became the property of the Ambrose. The China station was on to envy. The fly in the ointment was Hong Kong itself.

That town had more snobbery than an Agatha Christie novel. The sailor was a pariah, his status that of an untouchable. At the public dance halls, they took the sailor’s money but once he was in the hall nobody would dance with him. A typist with a speed of about three words a minute suddenly found herself next to a sailor in the cinema, she and her escort made a deliberate demonstration of changing their seats. Even the white whores in their separate brothel would not entertain sailors, refusing their good British money with a sneer.

And yet that town was kept alive and kept entertained by the Navy. The best footballers were supplied by the Navy. The weekly boxing show run by a local promoter was provided by soldiers and sailors. How those cheap little snobs ran to the Navy when the Chinese working class called a strike! Never has there been a strike of such formidable proportions. It was said that even the beggars in the streets refused hand-outs. Then the despised sailor ran the trams and operated the very important ferry service connecting Hong Kong and Kowloon. It was a sweating RN stoker shovelling coal to fire the boilers of the power station that kept the electricity working. But not a word of thanks. Who could sink so low as to offer thanks to such people as sailors?

When later the Hotel Hong Kong caught fire, it was a sailor who jumped from the top rung of the fire escape to the top storey window where their children and children’s Chinese nurses were trapped. One by one he swung them out of the window to a fireman waiting on the escape. Children and nurses were all saved, but the hero crashed to his death when the wall he stood on collapsed. In their snobbish way the British civilians remained true to themselves, accusing the sailors of having looted during the fire. Such was their gratitude. The funeral of this seaman was turned into a huge demonstration by his comrades, with never a word or a look to right or left, their grim appearance conveying their contempt for the onlookers from the town.

The most hilarious incident of our stay came, not from the upstart white population of Hong Kong, but from one of our admirals. Just before our departure from England the news of the troubles in China, under the leadership of the Kuomintang, had filled the newspapers, and as a precautionary measure a cruiser squadron had been ordered from the Mediterranean to the China station. The Admiral who commanded this squadron was known to the lower deck as the ‘Monocled Menace’, and stories of his unpredictable idiosyncrasies circulated throughout the Navy. It was said of him that he reworded the jingoist ‘My country right or wrong’ to a complacent ‘If my country is wrong I’ll put it right’. Now he had come presumably to put China right. He left the Grand Harbour at Malta with the crews of all the ships which happened to be there on deck and cheering, and with his cruisers’ marine bands playing ‘Hearts of Oak’. And the time was 2 am. When he arrived at Hong Kong his first action immediately set the people staring googly-eyed.

The announcement, written in the stiff and very correct manner of wardroom navalese, was so astonishing that everyone read it twice. Not at first believing their own eyes. ‘On such-and-such a date, from so many hundred hours to so many other hundred hours’, it said, ‘I (meaning the
Monocled Menace) will drive round Hong Kong in my car, dressed in civilian clothes for every man to see. If after that any man fails to give me a salute, no excuses will be taken and he will be punished for disrespect to an officer. An old sailor who had seen service with the great Beatty\(^4\) commented: ‘It’s a pity there are no elephants in China. We could have fitted one up with a diamond-studded howdah and two negro slaves with fans, and then there would have been a real circus’.

It is doubtful whether the admiral’s tour round town in an open car meant much to the native population: the thousands of natives who spread their sleeping mats in the streets and whose sightless photographs filled, in turn, one big wall of the local police station, when they were found dead by the policeman coming to waken them. It probably did not impress the thousands of families living in little sampans and allowed ashore for two hours a day to get some exercise and draw water. For the rest of the day these sampans were not even permitted to pull up alongside any pier on the whole waterfront, except to take one of the supercilious snobs on board and ferry him across the river. Like the rickshaw runners, the sampan owners would avoid taking such passengers if there was a sailor in need of transport. The sailors did not carry malacca canes and usually tipped liberally; and a few cents above the regulation fare was much preferable to a whack across the shoulders with the cane.

The same preference was noticeable among the menial labour in Hong Kong. Because of its wallflower standing, our ship was granted a special privilege: all the lower deck messes were allowed to engage (of course, at our own expense) a ‘boy’ - which did not mean a scruffy young chap in a school cap, with dirty fingernails, but a servant. We reserved the right to sack the boy at a moment’s notice if the occasion arose, but we had no difficulty in engaging them. Within half-an-hour of the dismissed boy’s departure, half-a-dozen candidates would be clamouring for the vacancy. Whereas the snobs ashore paid from four to six dollars a month, we paid ten. They kept their servants in the kitchen and gave them rice to eat, whilst our boys ate our food with us. There were other prerequisites. A Chinese holiday, for instance, and there were plenty of them, always called for a collection for the ‘boy’.

Hong Kong was not all sneering upstarts and whisky-soaked petty chiefs: it was also a terminal port for the large coastal shipping service run by the Jarding Lang Company, with head offices in Shanghai. Hong Kong likewise contained the ‘offices’ of the gang which periodically pirated the company’s ships. The pirates themselves were peasant fishermen from the villages around Bias Bay, about thirty miles from Hong Kong, but it was suspected that the organiser of these piracies was some capable criminal with a lot of pull and connections.

These were not the pirates of romance, hoisting the skull and crossbones to give chase to a prize, and after looting it forcing all those who refused to join them to walk the plank. These pirates wore no black patches and did not thrust cutlasses into their trouser bands. They were just ordinary people, but their organisation was of high quality and they were well informed about which ship was carrying bullion to a bank in Hong Kong, which rich Chinese had cabins on the bridge deck. The inside knowledge, timing, and grasp of geography and navigation which their successes betrayed were not supplied by illiterate fishermen. But the clever Mr X who planned the operations remained a mystery, and the backlash, when it finally came, brought suffering only to the pirates, their families and the other peasants from the same villages who had nothing to do with these nefarious exploits. But more of that later.

The officers on the Jardine Matheson Lang ships were Europeans, mostly Scandinavians, Britishers and Dutch, whereas the crews were Chinese. Wanting to use every square inch of their ships profitably, the company accepted as passengers Chinese coolies on their way to Hong Kong to find work. About three hundred of these coolies would be taken aboard a ship for the price of ten

\(^4\) David Beatty (1871-1936), British Admiral, created first Earl of the North Sea and Brooksby in recognition of his outstanding service during World War I.
Chinese dollars each and would be accommodated on the forecastle. They received no food and therefore took with them cast-iron pots in which they burned charcoal to cook the rice they had brought. All day they sat crowded on the forecastle, chatting or playing fan tan or more rarely mah jong. At night they spread out their straw mats and slept.

The pirates were indistinguishable from the passengers and came on board with them. Their favourite weapon was the Mauser, for which they were prepared to pay big sums whilst the ordinary service revolver was despised. With their guns hidden away, they took their places on the forecastle and bided their time, for the journey to Hong Kong took some days. Only when the lighthouse at the entrance to Bias Bay came into view, or a little before, would they move into action.

Then the guns came out. The pirates showed the quality of their organisation, for each was responsible for a particular part of the ship. First on the list, of course, was the wireless office, then the bridge and the cabins of officers not on watch. The engine room and the passengers and stokers were Chinese coolies who, so long as the ship did not sink, had no interest in what happened to it. At the first sight of weapons they put up their hands, whether a gun was pointed at them or not. One armed pirate could keep all three hundred passengers absolutely subdued.

Once all the captured officers were on the bridge under armed guard, the order was given to put out the lights and steer for Bias Bay. When the water became too shallow for the ship to proceed, a crowd of sampans and small junks surrounded it and the people from these boats looted the bullion and took away with them any wealthy Chinese on board for whom they would later demand big ransoms. European passengers were not molested. This done, the pirates would leave the ship, which was free to proceed to Hong Kong and there report the piracy.

Bias Bay was almost next door to Hong Kong, where a formidable group of warships filled the harbour, so these piracies seemed particularly audacious. Whenever an incident was reported, the local paper went to town with questions on the lines of `Why Do We Pay Taxes To Maintain A Navy?' and suggestions that the Navy was called the 'Silent Service' because the sailors were always fast asleep. The greatest scream of outrage came when the regulation search of a pirated ship disclosed that one of its water tanks contained everything that fired except field guns; a cargo which the captain claimed to be in complete ignorance of. A big 'If' appeared in the newspaper headlines: 'If the pirates had discovered the arms – what then?' We too thought along those lines, for we knew that in the long run it was the Navy who would have to smack the pirates down.

It was, however, the quick-thinking of a merchant service officer, and the timely appearance of a British naval sloop, which turned the paper's outrage to eulogies of praise.

The Sunning left Shanghai with the usual consignment of currency for Hong Kong and, of course, the usual consignment of coolies. All went well till, nearing Bias Bay, the pirates appeared, and in a very short time the officers were gathered on the bridge under the guard of a little Chinese with a big Mauser. It was a pitch-dark moonless night. As the ship steamed along one of the officers suddenly shouted, 'There's Bias Bay', and pointed in the direction of the now visible light. The guard, taken by surprise, turned his head, at which point another officer seized the long iron handle of a fourteen-pound sounding lead and brought it down on the pirate's head with all his force. Down went the pirate, dropping his gun as he fell, and the same officer immediately took possession of it. To everyone's surprise, the pirate began to get up again, but the officer quickly put a round in his stomach and he went down again and stayed down. Despite the heavy blow on his head and the bullet in his stomach, he lived to face the court and end up on the gallows.

Confused by the sudden change in their fortunes, the pirates began to run around the deck in panic, whilst the one officer with a gun, supported by all the others who had armed themselves with heavy objects, prepared to defend the bridge against assault. Frankly the odds were on the officers' side. Access to the bridge was by a single steep ladder which a determined armed man could hold against
a number of attackers. At this point the first glimmers of dawn began to appear on the horizon and after a lot of screaming and shouting the pirates divided into two groups, one lowering a small boat over the stern whilst the other set fire to the ship.

Not far away a Royal Navy sloop was on its way north, every turn of the screw bringing it near to the scene of the piracy. The first billow of smoke crawling its way into the sky was spotted by the sloop’s ever-watchful bridge. There was no need to ask questions. That smoke could mean only one thing—a fire at sea. In a moment the sloop increased its speed, the captain was called to the bridge, the boat turned out and the pumps brought to the ready. As the burning ship came clearly into view, a boatload of men frantically rowing away was noticed. The order was passed along the upper deck and in no time the sloop’s motorboat, with a Lewis gun mounted on the forecastle, sped away in pursuit. One short burst was fired over the men’s heads, at which they all stood up and raised their hands in the air. Back coursed the motorboat, and whilst some seamen drove the captured pirates down to the cells, others connected fire hoses and, with the sloop standing alongside the burning ship, a row of powerful water spurts hit the fire in the very centre. This prompt action by the Royal Navy soon put out the fire and, under the convoy of the sloop, the ship, officers, passengers, and valuable cargo were brought into Hong Kong. Altogether seventeen people were brought to trial, of whom one was acquitted and sixteen were sentenced to be hanged for piracy on the high seas.

Graciously the local paper restored to the Navy its honourable reputation, but old China hands among the seamen suspected that our elevation was only temporary and that any day we would come crashing down again like Humpty Dumpty.

In those years China, with its different warring groups, was something like Chicago in the days when rivals contested for the exalted position of Public Enemy Number One. Any half-penny mandarin could line up his serf-peasants, call himself a general and then proceed to attack and plunder his neighbours. Ships making their way up the Yangtze river had barbed wire around the bridge as well as a couple of Sikh guards. The Navy’s destroyers and gunboats carried defensive mattresses to protect the bridge from machine gun fire or even shrapnel from a First World War field gun. Such measures had hitherto passed Hong Kong by. Apart from the piracies and one very surprising hijacking of a bullion-loaded steamboat crossing to Kowloon in the middle of the day and under the eyes of the Fleet and a harbour full of merchant ships, Hong Kong was well out of all the mainland troubles. And then came grim news from close by that gave us to understand that if we were not in the troubles we were on the edge of them.

The Canton Commune lasted only a few days, but it shook Hong Kong more than any number of piracies. This town lies thirty miles up the West river, in the mouth of which Hong Kong stands, and for days the island was in a state that far from agreed with its name, the Island of Fragrant Streams. The counter-revolution reaped a bloody harvest and heads floated past Hong Kong as if somebody had kicked all the footballs out of a sports shop into the river. Soon the horror merchants were busy, toting round the most hair-raising photos for sale. One family of well-to-do people had tried to leave Canton when the Communists took over. They had piled all their most valuable belongings and their two children in their car and had put on red arm-bands in the hope that these would assure them a safe passage. But unknowingly they left Canton by a road along which the White troops were advancing. No amount of pleading could save them, they wore red arm-bands and that was enough. In the photograph they lay in a row beside their overturned and burnt out car. The children were terribly hacked, the father had suffered multiple stab wounds and his genitals had been torn off, whilst the mother’s legs had been forcibly stretched apart to an unnatural degree to show the hilt of a bayonet sticking out of her vagina. Such photographs swept the previous best-sellers off the market.
But China, that cauldron of trouble, never gave any atrocity the chance to hold the public interest for long. Unlike a volcano, its seat of activity was not permanent and nobody knew where the next eruption would take place.

By this time our ship had been pulled out of dry-dock and we found ourselves getting up steam for an emergency sailing. What our wagon could have done in an emergency was difficult to say. True, there was one 4.5 gun standing on one side of the quarter-deck, but it looked so insecure that one expected the first shot to send it toppling over the side. Our gunnery instructor, who had been on the staff of the Gunnery school, simply ignored its existence. Instead two submarines, each equipped with a proper 4.5 gun, were to accompany us on our secret mission.

Our destination turned out to be the port of Amoy, where everybody was on strike and five different political factions were fighting amongst themselves somewhere outside the town. Offshore, in the mouth of the extremely fast-moving river, was an island on which lived all the Europeans, consuls and business people. An American destroyer 222, the Bulmer, had already arrived, like us, to cope with the emergency. Like us too, the men were not allowed ashore on the mainland but could take walks only on the island. The Europeans were just the opposite of the Hong Kong snobs, and bent over backwards to entertain us with tea parties, dances and very amateur concerts – but only till 6 pm, when our leave ended. Their life on that island must have been as boring as a book by Anthony Trollope, and in everything they were ten years behind the West. At that time the Charleston had just swept Europe and my chum and I had mastered this somewhat energetic dance before leaving England. When our hosts learned of this they demanded to be taught, so we set up lessons in the Charleston in their little club. Our pupils were all well-equipped matrons of the light-heavy-heavyweight class. With a memory of the shabby treatment served out to us by the ladies of Hong Kong, we got those bulging bosoms and buttocks bopping and gyrating and shaking whilst the floor vibrated like a couple of hundred tam-tams. They grasped and they sweated but each was vying with the others to impress their teachers. By the time we called a halt their eyes were sticking out like organ stops and I realised it was less a dancing lesson than a slimming exercise. I am sure they lost a stone each.

That dancing lesson was the only departure from routine in the whole emergency. Our officers no doubt realised that we were there to do something other than just watch the river flow out to sea. We were taken round the little island, boasting, like all similar places in China, its King Edward the Seventh Hotel, and shown where we should mount a Lewis gun if the worst came to the worst. But the trouble, if there was any, preferred to remain on the mainland and not even a whiff of it reached the island. Nothing happened to lighten the burden of our monotony except a visit by a Japanese fleet containing every type of warship of that day. A Japanese ship, or group of ships, was its own personal leper colony. One day we took one of our officers over to the flagship, and the moment he had stepped out of the boat, a Japanese officer leaned over the rail and ordered us to lay off two hundred yards. There was no suggestion that we might tie up to there lower boom, which would have made things easy for us: keeping the boat up with the ship in that current was very difficult and demanded considerable manoeuvring with the motor. Likewise we only once saw the Japanese seamen ashore, and then they were in groups, no man being allowed to walk alone. They carried their own supply of drinking water in water-bottles slung from the shoulder on a white strap, and they passed us without the usual smile that sailors of different countries give each other even if they cannot speak each other’s language. They may have been wearing sailor’s uniform but to us they were more like prisoners from a special security block.

Our return to Hong Kong, with nothing achieved except an unofficial dancing class guarded by two submarines and a parent ship, dropped us right in the middle of trouble with a rolling ‘r’. The pirates had struck again and this time there was no fourteen-pound sounding lead to foil their plot. Now the ’Monocled Menace’ was raring to go.
Through diplomatic channels arrangements had been made with the government in Nanking to clean out the pirates’ lair. Close to midnight the expedition, consisting of a cruiser, an aircraft carrier and two sloops was to set off. Evidently someone meant business, to throw all that armament against Mausers. All the ships engaged were to prepare landing parties of seamen and marines which together would make up a sizeable invasion force. On the day before the assault our little party, including me, muffled the twelve oars of a cutter, which was later hoisted aboard the cruiser. It was done in absolute secrecy, or so the chiefs believed at any rate.

With lights out the force moved towards Bias Bay. When the cruiser had got as far as it could without running aground, the sloops took all the cutters in tow, and when the sloops in turn could go no further, we were to go on to the beach under our own power, the fifteen-foot cutters’ oars. Motorboats were also lowered, but remained in tow of the sloops in case the chug-chug of their engines endangered the secrecy screen. The boats grounded on the beach a few minutes before daylight, and armed marines and seamen poured out of them to advance on the small village set back a few yards from the beach. Our secrecy had been broken long before we got there, for the village was absolutely deserted. Half-finished breakfasts on the sandalwood tables were the only signs of human habitation.

Then we began our destruction, setting fire to sampans of all sizes and to a single large junk moored off the beach. But the first casualty was our own: our cutter, which had been lying in the dockyard so long that its boards had warped. The moment we began to embark the detachment of marines, water poured in from everywhere and with the marines trying to get out of the sinking cutter and three or four officers shouting orders from different parts of the upper deck, it was a scene of panic.

It was now full daylight and cutters loaded with armed men were spread all over that part of the bay. When I looked at them I remembered that ‘if…’ Yes, I thought, if the pirates had found that cache of smuggled arms….

Somehow we managed to beach the leaking cutter and at that moment the explosions began. Sixteen-and-a-half-pound charges were placed under all the dwelling houses, all of them one-storey, one-room structures, and a whole street went flying in the air. In the meantime the marines marched inland and began their destruction there. All day the destruction continued until every building was blown up except the temple. On its locked door, notices prepared and printed beforehand were hung up, warning that any further acts of piracy would be met by more strenuous measures. Whether anyone in that village could read or write I cannot say, but probably not, for within two weeks of our raid another piracy had taken place. Considering the amount of damage we had done to both pirates and non-pirates, it is best to put down this almost immediate return to piracy to their inability to read. Or maybe they just ignored the notices, there were so many ruins to look at.

Then appeared an apparition. A motorboat nosed itself slowly through the shallow waters to ground its prow gently on the soft gravel, and a long figure in riding breeches with a sports coat and cap and a malacca cane in his hand (shades of General Gordon) stepped on to the beach. It was the Monocled Menace. Any second I expected him to say ‘Lead on my nag, I wish to see if my vassals have been subdued’. In stead he gave the order to retire and then left in the motorboat. We, with our leaking cutter, were told to stay to the end and take off the captain in command of the operation, who, in accordance with naval tradition, must be the last to leave.

All this time there had been no sight of the villagers. They seemed to have walked into the ground, or maybe sky. But while the captain was backing down the beach, a service revolver in either hand aimed at the destroyed village, the scene suddenly changed. It was as if a trick artist, with one sweep of his brush, had filled an empty page with a large body of people, still and quiet. They were the inhabitants of the village, men, women and children, clustered all together and slowly moving down towards the beach. Old men and women were crying. The first one on the beach was an old man
who, not paying the least attention to us, continued to walk slowly straight into the water to a burning sampan and with tears streaming down his cheeks made feeble efforts with his hands to throw water on the burning wreck.

Soon a large number of men and women followed his example, standing up to their waists in water and making hopeless attempts to save the now smouldering boats. No cinema producer ever imagined such a scene – attackers and attacked together in the same waters, the one sitting in boats and the other standing in the sea. No words or gestures were exchanged, not even scowling looks. The fist-shaking and shouting of insults that the cinema is so fond of did not happen, but the Chinese remained mute and crying, their only care for their boats, and the British went about their evacuation. Finally the captain climbed aboard our cutter and a motorboat towed us to the cruiser for our return trip to Hong Kong.

As I have said, a piracy took place very soon after this punitive raid. all naval vessels were thereupon ordered to go round the bay instead of bypassing it. This measure had no effect either. The pirates were irrepressible. Finally our submarines were instructed to cruise the bay on fortnightly reliefs, submerged by day and surfaced at night.

One very dark night when the submarine on duty was on the surface charging its batteries, the men on the conning tower saw a massive black object coming slowly towards them. In a second it was clear what had happened: another ship had been hijacked and now, in the hands of the pirates, was making its way to the looting rendezvous. The signal to stop was flashed, the alarm sounded, and the gun crew closed up to their stations. Slowly the high prow of the ship swung round until it pointed directly at the submarine, then increasing speed it plunged forward to ram. A blank shot left the gun and whistled over the forecastle. Still the ship came on, gaining momentum with each yard.

Without hesitation the submarine captain took a momentous decision, and the next moment a lyddite shell crashed into the advancing ship. It landed amid ships, shattering the main steam pipe, and at the same time fire broke out aboard where the lifeboats were stowed. On board, as well as the gang of desperate pirates, were the European officers, some cabin passengers and hundreds of panic-stricken coolies. But once again the submariners showed their indomitable courage.

The hijacked ship's boats were on fire and the submarine had no boats to lower, but by now the flames were casting a circle of light on the water to one side of the ship. The submarine moved in closer. The passengers were ordered to jump overboard and as they did so, the submariners dived into the sea and helped them on board the submarine – women first, of course. As they came aboard, they were quickly stowed below and the men dived again to carry out their rescue work.

As always a pirate looked no different from a coolie passenger, and sailors who went to the rescue of a man struggling in the water sometimes found themselves facing a hate distorted face and a raised arm with a vicious-looking knife in it. A crashing right to the jaw and a knife in his balls, and the pirate was soon screaming with fear. But still the sailor grabbed him by the hair and pulled him aboard the submarine. With the fire increasing in intensity, the submariners kept up the good work, managing to save more than two hundred from the burning ship and stow them into the very confined space of the submarine, which then brought them full speed into Hong Kong.

I was on duty in the motorboat that night when we received a call for the rapid manning of the big motor-launch. Within a few moments we had run alongside the submarine, where a couple of police launches were already in position. Flanked by policemen the Chinese compradore of the burned ship stood by the fore hatch of the launch, carefully scrutinising each person as they came on deck. When the compradore pointed anyone out as a pirate, he was seized and handcuffed. Some already had their hands tied behind their backs as they had been recognised by sailors who, in attempting to save them, had been met with a knife.
The story ended a little differently from that of most unsuccessful piracies, for besides the trial and hanging of about fifteen of the pirates, the captain of the submarine was also tried, by court-martial, where he was acquitted with honour and then awarded the DSO.

All these events took place with two years of my arrival in China.

One other event, a personal one but important to me, also took place. I passed professionally for Leading Seaman and in so doing placed my foot on the first rung of the extraordinarily designed promotion ladder of the British Royal Navy. It is a unique structure, that ladder, for at the bottom there are only a few rungs, each painted a plain navy blue. Then there is a tremendous gap, without any rungs. Beyond the gap the rungs begin again, but these are painted gold and there are many more of them than at the bottom. In the gap there is a notice: ‘Plebeians of Britain, Keep Out! You have nothing to gain here. You will get all you are allowed down below’.

The old Ambrose went the way of all ships. She was ordered home to be replaced by a new parent ship, and we were somehow to drag her across the seven seas in company with a few old submarines which might need a tow if their decrepit engines should fail. It was a long trip. We slunk from port to port. But although we did have to tow one or other of the submarines from time to time, to our great good fortune the sea behaved like a gentleman throughout. Finally we crept into Portsmouth Harbour, delivered the underwater old crocks to Gosport, and then went right up the creek where we would not be an eyesore. Where the Ambrose stood meant nothing to us.

Before us was long foreign service leave and for the majority a neat little sum in the bank to break the boredom. For others there was no sum in the bank; they had sacrificed it for a wife and children; but what a homecoming they would receive in return for that noble sacrifice! For a few there was no joyful homecoming, but wives who had not waited. It is best to pull a dark blind over that. It was a tragedy if the husband came home to an unfaithful wife, but what if the wife had come out there where her husband had left his sins thousands of miles away?

Six months later the ship’s company of the old Ambrose returned to their own port division, Devonport, by specials train, the hundred-foot-long paying off pennant tied to the chimney of the engine. On arrival at Devonport it was a three-foot dirty rag. ‘That’, said one of the men, ‘is the way to pay off. The ship is being broken up, the men are going their different ways, and the paying off pennant is torn to shreds’. 
Devonport Barracks are not in Devonport at all but in a little place called Keyham. The two districts are so close, however that only the town architect can say where the boundary lies. In 1930 the population of the barracks was about four thousand men and officers. The imposing gateway suggested the entrance to a palace, and the guard with his rifle and fixed bayonet contributed to the impression, although, instead of a busby on his head, he wore a sailor’s cap. A building which was something in the style of a palace stood to the left of the entrance, a little way down towards the drill ground. That was the wardroom, where the officers lived. To the right were, first the quarters of the chiefs and petty officers, and then the barracks for the men – barracks which on Sundays suggested a deserted factory.

They were large four-storey brick building with one long room on either side of each floor. At one time each building had its own feeding arrangements. Food was brought from the huge galley to each mess, which was simply a table placed along one side of the room divided down the middle by bag racks. Then a chief cook named Jago devised a scheme whereby the ground floors of two buildings facing each other were turned into dining rooms, catering for all the men in the complex. It completely altered the feeling of this large number of men and was the introduction of what was called ‘General Messing’. The catering was taken out of the hands of the leading seaman in each mess and placed in the hands of this same Jago, who was now a warrant officer. Under the old system the men were faced, every month, with a mess bill, because the sum accredited to each man, one shilling and sevenpence per day, was not enough to enable them to eat as they wanted. The new system allowed the caterer to buy food wholesale, with the result that not only did the men have no monthly mess bills but there was also considerable economy all round, the money thus saved being used to provide other comforts in the barracks. Sitting-rooms were opened on this money, furnished with carpets and easy chairs and supplied with newspapers and magazines.

However at the time in question the system had been introduced only into the barracks and into one or two of the bigger sea-going units. When a man was detailed for draft to a ship his first question was whether the ship was on General Messing or Canteen Messing, with its attendant monthly mess bill. As a result of this innovation many men looked upon the barracks as a rest home. So did the Navy, but the authorities took care to see that no one stayed in the rest home for very long.
I mention this system of feeding because of the differences it made to a sailor’s pay. The so-called experts who have written about the pay of the lower deck at the time of Invergordon have never once included in their assessments the mess bill which the greater part of the Navy paid every month out of its own pocket. It could reach ten shillings or more, and on the China station, where many food products were imported, sometimes from England, it reached ten Hong Kong dollars a month, at that time the equivalent of £1. Only after many applications to the Admiralty was a small addition granted to the victualling allowance on that station.

There is no denying the fact that with General Messing the men lived and fed better. Moreover as well as purchasing the comforts already described, there were funds enough to employ the men on the barracks as waiters, so that the dining-room was as well equipped and run as the canteen of any large industrial enterprise in the country.

Liberty, as the right to go on shore is termed in the Navy, was exceptionally generous at Devonport, in that we could spend all our free time on shore. All activities. Study ad working parties ended at 4 pm, and anybody not on watch aboard was entitled to go on shore till seven the next morning. Such freedom I have never met in any armed force in the world. As a result many married men, returning from a foreign commission to be accommodated in the barracks, closed up their houses in their home towns, hired rooms near the barracks and lived with their wives the whole time they were at Devonport. A man was free to go ashore three days in four, had two short weekends every month plus one long, from Friday evening to Monday morning, and was altogether in a position somewhat equal to a man working in a factory. Of course it generally lasted no more than a few months, rarely as long as a year.

It had its negative side too. Keeping two homes meant extra expense – another thing the ‘financial experts’ have never taken into account when working out their rather distorted conception of a sailor’s pay. No doubt it was these same experts who told the two-and-a-half million unemployed of that time that two buckets of water had the same calorie content as a loaf of bread, and advised them to drink more water. Some may say that the sailor accepted this obligation to keep two homes of his own free will. But it is only human for a man absent from his wife for two or three years to want to spend all his available time with her. Further, did not the Navy, who had signed a contract with this man – sometimes for twenty-five years and including these long periods of absence – have some responsibility to see that he could be with his wife as much as possible? They never lifted a finger to assist, although a fighting man becomes a better fighter if he knows that those at home are comfortably provided for.

At the age of twenty-one I was not particularly worried by these problems. I was what is known as fancy-free and wanted to make the best of my young life, as far as women and song were concerned. Wine I gave a miss, as I have done all my life, never having been convinced of the joy it provides. Too often I saw young comrades of mine who had been on the booze the previous night, holding their aching heads and groaning in all sincerity. ‘Oh, I had a wonderful time last night. Oh my poor head. I don’t know how I will do my work today. But I had a wonderful time last night. Spent all my money. Oh, what a wonderful time I had and oh, my poor head’. No money left and a thick head into the bargain was not my idea of a good time. But I liked to get around, go to a dance, do a little toetapping with a fair young thing. And somehow I never got a sore head.

Even then, my type of sailor predominated in the Navy. Increasingly young people were joining from the school bench rather than from work like me, and conscious of their superior ability and recognising that the Navy would be their career, they pitched the tone of their ambitions somewhat higher than I or other men who from the beginning, were quite content with the prospect of CPO [Chief Petty Officer] rank. But these ambitious young men were doomed to disappointment. For what reason? The simple answer is class prejudice.
Although the naval authorities talked about their men with great pride to other people, civilian officials and such like - ‘my sailors’ was the term used – they deliberately hindered the men from developing their talents in the interests of the service. In 1918, Rear-Admiral Lay, Director of Naval Training, proposed that gifted young men from the lower deck should be aided to enter the officer corps. Rear-Admiral Lay was not trying to earn a reputation as a kind uncle to the lower deck. The 1914-18 war had completely and brutally smashed our conceptions of social relations. It had shown that the despised plebeian could perform acts of bravery, take initiatives, demonstrate leadership. Rear-Admiral Lay recognised this and also recognised that the Navy needed an injection of non-blue blood, that birth was less in demand than brains.

His chief opponent, the then Second Sea Lord Vice-Admiral Heath, raised the almost unbelievably snobbish objection: ‘To be a good officer it is necessary to be a gentleman’. Perfectly true, though not in the way he meant it. Many officers were known as ‘gents’, the lower deck’s highest praise, but these were not the people who were gentlemen among gentlemen and boors to their subordinates. It was not behaviour that Vice-Admiral Heath had in mind, however, but the fear that someone might appear in the wardroom whose mother took in washing. So although by his tenacity Rear-Admiral Lay succeeded in getting some reforms passed in the promotion system, the ‘Heaths’ introduced a whole series of unofficial obstacles to block the ascent from the lower deck.

In only a few years of service I had already witnessed the callous destruction of young men for every reason except lack of talent. When I was just a boy serving in the submarines I met a two-badge AB nearly at the end of his first twelve years and somewhere in the region of thirty years old. With the large number of unemployed in civilian life he knew he was obliged to sign on for a pension. This man had passed the higher education test in accordance with the regulations, the most annoying of which was the stipulation that the test must be taken before reaching the age of twenty-four: just one of the many little obstacles deliberately placed in the path of the lower deck man who wanted to move out of his class. In addition he had passed the general knowledge test, and on the face of it there was nothing to stop him receiving his mate’s rating, the lower deck’s first step to becoming an officer. But almost six years had passed since his examinations and he now less chance of becoming an officer than I had of becoming the Queen of Sheba.

Besides the compulsory examinations there were a number of other tests which were never made public, various commissions which investigated a candidate’s ability to meet the high standards of society behaviour considered essential by the seagoing elite. There was, for instance, the ‘Etiquette Commission’ which visited this AB’s home and found his mother in a sack-bag apron; whereupon away went his chances/ another acquaintance, successful in the examinations, had been foolish enough to visit a tattoo shop on his first trip ashore in a foreign port. The result was not a lurid picture of a huge ship disappearing under a green-blue sea across his chest, but a small compass in the joint between thumb and index finger: in all about the size of a sixpence. But it was enough to spoil his chances. The annoying aspect of this was that the wardroom had plenty of officers whose bodies looked like the National Gallery after a suffragette raid. Similarly an entry in red ink on a man’s medical history sheet, indicating that he had caught VD, put an end to his prospects, though quite a number of officers spent periods in hospital for this affliction. It was never described as VD, however, and was therefore called by the men ‘wardroom lumbago’.

Some candidates passed the social tests as well as the technical examinations, but were these rare successes accepted in the true sense of the word? In many ways they were never accepted. Such a candidate knew very well that he would never make the top naval academy, and up to 1930 only one lower deck man in the twentieth century reached flag rank. Even that one exception received his rank only on retiring, having previously occupied the post of captain of a training ship, never a ship of the line.
Usually an officer from the lower deck received lieutenant’s rank and after eight years was retired with the rank of lieutenant-commander. There is little doubt that they were unhappy: the one lower decker among the officers was a lonely man, a man on a strange desert island who had left our society and had not arrived at the society he desired. At eleven o’clock such a man would often be seen coming on deck to relieve the officer of the day. Now the Navy works its watches strictly to the famous eight bells, and eleven o’clock is six bells, not a time when watches are normally relieved. But eleven o’clock was the time the bar opened in the wardroom, and not having the money to drink duty free whisky, not to speak of treating his pals, the officer from the lower deck would (for a small renumeration, some sailors hinted) stand the watch for an officer more able to buy a round of drinks. How far this was true, I do not know, but one ex-lower deck man I served with was seen late in the evening making his way to the officers’ bathroom with a bundle of dirty linen under his arm. He was married and his pay did not stretch to the luxury of paying for his laundry. When guests from ashore were invited to an officers’ evening party, he never took part but relieved the OOD [Officer On Duty].

Such goings-on in the confined space of a ship could not be concealed from the men. Not that they sympathised. But the snub given to the lower deck officer was much the same as the snub administered to us, except that where he, on the surface at least, was treated as a shipmate, for us such camouflage was considered unnecessary. Some people thought that the rare selection of a lower deck man to become a commissioned officer was part of the general recruiting campaign. Others, and maybe they were nearer the mark, suggested that the authorities were trying to fill the gap between the officers and the lower deck with a favoured recruit who could be a source of badly needed knowledge of the men. If so, their stratagem was a complete failure, for, because of the wardroom’s attitude towards him, he was neither theirs nor ours.

It is useless to pretend that I had all this cut and dried at the age of twenty-two. Then I spent most of my duty time working for a gunnery qualification and, as soon as studies finished, I ran out with the first liberty boat to a little room I had hired where I put on a civilian suit, bought from the strict regime of economy I had kept during my time in China. I well knew that a sailor in uniform was just as likely to get a snub in Plymouth as in Hong Kong – only not such a blatant one and not from such cheap snobs.

Nevertheless, politics, in a very mild form, was forcing itself into my life, and considering that there was little effort to give the lower deck even an elementary idea of what was going on in the country, that was a big step forward. From the beginning in the Training Ship we had lived in political isolation. Admittedly there was a notice-board on which cuttings from newspapers were occasionally put up, but rarely a complete one. This strange kind of censorship was very effective: although my period in the Training Ship included January 1924, I, and I suppose many like me, left the ship unaware not only that Lenin had died but that he had ever existed. Even the Daily Herald was not allowed on the ships till 1926, and then not because of a progressive move on the part of the Admiralty, but because of a change in the Herald’s policy and, more likely, ownership.

It is ridiculous to talk of outside influences developing a certain political trend in me, as some writers on Invergordon have alleged\(^5\). In fact the Navy, especially the lower deck, resented any influences of that sort from whatever source. After the raid on the pirates’ lair in Bias Bay, I was told that a certain Chinese newspaper had printed a lurid account of the bloody slaughter we had wrought, claiming a number of dead and mutilated bodies far in excess of the total population of the village. As a participant in the raid I scoffed at this blatant lying, but men who had not been there roared with laughter and that was the end of it.

If I was influenced by anybody, it was by more experienced sailors who were nearing retirement age. In my last period on the Ambrose I worked with a man who was a rare exception in the Navy. He had

passed the age of forty, when he should have left on pension, but was making up ‘bad time’ - that is, the time spent in the cells in his youth for breaking all the Navy’s rules and regulations short of ‘Aid to the enemy’. When I knew him he had ceased his rule-breaking and was leading a quiet life. He was very intelligent, respected not only by other seamen but also by the petty officers and chief petty officers, although he had never aimed higher than an AB rating himself. He possessed a wise and sensible notion of politics, and though, like everyone else in the Navy, he did not belong to a political party, he was capable of putting a case in a very erudite manner. While we worked together he explained many things about relationships between the lower deck and the wardroom. He described the peacetime Navy as a regimented yacht club. The owners of the yachts were the officers and the menial strength to the men. The regimentation came from the faraway Admiralty which, notwithstanding the preferences of the yacht owners, dictated the movements of the ship. But wherever the Admiralty sent a ship, the officers arrived like passengers, ordered a boat ashore whenever they wanted one and, at any time of the night, ordered one back on board.

Despite the tradition forbidding women on board after sunset, many boats returning with officers in the wee small hours carried women too. The *Ambrose* was, as I have said, a very roomy ship, and besides the officers serving the ship itself there was on the strength a large contingent of submarine officers. These last were prone to leading the high life – not only because they received considerably more pay than general service officers, but also because volunteers for the submarines were mainly dare-devil young men who wanted to have their fling. If the students of those days could have ‘rags’, and knock off policemen’s helmets to play football with, then why couldn’t these young people have fun too? There were no policemen to control them and they were indifferent to what the lower deck might think of them, not accepting that the men they commanded had an opinion worth hearing in such affairs. One night we had the remarkable spectacle of two officers, each wearing nothing more than a tie, swimming to the ship, whilst on the forecastle of the accompanying motorboat two women and some other officers screamed with hysterical laughter and shouted lurid observations to be heard all over Hong Kong harbour. Their innocent evening frolics ended up with one of the women quite drunk, riding totally naked up and down the officers’ passage way on a bicycle, met at either end by officers with fire hoses.

Of course all the mess had to be cleaned up by the seamen. Maybe similar high jinks are sometimes practised in the houses of the affluent, and there it is the servants who have to clean up the mess. But that is what they are paid for and, moreover, the servants will not be asked to go into battle or to uphold the integrity of a famous force by exemplary behaviour ashore. If by chance a sailor should disgrace his uniform on shore, one of these officers would consider it his ‘painful duty’ to punish the man severely.

I hope no one will misconstrue my intentions in describing the foregoing incident, or suppose that I wish to convey the impression that such incidents led to Invergordon. What they did was add to the brew in that cauldron which was belching out the obnoxious fumes of class prejudice; and which, in its turn, was widening the gap between the lower deck and the wardroom.

The mystery of the rift has never been fully explained and it is not as simple as some people would have us believe, with their neat formula: ‘We are we, and they are they, and never the twain shall meet’. At that time there were just over a hundred thousand men in the Navy, nearly ten thousand of whom were officers. Most of the officers were from the middle, or lower middle, classes. The aristocratic officers (including, by the way, members of the Royal Family) were a very insignificant minority, although I might add, it was from these people that we saw and felt the least class prejudice. Some of the majority had barely escaped putting on the blue collar, perhaps their parents had got them into Dartmouth with the aid of a distant relative who had a little pull in naval circles. However that may be, these people entered Dartmouth when they were mere boys of twelve, and nobody will accept that boys of twelve are already infused with flagrant class prejudice.
The answer must be that, while at school, they were subjected to a very subtle sort of indoctrination. It must have been that they were brainwashed into believing the stupid saying that ‘the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton’. One marvels at the picture conjured up: scions of the gentry pull of their famous ties and tear into Napoleon’s Old Guard, knocking them down like ninepins, while a crowd of lads from the Old Kent Road, Moss Side and the Gorballs stand to one side leaning on their muskets, watching the slaughter and chewing their cud. Strange that so many of the scum got killed or wounded. They must have got too near the fragments of Eton ties that were flying around. Of course in those days not much was known about the school. Now that its inner secrets have been revealed, we should perhaps rewrite the saying: ‘The battle for Homolib was won in the dormitories of Eton’.

As evidence that naval officers were indoctrinated with class prejudice before they ever reached the sea. I cite their almost universal attitude towards men from the lower deck. If a sailor tried to explain the cause of a minor misdemeanour, the officer’s foregone conclusion was always that the man was lying. Equally, it was accepted without evidence or question that the men were dull-witted. Where could the officers have learned this approach unless it was engendered in the college? However, it is greatly to the credit of the officer corps of the RN that a considerable number of them discarded this attitude, developing instead an approach based on a simple, humane principle: firm but polite.

Indoctrination is an extraordinary thing which many people underrate. They fail to understand that the people least able to appreciate its power are those subjected to it. Presented as something giving them superiority over those they have to control or command, they go with it all the way. I have witnessed in the Far East the insidious change indoctrination makes in people whilst they themselves are completely ignorant of what is going on in their minds. A batch of new entrants to the army were to take over the duty of guarding convicts. Arriving in their civilian clothes from their towns and villages, they passed, on the way from the station to their quarters, a body of convicts working under guard. Touched by the sight of these men the new arrivals searched their bags and bundles for something to eat and threw it to the convicts. Two weeks later, after a ‘training’ period, their attitude had changed beyond recognition: every time they were obliged to communicate with the convicts, they used the most insulting language and where possible inflicted discomforts which might be described as sadistic. When taxed they could only parrot ‘Duty, duty’.

The course for seaman gunner’s rating, the first step on the gunnery ladder, lasts three months and provides an elementary knowledge of the major features of naval gunnery. Upon completion an examination is held. Unluckily for us, our course took place just after the enforcement of the economy measure preventing those who passed from immediately taking the next course. I came top of the class with the allowed eighty-three percent, but as that was two marks below the percentage admitting a man to further study, I had to spend much valuable time hanging around the Gunnery School washing windows and polishing brass-work.

It was at this time that notices were posted up announcing a forthcoming meeting of the Welfare Committee. Owing to the fact that sailors were only temporarily resident anywhere, the Welfare Committee did not exist in the generally understood sense. Each time the bi-annual farce was announced its members were elected anew. What the Admiralty expected from it is hard to say. Cynics suggested that it served the purpose of convincing the public that sailors had at least a small part to play in their own welfare. Shortly before I read the announcement of the forthcoming meeting, the Board of Admiralty’s answers to requests submitted by the previous committee had been posted on the noticeboard. A small crowd of sailors had gathered round and were almost bursting with bitter laughter at the ridiculous requests submitted, which had no bearing on the real grievances of the lower deck. None of the requests would have entailed trouble or expense, yet the Admiralty had refused more than half of them. The scoffing attitude of the men clearly demonstrated that the Welfare Committee was a joke – but a heartless joke, played by sleeves ringed with gold braid which should have been ashamed to associate themselves with such a farce.
I was urged to go to the meeting at which the committee would be chosen, but remembering the requests that had been turned down, I was a little wary at first. Then I came to the conclusion that the reason for the Welfare Committee’s helplessness could only be discovered by being on it, and I agreed to go. It was a poorly attended meeting and I was voted on to the committee. There was no need ever to return to another meeting, for here in this cinema hall everything became clear to me.

The presiding officer was a Lieutenant-Commander Malleson, one of the few World War I VCs still alive. There could not have been a more unsuitable choice, for Lieutenant-Commander Malleson was no hero to us. He seemed to get enjoyment from subjecting the men from his division to continuous childish pinpricks. After Mr Malleson had walked round the barracks, there were chalked crosses everywhere – on ditty boxes he thought dirty, on kit-bags not exactly straight in their racks, and in a myriad of other places. A cross on a man’s gear came to be known as ‘a kiss from Mr Malleson’. The biggest laugh came when Malleson drove up to the barracks in a ramshackle two-seater with a dickey so dirty that its colour was unrecognisable. Promptly the men went to town, and in a very short time that car was covered with kisses drawn in the dirt.

There was little for Malleson to do. What he did do, or rather read, was enough to show the Welfare Committee in its true light. The first words were a warning from the Admiralty about the limits on the committee’s work. ‘Presiding officers,’ it began, ‘are to warn the committee that the following subjects are not to be discussed: 1 Individual ships and establishments. 2 Individual claims. 3 Personnel…’ Then, after a couple of similar forbidden points, came the all-embracing embargo which enabled presiding officers to veto any point raised. It came under the single word ‘Policy’. From the beginning, therefore, the Welfare Committee was tied hand and foot and for that matter, blindfolded and gagged. Anything and everything came under the heading of policy. The warning ended with a reminder that all requests must be delivered to the Admiralty by post, no personal deputations would be received.

Now I knew why the sailors scoffed. Here was a serious body like the Admiralty spending its time discussing, and what’s more refusing, simply asinine requests – such as permission for the men to have cuffs on their number two suits as well as on their number one suits; or to wear sewn-round caps, because the sewn-round cap looks smarter than the non-sewn-round cap. It sounds incredible that the ruling power of His Britannic Majesty’s Royal Navy, a body of men with distinguished careers, specialists in one or other of the intricate mechanisms of fighting ships, some of whom had contributed scientific discoveries to be copied by all the world, should deal with the ‘welfare’ of the lower deck as only a person with the brains of a rocking-horse could do. For years the men had been endeavouring, through the Welfare Committee, to establish a contributory fund through which they could get railway tickets gratis when they went on leave. Although it was a system which would pay for itself, it had been refused again and again on the flimsy pretext that it would require extra clerical staff.

What driving power was it that urged these people of the highest position in the Navy to present the lower deck with a committee to expose and rectify their grievances, then disarm it with excuses of the most feeble kind? The answer is that these highly educated gentlemen were, politically, living in the early nineteenth century, when the ruling classes all over the country were dominated by the idea that any privilege granted to the lower orders would infallibly lead to calamity – for themselves, that is. To say ‘no’ to the most harmless of the Welfare Committee’s requests was the surest way of keeping the lower deck where it belonged; to say ‘yes’ was a sign of weakness that could only encourage further demands. It was precisely the justification for the cruelty which a circus-trainer uses to train wild animals.

Evidently every list of requests from the Welfare Committee carried within itself the seeds of bloody revolution, every request brought these gentlemen nearer to a ‘Bounty’ or a ‘Spithead’ or a ‘Nore’.
It would be wrong to contend that the Welfare Committee’s powerlessness led to Invergordon, but it certainly deepened the men’s mistrust of the Admiralty, and that mistrust was to be the reason why the men would not listen to pledges from senior officers of the Fleet that the pay-cuts would be reviewed.

After the Devonport Division Welfare Committee had finished its discussions a delegation was chosen to go to the final meeting at Portsmouth, where all the port divisions would be gathered. My name was suggested but the Detailed For Draft office had other plans for me. In their estimation I had been in the depot too long and a spell at sea was badly needed. So I was removed from the list and a little later was drafted to join the new cruiser Norfolk, then completing construction in Fairfield’s yard in Glasgow.

Thus it was that an overzealous clerk put me aboard the Norfolk. A little more laxity on his part and I might have gone as a delegate to Portsmouth, and this story would never have been told.
Every mutiny ever experienced by the British Navy has one element in common with all the others, and that is the two versions of it that a really determined chronicler would find to exist. One is the official version, which is generally accepted by the historians on the grounds that it is supported by records. The other is the unofficial version, not recorded in any archive but conveyed down the trail of history by word of mouth and usually discarded by historians as 'hearsay' - a convenient word for the disposal of unwanted truths.

The Invergordon mutiny is no exception. It differs however from the usual run of Royal Naval mutinies in that many of the principal participants are still alive, and therefore in a position to vouch for or deny any claim made about it. The extraordinary thing is that the authors of the books and articles about this world-shattering incident have never bothered to interview the lower deck men most concerned with the affair, and when the supposed utterance of one of these people has been quoted it is always prefaced with those words of mistrust 'he claims'. For some reason official records are never treated with such scepticism, although official records may well have things to hide.

The real significance of the Invergordon story is simple enough to be put in two short sentences. The day the Atlantic Fleet assembled at Invergordon (Friday, 11 September 1931), mutiny was as far from any man's mind as the idea of flying to the moon on a bat's back. But within two days the whole Fleet was ready to mutiny – or to stop work. It makes no difference what one calls it, it amounted to the same thing. In those two sentences lies the whole truth about Invergordon as I mean to tell it, but before plunging into this intriguing narrative, it is necessary to recall some features of previous mutinies affecting the Royal Navy.

Every writer of the Invergordon story has, each in his own way, gone hunting for analogies, lifting minor incidents from some mutiny or other of the past that bears a similarity to the events of 1931, trying to forge an historical sequence which Invergordon never possessed. There may be method in this madness. Going back several hundred years to previous mutinies is only a writer's trick to spin out a hundred-page story of five hundred pages, and thereby assure a reasonable pay off. But the comparison with earlier mutinies is in fact necessary because it shows that in all the long history of the Navy there was no precedent to Invergordon.

To begin with, its outstanding feature was its spontaneity. Previous mutinies, whether affecting a single unit or a fleet, passed through an incubation period. It took time for the irritations, grumblings and mutterings to ripen into a fester ready to burst. There was no incubation period for Invergordon. It was launched fully matured by the posting of an Admiralty Fleet Order on the ships' noticeboards on the morning of Sunday, 13 September.

Secondly it was not a response to ill-treatment. Those who have read all that I have written in the first part of this book will have noticed no complaints of ill-treatment, bad food, or any of the factors which led to earlier revolts. They will also have noticed that I, as an individual, had certain ambitions which only complete acceptance of naval rules and regulations, petty or important, could realise. In all my criticism of Navy procedure, of training, of individual officers, there has been no call for change by insubordination or violent means.

In fact the men of the British Navy were completely satisfied with their lot. Except for the American navy, no navy in the world served under such favourable conditions as we did. Not only had floggings been abolished long before, but no officer dared raise his hand to a lower deck man or, perhaps more surprisingly, dared use strong language to him. In normal circumstances an officer prefaced an order with the words 'will you'. In my travels I have met members of other armed forces who consider me a victim of my own imagination when I say that British naval officers were forbidden to beat the men. Especially incredulous was a former officer of the old Rumanian army,
who simply stated that no armed force could exist without this method of summary punishment. But brutality in the Royal Navy was unknown. The food was good, the days of maggoty biscuits and meat, of scurvy from lack of vegetables, were a horror story of years before. Nobody can deny that the pay was comfortable and came regularly, and a single man, if he was economical, could make a little saving for the future. In home waters leave was granted three times a year two weeks at a time. Some armed forces I have known give no leave during the whole period of service.

Given the conditions we enjoyed, there was, on the face of it, no reason to expect a refusal of duty. The Navy was, at least for the majority of the men, a career which they could make something out of or not according to their abilities and desires. They had no major complaints about anything. Even the presence of a number of post-1925 recruits on the new pay scales had not troubled them, as, up to then, these lowly-paid ratings had not been recognised as a possible danger.

A third factor which distinguishes Invergordon from the past is the roles played by the Admiralty and the officers of the Fleet. In earlier conflicts the mutineers violently opposed their immediate officers who, to protect themselves from assault, were quick to use all the means of suppression at their disposal, whereas the Admiralty, not blamed by the men for the injustices inflicted on them, were the uninvolved body to whom appeal could be made for the righting of wrongs and the restoration of peace. At the time of the Spithead mutiny in 1797 the Admiralty enhanced their reputation as an impartial negotiating body by travelling down to Portsmouth on the slow, uncomfortable stagecoach. And even if their trip brought the sailors’ leaders to the end of a line on the yardarm⁶, they did improve certain conditions against which the men had revolted.

Right up to the eve of Invergordon the Admiralty was an unknown quantity to us, out of sight and out of mind, a body of honoured gentlemen but nevertheless a figurehead whose interreference was not required in the problems of the lower deck, better settled on the basis of the comparatively good harmony between officers and men. When the shock came on Sunday, 13 September, there was absolutely no animosity towards any officer in the Fleet, not even to those whose attitude had earned them an unsavoury reputation. It was the Board of Admiralty who were unmasked as the dyed-in-the-wool villains of the piece. It was their callous disregard of the sufferings they were imposing on men tied to them by a one-sided contract, and on the men’s families, that triggered off the reaction no one had dreamed of. For the first time a mutiny was seen by the lower deck as a direct challenge to the Admiralty.

In essence the Invergordon mutiny was nothing more nor less than a pay dispute. It was caused by the Admiralty’s announcement that sailors’ wages were to be cut by a quarter. It lasted from 6 am on Tuesday, 15 September, till 6 pm on Wednesday, 16 September. It involved some thousands of men, not, as a recent Sunday supplement declared, ‘a handful of ratings and petty officers’. And it succeeded in having the cuts reviewed and finally more than halved.

Not long before the pipe-down on the night of the Saturday, 12 September, a group of four seamen, among whom I was one, were standing on the upper deck of the Norfolk, anchored, along with most of the Atlantic Fleet, in Cromarty Firth, on the eastern coast of the Scottish Highlands. As we were chatting there, Commander Dunne, our executive officer, came up to us and invited us to come aft to listen to a statement on the radio which we might be interested in hearing. At that time radio sets were allowed only in the wardroom and invitations to the wardroom for any purpose were unknown. If ever we entered its door it was only to dash in to deliver a message and dash out twice as quickly. Not that we hankered to be let in – there were those amongst the officers who might have fancied emulating a certain stupid peer celebrated for kicking a Labour leader down the stairs of White’s. in our view the less we fraternised the better. So we all declined Commander Dunne’s offer. He did not press the point, nor did he advance another few steps forward where the rest of the men were gathered and make his invitation general. Instead he left us and we four went on to

⁶ Hanged, most victims of Yardarm hangings died of strangulation [Reddebrek]
the mess deck where we turned in without another word being said about the invitation or why it should have been given. Nothing was further from our minds than mutiny.

As I went to breakfast next morning, Sunday the 13th, I saw a group of men gathered round the noticeboard. There for all to see was the Admiralty Fleet Order announcing that from 1 October 1931 our pay was to be cut by twenty-five per cent.

There were no threats, no scenes of any kind. Everything and everybody was perfectly quiet. The men’s reaction was one of complete shock. So near to impossible seemed the enormity of the reduction and so unexpected was it that everybody could only keep repeating the one word ‘Why’?

I read the order a second time. Clearly it was to let us know what was in store for us that Commander Dunne had issued his unprecedented invitation. But it struck me that this complicated document of sixteen printed pages, covering not only current wages but also future pensions, and detailed to the last farthing, could not have been prepared, printed and delivered to the ships at Invergordon between the government’s announcement of proposed Service cuts the previous evening and this moment, when we stood in front of the noticeboard. It was obvious to me, and I suppose to others, that an order which should have been made public days or even weeks before had been deliberately delayed and we, who were to bear the brunt of its proposals, had been deliberately kept completely in the dark.

When the men’s first emotion of worry for their families gave way to sober consideration, it became clear that the callous disregard for them, their standard of living and the security of their wives and children originated in the Board of Admiralty. Furthermore, studying the order, the men began to realise that they were victims of a cheap trick. Not only was the pay of today to be cut, but also the pensions of tomorrow. ‘In what way’, they wondered, ‘does the present-day financial crisis affect the pensions we shall receive in ten or fifteen years’ time?’ What they did not know then was that the other tricks had been played upon them by this same Board. Including, almost unbelievably, a two-day delay in the sending of this Admiralty Fleet Order, the most important order since the declaration of the First World War.

Whatever the men’s first interpretations of the order and the forces behind it, it is certain that they were ready for action, and drastic action at that. On that Sunday morning the whole Atlantic Fleet was ready for action, without instigation from any quarter. The men were ripe, and the fact that ripening had been swift and full was the fault of the Board of Admiralty. All that was needed was someone to give the first push, and fate decreed that I should be this person. Had I not made the first move, somebody else would have done so.

There was one channel through which it was possible to spread the idea of a meeting, that evening, in the Royal Naval canteen, ashore at Invergordon. I took the opportunity. Every Sunday, in accordance with the first of the Articles of War, which are available for all to read, a church service must be held on every ship. Now the predominant sect in the Navy is Church of England, so every ship of cruiser size and up is provided with a Church of England chaplain who holds services on a Sunday, in a jury-rigged chapel, usually on the upper deck. Capstan bars, buckets and mess-stools are, by naval ingenuity, fashioned into pews – which is why the Navy’s version of a well-known hymn reads: ‘The Church’s one foundation is capstan bars and stools’. So much for the Church of England. Because the Catholics are in the minority, they have fewer privileges, and in my day it was arranged that the one Catholic priest in the Fleet should hold a service on board a different ship in turn each Sunday, at which all the Catholics from the other ships would gather. A better means of spreading the word about a meeting in the canteen could not have presented itself, for, to this Catholic service, went men from every ship at Invergordon.
I asked the Catholics not only to announce a meeting, but also to find out the reactions of the other ships to the Admiralty Fleet order. It was their answers to this question that made me decide to go ashore: had the reaction been apathetic I would not have bothered.

Invergordon was not a place to tempt a sailor from his ship. Some writers have either never been there or have let their imaginations run riot, for they describe this quiet little Scottish town of one street and a Town Crier as a sort of kilted Las Vegas where boozy blue-jackets caroused with canny Caledonian cuties in the casinos of Cromarty. In fact it was a most difficult place to be bad in, and in general leave was only till 8 pm. But that Sunday the rush of liberty men ashore after dinner was something never before seen, even for a Fleet cup final. Yet nobody in authority paid attention to the numbers, in themselves a warning of things to come: evidently the wardroom, together with the admiral’s cabin, still believed that these dull-witted, beer-guzzling sailors were incapable of serious disturbances, let alone concerted action.

Shortly after two o’clock on that fateful Sunday afternoon I entered the canteen. There had been none of the usual preparations for a meeting and I could not be sure that my suggestion, conveyed at second hand through the Catholics, would have reasonable results. But whatever the response I felt I must go and try my hand at speech-making. The canteen was a First World War wooden structure consisting of a long, low hall with regular stanchions holding up the roof. The main entrance looked out on three or four football grounds. At the far left of the back wall stood a waist-high counter, cutting off one corner of the hall. That was the bar. To the right of the bar was a door leading out to the toilets. When I came in all the tables were occupied except one, standing to the right of the rear door.

The atmosphere was extraordinarily quiet and subdued. Of course every man had a jug of beer in front of him, but the beer was not flowing in rivers, as has been claimed: on four shillings a day, no doubt to be cut to three, one could not buy much beer. I approached one or two tables and asked the men sitting at them what they thought of the pay cuts. There was no shouting, none of the outbursts of bad language which some writers think is the plebeians’ only reaction to anger, disappointment and betrayal. All the men seemed in the grip of astonishment and disbelief that such a thing could be done to them.

I carried my cap with the tell-tale ribbon hidden and was wearing a jumper without my chevrons, a good conduct badge on the left arm and a seaman gunner’s badge on the right arm. I had no wish to expose my identity before it was necessary. From these precautions a legend was born, for afterwards the men tried to guess my rating and word was passed about that the speaker at the meeting was a wireless telegraphist. I suppose the reason was that wireless telegraphists (or radio operators, as any other navy would call them) received more schooling than ordinary seamen and were therefore considered more intelligent.

I walked over to the one empty table and jumped on to it. It was as if somebody had pressed a button for silence. The buzz of conversation stopped immediately and all eyes turned towards the table where I stood. There was something in the hundreds of pairs of eyes like a glimmer of hope, as if this was what they had been waiting for. The stage-fright which is supposed to attack first-time speakers did not assail me at all, although two minutes before I got up I had been unaware of what I should say. All my apprehension that I might be shouted down, that years of subordination would deprive the men of the will to listen, was banished immediately. These men wanted a speaker who would express their own resentment at the cuts, and when they got one they were solid in their support.

My speech was short. I knew nothing of politics, I did not even know how to conduct a meeting. All I knew was that of all the industrial workers in conflict over wages in those days, the miners were the most outstanding. We had seen them in action in the General Strike, and we must follow their example. ‘We must strike’. I said, ‘like the miners.’ I also spoke of the poverty and degradation
which face the men if the cuts went through, and of the vast amount of money the Navy spent on ‘exercises’, expensive games for officers in which we, the men had about the same role as a caddy on a golf course. But all this was by way of an introduction. What I emphasized was the need to strike.

There was no cheering or clapping, but the sea of faces I was looking into told me I had struck the right note. However, the test was still to come. I appealed for a representative from each ship to come forward and volunteer to spread the proposal for strike action throughout the Fleet. Perhaps this was the moment when the fate of the strike hung in the balance. A sailor who answered this appeal put himself in a very precarious position. But they came, a whole crowd of them. There was a rush to the table where I stood. I took a packet of twenty Ardath cigarettes out of my pocket and on it jotted down the names of the ships represented. Then I informed the volunteers that another meeting would be held in the canteen the next day when the final decision would be taken.

The whole meeting lasted no more than an hour, starting with my speech and ending with the volunteers coming forward eagerly, and it broke up without the least disturbance. There had been no rowdy scenes, no throwing of glass mugs, as was later to be alleged. I was so impressed by the response that I failed to realise that not only had I put myself in jeopardy by my speech, but that the volunteers too had marked themselves down for trouble. Among them were married men who were very desperate: their future carried a greater threat than any trouble from the authorities.

I left the canteen as quietly as I had entered it, and there on the street I met the warrant officer of the patrol, who was strolling along enjoying the soft September evening. I remembered a story I had heard about an ingenious sailor. Wanting to smuggle several pounds of duty free tobacco ashore, he approached the policeman at the dockyard gate, asked when he would next be on duty, and suggested he should allow the contraband through, for a rake off, of course. The policeman agreed, but the next evening an inspector was waiting with him. Without ceremony the sailor was ordered into a search room and stripped naked. To the constable’s chagrin, not even a smell of tobacco was found, and the inspector left in a huff, telling his subordinate he should remember faces better. The policeman turned angrily on the sailor, who sunnily replied, ‘Remember when I asked you to let the tobacco through? Well, I had it with me then.’ I thought this Artful Dodger could teach me a trick or two. Politely I saluted the warrant officer and asked if we could hold a meeting in the canteen. He smiled with tolerance of an older person putting an inexperienced youth on the right path. ‘Oh no, son, no. No meetings are allowed.’

Leave was only till 8 pm and there was nothing further to keep us ashore, so we all returned aboard our various ships. Again there were no rowdy incidents or obstreperous drunks, as we are led to believe by certain writers, who could very easily have established the truth by referring to official records. Every ship kept a note of the number of men who went ashore and the number put in the ship’s cells for drunken behaviour. Now the men had their own ideas of the different types of short leave in the Navy. If there was accommodation ashore, leave was usually extended until 7 am next day, and this was very acceptable to the men because, if they did have a drink or two, there was time to sleep it off. Leave till 10 pm or, as at Invergordon, till 8, was known as ‘man-catcher’ leave. As the men came on board, they were inspected by the officer of the day, and if he thought any man was under the influence of drink, he sent him to the cells to sleep it off and appear in commander’s defaulter in the morning. Naturally the men were well aware of this and avoided excessive drinking, and I am sure that the records of men put in the cells for drunkenness on 13 and 14 September would dispel the impression created by writers of the Invergordon story. Or maybe they are not interested in finding material which would disturb their picture of the British sailor.

Less than twenty-four hours had passed and already fantastic stories about the meeting were beginning to circulate. The captain of the Worspite, obviously a Naval Intelligence officer, had apparently been collecting information from that most unreliable of sources, the temporary
informer, what the lower deck termed 'white rats'. He quickly advanced me from a wireless telegraphist to a leading wireless telegraphist, an unforeseen promotion in a branch of the service of which I knew nothing. To find a mere telegraphist was indeed an affair of the needle and the haystack, but there were not more than about forty or fifty leading telegraphists in the whole Fleet, so to locate the right one should have been no problem. It would seem that the captain abandoned his search for a more fruitful fantasy.

According to his own account, he called in three men who had purportedly taken an active part in the meeting. They were Stoker Thomas Winstanley, Marine Charles Hall, and Telegraphist Stephen Bousefield, whose presence and activities at the meeting were supposed to have been witnessed by the Warspite's patrol. Bousefield justified his presence in the canteen by claiming to have restrained men from throwing glass mugs. According to uninformed writers, enough glass mugs were thrown at Invergordon to put Pilkington's in the bankruptcy court. In fact one single glass was thrown during the entire incident, as we shall learn in due course.

The progress of the first meeting was just as I have described it, and none of it was witnessed by the patrol, a fact amply supported by my aforementioned meeting with the warrant officer. The captain of the Warspite proposed to the three men, conveniently representing the three most prominent groups of the lower deck, that they should turn informer. Whether all three accepted I do not know, but I think it is certain that Telegraphist Bousefield did.

From this point on, intelligence was two-way between the wardroom and the lower deck. On board the Norfolk a friendly midshipman (whose name shall never be known) told me that there was somebody amongst us who was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. But we had our sources of information too, and they enabled us to counter any manoeuvre of the officers throughout the strike. Officer’s servants and messengers were lower deck men like us, and at every meeting of officers a servant or messenger was nearby. Nobody taught them to creep round in cinema spy style – they were simply overlooked. It was the old story that the officer’s did not count them for anything and talked quite freely in their presence.

From my sources I learned that the meeting was reported to the admiral, Rear-Admiral Wilfred Tomkinson, and that he dismissed it as 'Drunken sailors shooting off their mouths'. I do not vouch for the accuracy of this quotation, but such a remark would certainly be in keeping with the general attitude of the wardroom up to then.

What puzzled me was that we were allowed to go on without interference from higher authorities. They knew of our meeting yet they did nothing. From the beginning, when the order had been put up on the noticeboard, no officer, neither junior nor senior, had come to us or attempted to find out our reactions. They too were losing a percentage of their pay, but they took it like a crowd of Bertie Woosters, keeping the jolly old chin up, don’t you know, old chap. Let somebody else bother. Their bar was open, duty-free whisky flowed. All’s well for us in this world of crisis.

Writers on Invergordon have, of course, had a whitewash brush in each hand when dealing with the role of the officers just before and during the mutiny. They refer to a loss of contact. In fact contact never existed and could not, until the whole basis of relations between officers and men had radically changed; until the book on how to treat the men, compiled by some Victorian admiral and used as a text in Dartmouth College, had been publicly condemned and burnt. The truth was that the wardroom had failed to move with the times. Many of the officers had lived through the First World War, but the shattering blows it delivered to the Edwardian conception of class superiority in civilian life had failed to touch the wardroom, and the officer corps was so insulated that it could not understand the changing character of the lower deck or even that a change had taken place.

They failed to see that the ever-rising technical level of the Navy’s armament and equipment was drawing in the technically trained, industrial proletariat. In 1924 there were still men on the lower
deck who believed that education was an heirloom passed on to those lucky ones who were born to it. They were mostly sailors who had completed their twelve long years before World War I and, when called up for service on the outbreak of war, had decided to continue serving for a pension. By 1931 they were gone, probably smoking their Navy Cut and telling stories about the days when ships were wooden – and men were iron-headed. But the new intake was beginning to understand that a correct accent was not much use in a crisis. They could see which of their officers merited respect for their specialist knowledge, and that the mainstay of the Navy was increasingly the specialist petty officer, the gunnery inspector, the gunnery instructor and the stoker PO. Fear of officers was lessening, respect was stationary and disdain was beginning to creep in.
8 The Guilty Admirals

After the Invergordon mutiny was over numerous fables were invented to explain it away. Interested people anxious to save their own miserable skins dug up red or green or yellow agitators who had plotted beforehand and pushed loyal sailors into mutiny. Stories increased and multiplied about secret signals, about the word ‘comrade’ in signalled messages, about clandestine meetings under cover of the Antediluvian Order of the Buffaloes on the Atlantic Fleet’s passage north to Invergordon. Far from first learning of the cuts on that fateful Sunday morning, the men (it was said) had been well prepared beforehand by the rumours that were flying about and had even gone the length of suggesting mutiny at a meeting in the Invergordon canteen on Saturday, 12 September – the night before the Admiralty order was posted.

All these stories are so much rubbish, figments of a diseased brain; and the writers who accept them as genuine are no saner than the inventors. On the way up to Invergordon the lower deck was unaware of the coming cut in pay. We had no reason to plot, to meet in secret or to send secret signals. It is doubtful if there were one Communist in the Fleet. (Today, on the other hand, when the so called ‘militant groups’ are pampered by both press and government, it is possible there are some on every ship.) As for the imaginary meeting on 12 September, when, it is alleged, mutiny was first proposed, there is only one question to ask about it: would the men of the Fleet decide on a step which, according to the Articles of War, might lead to a death sentence, on the basis of a rumour? The answer is no, emphatically no, the Navy does not breed such fools as that.

I heard no rumours whatever, and believe them to have been fathered after the event by the Invergordon historians. But if any did exist, they can have carried no weight nor in any way destroyed the men’s belief that previous contracts would be honoured. What there is no gainsaying is the fact that the official Admiralty order did not appear on the ships’ noticeboards until the morning of Sunday, 13 September, and that it was this official announcement that broke the men’s faith.

It was less the cuts in themselves than the size of the cuts that undermined our trust. We all knew the economy was in a bad way, and had a reduction of five, or even six, per cent been announced, nobody would have uttered a word. It was the impoverishing twenty-five per cent which shocked us into spontaneous action. We first heard of this sum at breakfast time on Sunday morning, and by that same afternoon there had been a meeting in the canteen and a resolution to strike. You can’t get much more spontaneous than that.

Britain was then faced with a financial crisis. Whether it was caused by mismanagement, an act of God or anything else is of no consequence at the moment. In order to overcome its difficulties, the government resorted to the usual measures – an attack upon the finances of the little man. All, as far as governments are concerned, in order; but the amazing thing was that the Board of Admiralty, which ostensibly had the welfare of the little men of the lower deck at heart, entered into the conspiracy.

I have already explained that there were two pay scales in the Navy; one, fixed in 1919, which gave the able seaman a basic wage of four shillings a day, and another, for men joining from October 1925 onwards, which allowed three shillings a day. When this rate was fixed, the 1919 men were promised that their pay would not be lowered to match that of the new ratings, and the believed this promise. In 1931 the majority on the lower deck were still on the 1919 rate. The government’s proposal, accepted with unbridled eagerness by the Admiralty and announced in the order we first saw on that Sunday morning, was to reduce everyone to the 1925 level. It was to come into effect a couple of weeks later.

After the mutiny the members of the Board of Admiralty claimed to have protested against breaking the pledge to maintain naval pay rates. People said it was not the Board but the Cabinet who
demanded the cuts. True, the Cabinet ordered cuts for the whole country; but the work of preparing them for the Navy was the work of the Admiralty. It was an Admiralty staff of accountancy experts who made the calculations and eventually compiled that sixteen-page announcement with all its financial details. And, like Rome, it was not a day’s job.

The most astonishing aspect of the proceedings was the indecent haste with which My Lords hurried to carry out the Cabinet’s wishes in respect of the sum to be saved at the Navy’s expense. Without any consideration of the outcome, they plunged into working out this measure as if their own lives depended upon it. They arbitrarily placed in the balance the very existences of the ninety thousand trained men and ten thousand well educated officers, many of them important specialists, for whose fate they were entirely responsible.

No one will suggest that they did not know the Navy was the vital lynch-pin holding together what was then the British Empire.

The measures the Board should have taken were very simple. For a brief period their duty was to abandon their position as chairborne admirals and become seaborne. Instead of issuing arbitrary announcements about loyalty, sacrifices and other noble sentiments, they should have gone to the Fleet and explained to all ranks the situation the country was in and discovered how the government proposals would affect them. They could have gone through the comedy of calling an extraordinary session of the Welfare Committee which would at least have given the impression that they were interested in the fate of their men.

But their training, their upbringing in the naval college was an insurmountable barrier preventing a Lord of the Admiralty from going to the men, however dire the country’s circumstances. One glance at any of the orders in reply to requests from the Welfare Committee would show the spirit which guided them in their relations with the men, their reluctance to bend even slightly their majestic heads to listen for once to the lower deck. So they remained on their exalted perch, seeing nothing lower than the top of Nelson’s Column and setting their standards of relations between the lower deck and the wardroom by those that existed in the wooden walls that great man commanded. True, the yard-arm line and the cat-o’-nine-tails had gone. But the scum mentality remained. For this reason the appeal to loyalty fell somewhat flat on the ears of the only men that were really loyal, and never so sincere about it as at Invergordon.

With all their power and with the certain backing of the Navy, the Board did not lift a finger to stop the cuts. What is more, they schemed to launch them as an almost perfect fait accompli.

Altogether there were three documents connected with announcing the cuts: a telegram dated 3 September, to commanders-in-chief, announcing that reductions were coming; the famous letter C.W. [Commissions and Warrants Department] 8284/31, dated 10 September, giving the details; and the Admiralty Fleet order itself. The first two of these were sent to the wrong ship – to Nelson, flagship of the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, Admiral Sir Michael Hodges, then ill in hospital, instead of to the Hood, aboard which was the acting C-in-C, Rear-Admiral Tomkinson. And the third of these documents arrived late.

Such mishandling of documents might be believed an accident, but I doubt it. I once had personal experience of a mislaid signal. In 1924, when I was serving as a boy first class in the Devonport Submarine Flotilla, I was lent during the leave period to the Dockyard Signal Tower as a messenger. The first message I had to deliver was to a newly built and commissioned submarine of the L class. I came down the forehatch into the boat and saw a number of people busy with different tasks. One man, a burly type in his shirt-sleeves, seemed to be doing a lot of ordering, so I guessed he was the coxswain, a chief petty officer. I handed him the signal, and there and then he read it aloud. It was from the admiral of the port announcing that the submarine should proceed to the pool in Plymouth
Sound the next day, when he would come aboard to inspect it. I heard the man read the signal quite clearly. He then dismissed me and I went back to the tower.

Next day the admiral, plus suite and barge, went out to the pool and the cupboard was bare, there was no submarine. I learned this when I was dragged along day after day to give evidence about how I had delivered the signal and to whom. From the way the investigation, by all kinds of gold braid, went on and on I began to think I might take my pension answering questions about this minor mix-up. Having experienced all the to-do over a signal of trivial importance, how could I believe that when a signal of infinitely greater importance went astray it was a matter of no concern to the senders.

Admiral Hodge’s illness was no part of the scheme. It was genuine. But there may have been those, or maybe only one person, in the Admiralty who saw in this an excuse for the signal to go astray. Despite the arbitrary measures then being legislated, we still had a Parliament and other organs that might, if only to make political capital, have raised the question before the public if the signal was delayed without some pretext. If there is anything which scares naval brass, it is interference in their affairs by MPs and people like them. Very often I have heard a naval officer say ‘... and then you’ll write to your MP’, in the manner of someone who hopes you won’t.

So, like a dog without a collar, the signal went astray, and the Atlantic Fleet, under the command of a junior admiral, Rear-Admiral Tomkinson, left, on 8 September, for Invergordon, unaware of the shattering news awaiting it.

One possible reason for a deliberate withholding of the signal was that the Admiralty’s accountants had worked out the allocation of the cuts at a most inopportune moment, when the ships – and therefore the sailors, some thirty thousand in all – were all in the home ports, Chatham, Portsmouth and Devonport: three large industrial towns. In 1931 each of these towns had its contingent of unemployed, part of the two-and-a-half million throughout the country who were getting more and more militant every day, and who also were to be affected by the government’s economies. The Admiralty may well have seen, perhaps with help from government officials, that there was a new danger here. Never before had the Services been made to feel the pinch of economy together with the workers and unemployed. Disclosure of the order would inevitably lead to trouble on the lower deck, in which the unemployed and many workers would join, no doubt with the moral support of their wives. In brief, steps had to be taken to prevent what many had been afraid of since the General Strike: the possibility of servicemen combining with workers to repel an attack on the living standards of both.

So, the fortuitous illness of an admiral and the naval movements schedule worked out long before the crisis ensured that the ships of the Fleet were isolated in the Firth of Cromarty. At this point the Admiralty quietly made their announcement, keeping it in the family, so to say.

But the Board tangled themselves up in their own web and incidentally put their fellow officers in the Fleet in an impossible position. Kept ignorant of the Board’s aims, the officers found themselves in a quandary which none of them had ever faced before. That is why meetings could be held without interference. Let us look at the situation without trying to find excuses for anybody. The first meeting takes place on Sunday, 13 September. There is one speaker, but he suggests following the miners’ example and taking strike action and also makes and appeal for what could be called a preliminary committee. This is reported to the right quarters yet nothing is done. The next day a second meeting is to be held where strike action is not merely proposed but an actual decision to strike is taken. By this time twenty-four hours have passed. Still nothing is done. Moreover, there is an interval of twelve hours between the decision to strike and the strike itself. And in all that time nothing is done.
So we see that the unexpected springing of the cuts, brought about by the Admiralty keeping the news to themselves for such a length of time, tied the officers hand and foot. By the time the officers realised the seriousness of the situation, only bloody suppression could have stopped strike action, and the Commanders of the Fleet were not anxious to impose that. They thought more of their men than the Admiralty did, as the words of Admiral Tomkinson bear out: ‘The ordinary sailor was worth a hundred times more to his country and his service than was warranted by the shoddy treatment and broken promises meted out to him by the Admiralty.’

But the Board’s biggest blunder was to underestimate the men’s reaction. They did of course send a ‘Warning Signal’ on 3 September to prepare senior officers, even if it never reached the senior officers of the Atlantic Fleet. But what was it warning against? This question inevitably arises, especially in view of the fact that the word ‘warning’ had been in use in the Navy for years in connection with approaching storms, and had therefore acquired a specific significance. One obvious answer is that the Board, the very people who vouched for the lower deck’s willingness to go to the sacrifice without a bleat, were the people who least believed in their avowal.

Trouble, then, was expected. But what was not taken into account in the strategy for springing the surprise announcement on the lower deck was the extent of the shock. The men were shocked in a way that had never been known before or perhaps after. Not even declaration of war had the power to shock them as much as this announcement succeeded in doing.

Realising the Board’s slave-like eagerness to bend the knee to the politicians to whom they owed their own position, and their seeming complete indifference to the fate of the ninety thousand ratings and their families, the men were inspired to do what the high-placed gentlemen of the Admiralty were afraid to do: show the politicians a solid front.
9 Strike Meeting

From the time I returned on board on Sunday evening, 13 September, to the time I went ashore again at 4 pm on Monday the 14th, I was never once questioned by any officer of Norfolk. In fact there was absolutely no mention of any meeting in the canteen.

That Monday I was in the duty watch which meant no shore leave, but in the morning I put in a request to be allowed to go ashore 'out of watch with substitute', that is, another seaman agreed to carry out my watch duties and let me go ashore in his place. This was a common practice and in home ports it was sometimes extremely difficult to find a substitute, but at Invergordon where there was nothing to see or do such a request was rare. Yet no officer stopped to ponder this, a fact which was particularly remarkable as it was well-known that a meeting had been held the night before. The fact that my request was granted blind can only be attributed to a mixture of sheer negligence and smug complacency.

So it was that, having, by my request, advertised my going to all and sundry, I walked off the ship without interference and went straight to the canteen, where a meeting was well underway. This time I was accompanied by Leading Seaman Richard Carr, a man much respected on the lower deck and who, in other circumstances, would undoubtedly have ended his career as a chief petty officer. The canteen was packed. There was no chairman, and anyone who wanted to speak did so where he sat. As I entered, a little hollow-cheeked man with fiery ginger hair was calling upon the men to leave the ships and march on London. This was Able Seaman Bond, a well-known big mouth whose political creed as 'against the government whatever it may be'. At that moment he was telling the men that they could eat turnips and mangel-wurzels in the fields on the journey south. He was not shouted down, but laughed down, and that in one of the most serious meetings in British naval history this century.

This crazy speech came to be blown up into a major incident of the Invergordon mutiny and was to keep the secret service busy for some time after it. No documentary evidence was ever produced to show that such a suggestion was made by anyone who played a part in the leadership of the mutiny, yet, even now, when naval documents concerning Invergordon are by law available to the public, a writer7 repeats this schoolboy plot as the real thing.

How fortunate that I can tell the true story! Our underground organisation planned to make a landing on two beaches, having first captured a bumboat and a wherry from Jock McHine (singer). One beach was code-named 'Omaha, Omaha, I'm coming where you are', but the other involved a furious discussion between the two-man central committee and finally knives were drawn and thirteen people were killed. At night we took them to Loch Ness and left them there as food for the monster. That left us with two code names for the other landing beach, a few yards from Wigan pier. One was the first line from that old sea shanty 'Locked in the stable with a sheep'. Stoke Smithsky was appointed political commissar and was given the job of thinking up some rousing political slogans like 'Flatfoots of the world ignite!'. He also worked out a scheme for seizing the engine of the Flying Kilt, fixing it with radial no-inner-tube car tyres and using it as a state vehicle for highly placed leaders to ride direct to the Palace. To the devil with the mass of flatfoots! They could walk, they voted for it. The captain of the drifter Greasy Water was made chief of supplies, and by a little pull here, a swindle or two there, plus a couple of thick ears for recalcitrant farmers, managed to collect three fields of turnips and five of mangel-wurzels. The turnips were kept for the leaders, the mangel-wurzels for the plebeians. Angus McWhiskyswigger, the local pink, offered us the use of an 1888 penny-farthing, but we told him we would prefer a tenner to buy the leaders beer on the way. If the plebeians should complain they had no beer we should say 'Let them eat cake'. Everything worked out, to the second: the one snag was that there was only one marcher, Able Seaman Bond.

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7 David Divine, Mutiny at Invergordon, London, 1970
Crazy? Maybe, but no more crazy than the fact that a ridiculous suggestion should have been built up to become a story in which there is not one word of truth, but which to this day is preserved in state archives for latter-day historians to refer to. AB Bond did not open his mouth again, except maybe on his own ship after the strike began, and the march on London was never mentioned thereafter except by the secret service.

The super-militant Bond had just been laughed down when the door was assailed with furious knocking and rattling and a voice demanded that we open up. Without delay it was opened and a young lieutenant walked in, accompanied by the three ratings of his patrol. This, as we later discovered, was Lieutenant Elkins.

He had a peculiar manner that did not entirely measure up to the calm, collected behaviour one expects from a naval officer addressing a crowd of men. There was no reason for the crowd to be dangerous in any way threatening for everyone was aware that their complaint was not about any officer in the Fleet, not even the Admiral himself. Had the lieutenant ordered them to disperse, they would have done so, because the decision to strike in the morning had already been taken; we were to refuse duty until the authors of the pay cuts in the Navy had withdrawn them. But Elkins did not show himself flexible enough to adapt to the situation.

In a voice which suggested a man who finds himself, at the dead of night, in the most ill-reputed part of a city and talks out loud to give himself courage, Elkins almost screamed: 'Stop this meeting! If any man speaks I shall arrest him immediately!' Nobody was impressed. He who gives way to fear always blunders, and Elkins had blundered in his approach to these very sober, very determined men.

As Elkins pushed his way from the door to the centre of the canteen, he became separated from the men of his patrol. He was standing alone in the middle of the building, half way between the bar end and the entrance door. He could move neither left nor right, neither backward nor forward. One of his men was nearer to the rear door and one to the entrance, each surrounded by groups of determined sailors. Where the third was I am unable to say, but he was certainly not near Elkins. I was about fifteen feet from Elkins, facing him. He was very noticeable because he was the only man present in officer's uniform. Then the glass flew. The picture is before me as I write, as clear as if it were on a cinema screen.

Suddenly I saw a hand lift, in a sideways swing, to the left rear of Elkins, about twenty feet away. The owner of the hand was not visible: he had evidently crouched down in the crowd. A glass jug cast by this hand flew over towards Elkins, hit a stanchion just behind him, and shattered, scattering behind him to the right and left. The splinters did not touch him, but he crouched down, screwing his head into his shoulders, then suddenly turned and made a dash for the entrance door, all the people in his way parting for him to pass through. Elkins was later to claim in his journal of the mutiny that he was rugby scrummed out of the canteen.

The moment Elkins had fled to the entrance door, the men began to pour out of the rear door. It was not panic but common sense which prompted them. If Elkins returned with a bigger patrol there was no sense in being trapped in the canteen.

On the football ground of the local team, a place known as the Black Field, there was a small shed, evidently used as a dressing room, and from the top of this shed the speakers continued to make speeches. Actually there was little need to continue the meeting, for by this time strike action to begin at six o'clock the next morning, had been decided on, and the word was being bandied about all over Invergordon. The speeches were not long political diatribes, for none of the men had any experience of speaking. There was, however, a very important feature of this meeting. Although every speaker spoke mainly of his own particular position and the suffering the cuts would bring his
family, every branch of the lower deck was represented. It was clear that nothing could prevent a refusal of duty at 6 am the next day.

By this time Elkins had made his way to the Black Field and taken up a position some thirty yards behind the crowd and a little to one side, by some bushes. He says in his journal that he went to the field by a roundabout way, a veiled hint that he might otherwise have been manhandled. In fact nobody approached him and certainly nobody attempted to harm or insult him, or even, apart from a casual glance or two, noticed him at all. With such a tremendous problem before them, the men simply had no desire to become involved with small fry like Elkins. He was there and he could stay if he wanted, he did not make the weather for us.

Meanwhile he was busy watching faces, particularly those of the speakers, and listening to the speeches, taking special pains to describe their inflammatory character. The speakers Elkins heard were all urging the men to do something drastic and one challenged them to ‘have a go’. I was there and I stood with Leading Seaman Carr just underneath the speakers’ temporary platform. No man threatened or agitated. Each one of them talked about what they would have to face if the cuts, were allowed to take place. Did not the eavesdropping Elkins hear one young man tell how his wife, after paying all commitments from his allotment, had one penny left for food? One penny for three people for two weeks, and that before the cuts?

After the meeting on the Black Field, we went back to the canteen, where another remarkable scene met our eyes. A lieutenant-commander stood, smilingly calm, on the counter of the bar, addressing the men in a quiet voice. Behind him stood Elkins. This officer, Lieutenant-Commander Beresford of Hood, was dressed in duty rig, with black leather leggings and a sword hanging from his sword belt. He looked very official but far from officious. Here was an officer who had much wider view of the situation, who understood the men’s position but who, at the same time, recognised his duty to urge them to depend on their officers for help.

Lieutenant-Commander Beresford was the officer of that evening, if there was one. The calm and confident manner with which he faced the crowd and talked to them was amazing. There was not the least attempt at rowdism and everybody listened attentively. Being a living example, he appealed for calm and quiet and got them. Whether he is alive or not I do not know, but if he is he will probably remember the sailor who said to him ‘Sir, tell the barman to fill up my glass and we’ll listen to you all night’. He smiled and continued his address.

But his task was extremely difficult. The officers were also subject to cuts, and if, for those lucky enough to have a private income, it meant little difference to their material position, the majority were going to feel the pinch. Despite their patriotism and, above all, their devotion to the service they were a part of, they could not help realising that the men’s action had been forced upon them and they were in no way attempting to use violent means to destroy the British way of life, but that once their grievance was settled, they would go back to the duty they had temporarily been compelled to desert against their will.

Lieutenant-Commander Beresford ended the meeting and dispersed the crowd. He had made every effort to convince the men that the Fleet Command was trying its best to help them. But mistrust of the Admiralty had gone too deep and, short of a bloody conflict, nothing could stop the events of the morrow taking their course.

Although I did not speak at either of the meetings on the 14th, in the canteen or on the Black Field, I did not remain entirely inactive. As speaker after speaker talked of their own hapless situation, I walked among the men repeating one single phrase as if it was some slogan: ‘Don’t forget, six o’clock tomorrow morning’. Very soon it was being shouted aboard for all in the Firth to hear, and when the boats went off to the ships with retuning liberty-men, it was shouted from boat to boat and from boat to ship.
It was no doubt this shouting that created the impression that the number of drunks had increased several-fold. In reality the men were never so sober in their lives, so sober, or so serious, for they were about to take a step which, according to the Articles of War, could lead to a death sentence for some of them.

On our return to the Norfolk we held another meeting in the recreation room. Why we were allowed to hold it is a mystery to this day. On my recommendation the men of Norfolk decided to postpone strike action until eight, because it would be more effective if the big ships took the lead and more heartening for the smaller ships like ours. How long it took for this decision to reach the wardroom I do not know, but at most it was half an hour. But there were no counter-measures.

10 Mutiny

Invergordon has been called the ‘quiet’ mutiny. A far more appropriate word is ‘determined’. There could have been no more determined men in the world than the mutineers of the Atlantic Fleet on those two days in 1931. There was none of that strange atmosphere which usually engulfs a fleet when a small mutiny breaks out on a single ship, when the ship in question seems to have been put in quarantine and a pall of mystery settles over it. From the beginning we knew we were going to win and we had no fears that, having lost out, the Board of Admiralty would let loose its hang-em-at-the-yard-arm revenge complex. Our strike was based on the solidarity of all involved.

Having decided, on Norfolk, to delay action till 8 am, we turned out in the normal manner and went through the almost ritual job of washing decks. In the poor light of the Highland morning it was not easy to see the other vessels of the Fleet but we could clearly hear loud cheering coming from more than one of the big ships. It was our duty to keep our promise and join in after breakfast. It may be said that it was our duty to continue loyal service, but who were we expected to be loyal to? The people who had a duty not to break a promise and did?

Events on Norfolk followed the expected pattern. Naturally Captain Prickett had been informed that our late action was only a little strategy to put the onus of starting on the big ships, but our intelligence agents had informed us of the move he meant to make to cut the ground from under us. He planned to call a meeting of the ship’s company just before eight o’clock and, once the men were mustered, to talk to us about the futility of our action, promise his help in raising the question of our grievances and then, by saying something such as ‘Now, men, let’s go to work’, end it all peacefully.

I put it to the men that the pay cuts were ordered by a body much higher than Captain Prickett and that even if he were acting in good faith there was nothing he could do. If he got us to go to work, we had lost. At 7.30 am, together with Able Seaman Shields, I made the round of the mess decks where were housed the people we considered the most important: the seaman’s mess deck and finally the very vital Marines’ mess deck, the Marines being the only men among us who were sworn in when joining the service. There was no need for long speeches. In fact for the stokers but four words were needed: ‘Are you with us?’ There was an immediate response in the affirmative and having obtained the same answer from both seamen and torpedo men, it was left for me to go down to the Marines.
I must confess that as I made my way to their mess deck I had certain apprehensions. After all, only men who have taken the oath of allegiance know how deep an impression it makes. However the reception I received was no less enthusiastic than on the other mess decks. Perhaps people will ask how it was that an able seaman with no exceptional popularity on the ship or any great achievements could have swayed serious-minded men so easily. The answer is that it was not Able Seaman Wincott’s powers of oratory or his persuasive manner, but the inhuman behaviour of the Board of Admiralty which drove these people to desperate measures. Able Seaman Wincott was nothing more than a vehicle conveying from one branch of the ship to another the combined wish to begin concerted action.

A little while after my tour representatives of the Marines came to ask me for special protection: they feared they might be called out one by one and thereby isolated from the rest of the men. As shall be seen, we took our own counter-measures. Now we had nothing to do but wait for the captain’s next move.

Exactly at a quarter to eight Captain Prickett ordered ‘Clear lower deck’ and gave the petty officers the word that no one was to be excused. Knowing this muster was due we had previously agreed to attend the call and listen to what the captain had to say, but if within three to five minutes he had not announced that the pay cuts were to be reviewed, we were all to leave the quarter-deck and make straight for the forecastle. As it happened, Captain Prickett sent us to the forecastle sooner than we had intended, for he began on a very unfortunate note. As a result of our action, he told us, several million pounds had already been knocked off British shares in the Argentine alone. Why he chose the Argentine I don’t know—perhaps he had interests there himself. It was somewhat out of place to try to impress sailors on four bob a day, about to drop to three, with the misfortunes of shareholders in the Argentine or Timbuktu or anywhere else. In the event there was not a murmur and no one was noticed jumping over the side in the absence of a skyscraper window. Instead, at the signal, there was a mass movement to the forecastle, and Captain Prickett was left talking to his officers and petty officers.

Keeping our promise to the Marines, we set them in the eyes of the ship and then stood between them and any possible attempt to cajole them back to work on the basis of their oath. At this point the cooks sent a representative to ask me what role they should play during the strike. They were quite ready to down soup ladles with us. I quickly pointed out that they were more valuable to us as cooks than as strikers, as we had no intention of leaving the ship and would need to eat. This little scene may seem rather insignificant when compared with the events taking place in the Fleet that day, but it refutes the calumny that I was conspiring to organise a march on London. In fact everything that followed refutes this unfounded stupidity, which Whitehall still lovingly preserves in its archives, to add to the pollution of Britain.

It was a false start, this attempt by Captain Prickett to win sympathy from men whose one concern was their immediate predicament whose meagre income was accounted in shillings and not in millions. Just those few opening words convinced us that no serving officer of the Fleet, no matter how he sympathised, could change the situation: our fate was in the hands of that small group of men known as the Board of Admiralty. Captain Prickett’s words also convinced us of the relentless truth of the axiom ‘The well-fed man cannot understand the hungry man’.

From the moment the men of Norfolk took up their position on the forecastle and announced their solidarity with the other striking ships by a loud cheer, they were on their own. From then on their decisions and behaviour, like the decisions and behaviour of the men on the other individual ships, was up to them. There were no leaders except those thrown up by the crisis. There were no secret contacts with other ships. There was no system of passing messages, as the creators of the Invergordon fables would have us believe. Throughout the mutiny events on different ships followed more or less the same pattern, but this cannot be construed as evidence of premeditation or secret
signals. Circumstances of shipboard life had been standardised for years and it was these which dictated the men’s behaviour. For instance, a unanimous concern was the safety of the ships and the officers. This had always been important and no less now, perhaps even more so. Therefore officers of divisions and departments had full access to the men. There were no threats, no insults, no attempts to avoid contact with officers, although a popular officer was talked to more freely than one who had less popularity or none.

Now, whilst the men of Norfolk are gathered on the forecastle, carrying out the necessary chores and talking to the officers, it is a convenient moment to break the narrative and put he case for the lower deck.

In previous versions of the Invergordon story most writers have hurried to show what fabulous salaries sailors received. The Admiralty’s official view in 1931 was that our pay was overgenerous and should be brought down to the level of workers’ wages. Somehow that statement conflicted with our conception of these so-generous wages: we were of the opinion that if we were to be put on a level with workers in factories, our wages would have to go up, not down. On the side of the Admiralty, in their claim that we were overpaid, were, and are, many educated people. It is strange that even now, when our universities are turning out thousands and thousands of these so-called educated people, the belief that they know it all is still preserved. You have your elaborately got up piece of paper called a diploma, you speak with the ‘correct’ accent, and that is it, you’re in the circle. And of all these ‘proper’ accents, the Navy had the most exaggerated, a subject of many jokes on the lower deck, with its mixture of every one of the hundreds of accents of Britain. The AB on duty on a certain ship once reported to the lieutenant who was OOD the arrival in port of another warship. Saluting, he said ‘The Alligator is entering harbour, sir’. From the summit of his higher education, the OOD looked scornfully at him and said ‘Alligator? What do you mean, my man? You should say “Elligaytah!”’ ‘Yes, sir,’ said the AB, ‘and the Krokodiiee is just behind’.

That is just a diversion into lower deck humour, but it helps make the point that hundreds of these diploma-ed people are mere Professors of Gabology. Yet because they have their bit of paper, they are elected to committees on important affairs of state and given huge salaries and no time limit. At the time of Invergordon these committees were springing up like mushrooms, and their main aim was to show that all the lower paid were being pampered, as a result of which the country was running into financial difficulties. The so-called experts manipulated their figures and convincingly demonstrated that the poor could be more economical; the unemployed could eat grass, the sailor’s wife could sell some little luxury like a gramophone bought at great sacrifice. Then they went through the comedy of getting a democratic backing for their measures, showing them first to the bodies supposed to be representative of every section of the British people. Strangely enough the Trades Union Congress rejected all their suggestions except the ten per cent cut proposed for judges (paid £10,000 a year) and ministers. The TUC’s views did not cut much ice, yet it was in the TUC that the real specialist on the low paid worker was to be found, the late Mr Ernest Bevin, head of the largest union in the country and one of the many union leaders who had legged heavy loads on board ships and actually lived a low paid life.

Turning to the Navy, the experts went to town to show the British public that if the British sailor did not ride around in a Roll-Royce, it was only because he spent too much on beer. The lower deck really had no reason to strike, they said. It was not losing twenty-five per cent of its income because it benefited from allowances on top of its basic pay. Figures can’t lie, they said, forgetting that we of the lower deck together with the unemployed had long ago learned that liars could figure. Now I will attempt to describe what our fabulous wages looked like when placed on the cap of a son of the sea, whilst inside the head that fitted under that cap a thousand questions were circling around on how he was going to keep his wife and children decently.
The flat rate for an able seaman who joined the Navy before October 1925 was four shillings a day, and on that sum alone could he rely entirely. All extras were subject to conditions and were about as stable as the weather in the Bay of Biscay. For instance, at the age of twenty-one he received his first good-conduct bandage, which entitled him to another three pence per day. However it was only necessary for him to fall foul of some minor naval regulation and away went this little extra. Not only that: by losing that badge he was faced with the possibility of losing in addition his fifteen years’ good conduct medal which carried with it a gratuity of fifty pounds. Small wonder that the men referred to this award as the Medal for Fifteen Years’ Undiscovered Crimes.

That it was not so difficult to lose a good conduct badge may be seen from the following incident.

The same captain who took us on our wonderful trip to China deprived one man of his good conduct badge, a leading seaman of his rating, and five crewmen of their badges, and added seven days’ cells into the bargain, all because they were reported by the flagship to rowing raggedly. It happened at Gibraltar, where they were taking the whaler on some mission or other; as they passed the break in the mole a heavy sea struck and for a moment they lost stroke. When an ‘extra’ can depend on the whim of an officer, who may or may not like you personally, it is certainly not to be relied on.

Much has been made of the extra known as the ‘clothing allowance’, and the impression has perhaps been created that it was given in addition to the clothing supplied by the service. The truth is a little different and shows that the government was actually doing business on this allowance.

When a boy joined the Navy at the tender age of 15 ¾ he was completely kitted up within the first two days. No one will deny that the kit issued to new entrants was something to admire, complete in every detail down to tooth powder. On finishing his course and leaving for sea-service, he received in addition a sailor’s overcoat, tropical suits and a few minor articles. But from that day on he received nothing free of charge, not even a length of cotton to sew on a button with.

Instead he got a clothing allowance of threepence a day (this threepence, like a tip for a liftboy, seemed a widespread practice in the Admiralty). It would appear that with careful treatment of his clothes, a man could be in hand threepence a day, only rarely making incursions into the accumulated sum to renew some article which had outlived its usefulness. However there were plenty of people, aided by a number of regulations, to put a check on a man trying to become rich from his clothing allowance. According to regulations, his immediate commanding officer was obliged to conduct a kit inspection every two weeks. True, many officers avoided this chore, but many did not. Any clothing which did not come up to the officer’s conception of naval uniform standards was condemned and new items provided, the cost being withheld from the man’s pay.

If there was no particular emphasis on these regulations on the ships, the system in the Royal Naval Barracks at Devonport made up for it. It was known as ‘clothing class’, but it had nothing to do with teaching sailors how to sew on buttons or patch a pair of pants. It should have been called ‘clothing inquisition’. The ‘class’ was held in a large basement in one of the barracks and was in the charge of a WO [Warrant Officer] whose five underlings, all petty officers, were evidently chosen for their reputations as what sailors called ‘pure, unadulterated bastards’. Every man entering the barracks had first to acquire a card, something in the nature of an identity card minus photograph, which was known to the men as a ‘breathing licence’. Without it nothing could be done, and until it was stamped by the clothing class he could not breathe freely.

The man spread out his kit on the floor and one of the petty officers took on the job of inspection, both for condition and inventory, some of the articles had long since ceased to serve any useful purpose, but that did not matter: they had been issued and had to be accounted for. The favourite trick of the junior inquisitors was to take up a pair of trousers, search it inch by inch until they found the beginning of a hole, thrust their two index fingers through the cloth, crowing ‘What’s this? What’s this?’ and pull their fingers apart until the garment was torn almost in two and, of course, beyond repair.
In view of the fact that the purchase of, say, a suit was a big drag on a man’s pay, an enterprising firm of naval tailors in Devonport organised a scheme whereby the men could make a regular allocation from their pay and take clothing as and when required. For the businessman it was an advantageous deal. Thousands signed the allocation agreement, with the result that every week the tailor put large sums of money into his bank, where it earned him a tidy sum in interest for no more effort on his part than the trouble of keeping his bankbook in a safe place. Now no one made an allocation of the mere sum of threepence a day – a weekly sum of twenty-one pence or in the financial language of those days, one shilling and ninepence. They always added to this sum from their own pockets, for the tailor would not accept less than ten shillings a month.

So the Navy got its pound of flesh from the clothing allowance. Only the experts can be gullible enough to think it was an addition.

I have already mentioned the monthly mess bill which a goodly part of the lower deck was still paying in those days, as the ‘general messing’ system only slowly overtook the whole Navy. Another expense which the economists failed to take into account was the regular leave railway fare. If we take it that the majority of the men hailed from London or from the north, we can say that on average the men paid a good three pounds per year in railway fares. I know that when I once lost my return ticket from Leicester to Plymouth, the inspector took my name and particulars and three months later I was called into the ship’s office and signed away more than two pounds for that one-way trip. On another occasion, when I was still an ordinary seaman, I drew my pay to go on leave for two weeks and just managed to cover my railway fare. Yet all the efforts by lower deck representatives to introduce a contributory system whereby a weekly subscription would ensure free travel for seamen proceeding on leave were persistently blocked.

There was a marriage allowance, but it was limited to sailors of twenty-five or over and by no standards could it have been considered excessive: six shillings for the first child, then down to two shillings for the following one. Why the minimum age of twenty-five was imposed is incomprehensible, unless, of course, it was thought better for virile young men of twenty-three or twenty-four to spend their energies in brothels than in the marriage-bed, or better still, skulking around dark alleys or in cheap doss houses with the VD-ravaged ‘free’ prostitutes of Britain.

But extras are extras to whomever they are paid. Some extras, somewhat more juicy than those granted to the men, were never mentioned by the analysts who thought the lower deck too well off. For instance, according to the first of the Articles of War, every captain or commander of a ship had to ‘cause worship of Almighty God’ to be observed, or suffer punishment for not doing so. Should there be no chaplain aboard, the captain took prayers every morning after breakfast. It was a job which occupied at the most three minutes, but the captain pocketed an extra half-crown every time he did it – five-eights of an AB’s daily rate, not a mean extra. Furthermore captains were happy to arrange for chaplains to be absent, so that the half-crowns kept coming. I myself have taken part in filling a spare cabin with lumber so that the captain could plead he had no space for a chaplain.

How many more such extras for officers helped to swell the Navy bill I do not pretend to know, but entertainment money figured high on the list. Not for the men, however. When we visited Kiel, the crew of a German cruiser invited us to their own mess deck and did us really glorious. But after our convivial evening, we could only say ‘Thank you’. We had no chance of returning their hospitality.

After that digression which, based on personal knowledge, is far more authentic than the estimates of high-salaried so-called experts, let us get back to the forecastle of the Norfolk, where the men have gathered after Captain Prickett’s dismal failure to impress them with the story of the drop in British holdings in the Argentine.

One of the most extraordinary features of the Invergordon incident was the peaceful relationship between officers and men and, above all, the smoothness of the daily routine. An examination of the
ship’s log of any of the ships involved will show a complete lack of abnormalities. Although different activities were continually underway on board the ships, officers interviewing groups of men and so forth, the harbour was deserted except for an occasional ship’s motorboat passing from one ship to another. As I have said, the strikers had no detailed plans and passed no secret messages, far less passwords or instructions. But if the crew of a passing motorboat from another striking ship showed crossed forearms, it conveyed to us that the men of that ship were still solid in their strike. This was not a planned signal. The crossed forearms were one of many unofficial signals that had entered Navy life years and years before and actually meant ‘Tie up’ or ‘Finish’. In our particular circumstances at Invergordon it was automatically adopted to mean something more.

We were visited regularly by our officers all through the day and these regular approaches unwittingly gave us an inkling of what was going on higher up. At the beginning the officers were mainly concerned with getting us to go back to work on the understanding that they, the officers, including the highest in the Fleet, would take all steps within their power to help us. But they soon realised that our quarrel was not with them, that whilst we believed in their integrity, our belief in the Admiralty was smashed entirely. After a time their suggestions took on another tone. Instead of trying to get us back to work, they proposed we should use the time for training. This also had no results.

Then came an interruption in our peaceful day. We on Norfolk were expecting a visitor, an important visitor. Our intelligence service, which had the complete trust of the wardroom and was probably working on both fronts, informed us that the admiral of our squadron, the Second Cruiser Squadron, was coming aboard to talk to us. We did not know him and moreover we did not know his name, for he had never taken any measures to make our acquaintance. His proposed visit meant nothing more to us than that higher officers were being brought into play, emphasising thereby our growing strength. However, exactly forty years after seeing him for two minutes on Norfolk, I discovered his name was Rear-Admiral Astley-Rushton, when I read it on page 115 of Mutiny at Invergordon in 1971. Well, Rear-Admiral Astley-Rushton used his two minutes for an abusive attack on us, using such choice expressions as ‘Bleddy fools! Bleddy hooligans!’ Here was a typical example of the officer who despised his men, accepted the ‘scum of the earth’ theory and was准备 to sacrifice anything except his own interests. Some years later he was killed in a car dash to London after discovering that his name had been omitted from the list of officers decorated after the Royal Review at Spithead. That same dash was sadly lacking when it came to defending the men he was called to lead, but perhaps the manner of his death offers an explanation of the behaviour of the Admiralty. Was it for awards and decorations that the Admiralty schemed to bend the knee to the Cabinet and sacrifice the living standards of ninety thousand loyal men?

Just before he left his own ship to come aboard Norfolk the Rear-Admiral managed to get his men assembled on the blind side, and during his talk he pointed to the deserted deck and said ‘You see, my men have turned to!’ The trick was so obvious that, together with his profanity, it convinced us he was an officer who would always treat sailors as half thugs, half retarded children.

As he left the Norfolk, we returned to our position on the forecastle, deeply disappointed with his foolish diatribe. The fable-mongers soon got busy, however, and the story was circulated that we had pelted his barge with potatoes – a physical impossibility unless we had come armed with potatoes to hear him speak. But not one officer could honestly say that the men of the Norfolk refused him a peaceful hearing all the time of the standstill.

One of our most popular officers, who never in all his approaches was given an impolite word, was Lieutenant-Commander Rogers. He was the officer of my division and we, the men under him, had always been grateful for his attitude towards us, especially his very humane manner of talking to us. During the strike Lieutenant-Commander Rogers was the officer who was most talked to, and it was

\[\text{Resumed duties and returned to work [Reddebrek]}\]
he who, after the failures to get us to work or to train, asked `What do you want?' This was something we had not specifically discussed; our whole argument was that the proposed twenty-five per cent reduction would be an impossible burden on the men and their families; but the answer was clear and ready. The circumstances leading to its formulation were the solidarity of the men, the inability of the officers both high and low to break the strike by any means short of force, and finally the absolute incompetence of the Board of Admiralty in the presence of an unusual crisis. It reads like Lenin's three essentials for revolution, but I can assure the reader that none of us knew of a man called Lenin, so I hope my use of the name will not give reactionaries suspicious thoughts.

When Lieutenant-Commander Rogers asked what we wanted, I rushed down below, took a sheet of foolscap and a pencil and wrote in large block letters `Go away and we will give our answer in writing'. I quickly returned to the forecastle and while Rogers was speaking to some of the men, I passed the sheet of paper to him over their shoulders. I doubt if he saw who gave it as he was surrounded by sailors, but on reading it, he readily agreed and even went so far as to make a gesture to help us, instructing AB George Hill, the commander's office worker, to bring out to the forecastle the off typewriter, paper and a table. Hill had been in Devonport Division’s one and only typing class – the one and only, because at that time the Commodore of the RN Barracks was a man who believed in ships of iron and men of iron too. When he heard typing classes had been organised, he went off the deep end, shouting something about sailors soon being in skirts, and cancelled the classes.

Hill sat at the typewriter and I began to dictate. What I said was neither previously discussed nor subsequently altered. It poured out of my mouth as it came into my head. This is what I said:

We the loyal subjects of HM the King do hereby present my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty our representations to implore them to amend the drastic cuts in pay that have been inflicted on the lowest paid men on the lower deck.

It is evident to all concerned that this cut is the forerunner of tragedy, misery and immorality amongst the families of the lower deck and unless we can be guaranteed a written agreement from the Admiralty confirmed by Parliament stating that our pay will be revised we are still to remain as one unit, refusing to serve under the new rate of pay.

The men are quite willing to accept a cut which they, the men consider in reason.

Never was any document, which was afterwards to become an historical one, so easy to write. It just came out of me like a baby's rhyme, learned to perfection, although I did not stop to think it out first, or make corrections, before putting the finished version on paper. But how I came to put on that extraordinary last sentence is still a mystery to me, the author. It contained a perfect opportunity to break the strike as it excluded the ‘X’ ratings, the post-1925 men, from the sailor's demands. The ‘X’ ratings might have been persuaded to return to work, and any significant number of men turning to at that moment would have inevitably led to our complete collapse. But to our good fortune nobody except a few of these ratings noticed this possibility, and everybody, on the contrary, took this last sentence as a confirmation of our claim to loyalty, our desire to meet the government half way. It seems to me sheer negligence that this point was passed up. Nowadays when I read in the papers or hear on the radio that `experts` are studying a note from a foreign power, I wonder just what vital point they are overlooking.

Despite the official version that 'only a few' men prompted the mutiny, despite the fact that other fleets did not strike in 1931, I believed then and still do today that the lower deck of the Royal Navy was, without exception, behind this statement. Trying to play down the affair and discredit the men, the authorities manufactured evidence that the would-be-loyal majority had been terrorised into strike action. The fable was spread around that only my brutal threats had forced AB Hill to type for me. It is a really gruesome picture: the scowling Wincott, stripped to his hairy chest (actually it is like
a football field, with eleven on either side), the skull and crossbones tattooed on it in fifteen different colours, a huge red hammer and sickle on his back and a penknife thrust in his waist-band.

`Type,` he growls at the fearless Hill, `or I'll ditch the typewriter!` `Ditch and be damned!` retorts Hill, his eyes flashing with courage. But Wincott in his beer-soaked voice orders his henchmen to rig up the plank and blindfold the typewriter. It is too much for the noble Hill. He cannot sacrifice his beloved typewriter and bowing his head in grief he begins to type.

How ludicrous it all appears, but no more ludicrous than that such a tale could be taken seriously. How George would have laughed to know that I threatened my best friend on that ship, at whose home I had been a regular visitor and for whom I had acted as best man at his wedding but a few weeks before. But all these fairy tales of threats and conspiracies and plans to march on London could not avert the successful result of our action. When we had sent in our manifesto, and were waiting for a reply. A certain officer on Norfolk told us `You have won, but some of you will go outside`.

But there was a whole day to go before those words became a fact, and in the meantime we waited for the official answer to our manifesto. There were no further attempts to cajole or threaten the men back to work. It was now thoroughly realised by everyone, from the top to the bottom of the Fleet, that this was not the mutiny of the adventure books, but a displays of unprecedented solidarity by men who had been callously treated by award-seeking high officials; by men who looked poverty in the face and stared it down; by men who were always ready for the call of duty and who, if an enemy had attempted to take advantage of Invergordon, would have met him with all the fighting spirit of the naval tradition.

One of those to have personal evidence of these qualities was the Norfolk`s officer on duty that first day of the strike. When the order was given at 21000 hours to muster the fire party and night boat`s crew and close the B and C doors, safety measures taken on ships at night, the OOD was amazed to see, not the people called, lining up under the duty petty officer, but one man who stepped smartly up to him, saluted and reported, `Night boat`s crew and fire party mustered, sir. B and C doors closed`.

So astonished was he that he forgot to acknowledge the report, rushed down below to the wardroom which was full of officers and said, almost breathlessly, to the commander `Sir, they have mustered a night boat`s crew and fire party themselves! Yes, sir!` There was a momentary silence as his words sank in and then the commander is reputed to have said `Yes. There are more brains forward than we have ever given credit for`.

We had deliberately chosen a night boat`s crew and a fire party from volunteers who were not in the duty watch, and this for two reasons. The officers would not be able to say `These men have turned to, why not do likewise?` And, secondly, no man could say that he had not taken part in the strike. The officers` surprise at our taking safety precautions was significant, showing once again that the wardroom had failed to move with the times, and to appreciate the change in quality of the men they commanded.

So we caused a sensation when we put our ship to bed safe and sound and prepared for any emergency the elements may have had in their box of surprises. Perhaps we caused an equal sensation among the more reactionary-minded officers when we failed to take advantage of the rifles and bayonets always ready for action on the Marines` mess deck. In his journal Lieutenant Elkins reported how he put a guard on the weapons on his ship, the Valiant, and further made the dramatic announcement that he primed his two blunderbusses. Later he shifts from blunderbusses to Lewis guns. But Lieutenant Elkins was preparing for an enemy of his imagination. The Marines left the rifles and bayonets safely locked up in their racks and joined the seamen on the forecastle.
Our strength lay in being obliged only to take counter measures to the wardroom’s every move. They had to put into action the measures decided on whilst we needed only to make a last-second counter-move to render their efforts futile. We had taken our one and only major step, we had stopped obeying orders, and after that we had merely to defend our position against feeble attacks while time worked to strengthen us.

Whilst the inventors of conspiracies set to work to find evidence for their fantasies, the most fantastic event of the mutiny was taking place: in ships with complements ranging from six hundred to over a thousand, officers and men went to their hammocks and beds within a few yards from each other and peacefully slept the whole night through while peaceful mutiny raged around them. At 6 am, when the boatswain piped ‘All hands’, they rose from their sleep and continued their mutiny.

11 The Admiralty’s Revenge

We now entered a phase at Invergordon which did not exist in any earlier mutiny and will probably never exist again. The men did nothing, in the full meaning of the word. In fact on one of the big ships they pulled out the piano from the recreation room on to the forecastle and ran impromptu concerts. But apart from that there was nothing to do. We had done what we considered needed to be done, and now it was up to the Admiralty and the government. With the typing and circulation of the manifesto – copies were distributed round the Fleet by motorboat – the strike was at its apex; but unlike most movements it was not faced with a decline. Had we threatened an intensification of our efforts if the cuts were not rescinded, there might have been a danger of weakening. But in the circumstances a straightforward rejection could only mean our continuing as we were, refusing to serve. We had bypassed our officers and appealed directly to the Admiralty; our answer was to come from them, and soon. We were losing nothing by the continuation of the strike whilst the Admiralty was on the way to losing a navy.

As it happened, the end of the strike was delayed a whole twenty-four hours by the Admiralty’s strange behaviour. Knowing that the Admiralty had every modern means of communication and transport at their disposal, we expected our manifesto to reach them within hours of it reaching Admiral Tomkinson at Invergordon. It was our officers who had asked us what we wanted, and we had responded immediately, so we could not be accused of presumption in expecting a quick answer. Moreover, it was not only we who were waiting but the whole country. The day dragged on and no answer was forthcoming. Evidently some of the denizens of Whitehall were not prepared to sacrifice anything, as for instance their tea-breaks to expedite matters.

While the Admiralty were engaging in pure adventures – not least in blowing up Invergordon into a national revolution to frighten the King – Admiral Tomkinson, the man on the spot, who did not depend on conflicting reports from rival security services for his information, was successfully playing the affair down and controlling hot-headed young officers. Already an army of pressmen had converged on Invergordon from London and the central towns of Scotland. Even in those days cameras were efficient and easily portable, yet no photographs of Invergordon exist. This is to Admiral Tomkinson’s credit. As soon as the newspapermen arrived he took them aboard the flagship and gave them to understand that sensationalism was not required. So effective were his powers of persuasion, (and they have to be good to get a newspaperman to ease up on such a question) that nowhere are there pictures of sailors massed on the forecastles of ships at Invergordon. And yet there were quite a number of local boat owner prepared to take newsmen out in the Firth, and likewise there were newsmen willing to fork out a tidy sum for the trip.
If Invergordon was the ideal place for springing the cuts on an isolated Fleet, then it was doubly ideal for settling the dispute without publicity. The canteen and fields around were government property where no local civilians ever came. When Admiral Tomkinson reported the first rumblings of dissatisfaction to the Board, they should have travelled to the scene of the action, as their predecessors did to settle the Spithead mutiny of 1797. In 1797 travel was difficult. In 1931 it was not, and although air travel was not yet widely used, with so much at stake the Admiralty could at least have taken a plane to Scotland. All the measures eventually taken, the cancellation of the exercises, the setting up of a commission, the investigation of the men’s financial situation, the restoration of part of the cuts, could have been done in the isolation of the Firth of Cromarty and no outsider any the wiser. Had these measures been taken then and there, the Admiralty would have scored a greater political victory than any Board in history. Of course, they would have eaten humble pie over the cuts, but this they did in any event, and publicly. Here it would have been magnificent humble pie, and afterwards the mere mention of the words ‘Board of Admiralty’ would have called for a gesture of reverence from the lower deck.

Only when it was beginning to get dark at Invergordon on Wednesday, 16 September 1931, did the captain of Norfolk come forward and read a new Admiralty Fleet Order to us:

> The Board of Admiralty is fully alive to the fact that amongst certain classes of ratings special hardship will result from the reduction of pay ordered by HM Government. It is therefore directed that ships of the Atlantic Fleet are to proceed to their home ports forthwith to enable personal investigation by C.-in-C.s and representatives of Admiralty with a view to necessary alleviation being made. Any further refusals of individuals to carry out orders will be dealt with under the Naval Discipline Act. This signal is to be promulgated to the Fleet forthwith.

Whether it was light or dark at that moment, one thing was clear to us: we had won the day. The threat at the end was just normal form for My Lords of the Admiralty, every one of whose Articles of War ends with a promise of punishment. Without that formality I doubt if they wrote a letter home to their loved ones: it was the thickening ingredient of their blood. But why should we continue disobedience? We had gained our point, a review of the cuts. The tacit promise in the order that actions, up to the time of its promulgation, would not be punished was later made explicit in the House of Commons. But still a vengeance-seeking Board had to invoke the Naval Discipline Act to justify their claims of agitators, secret societies and other conspiratorial groups, which were so clandestine that the conspirators themselves did not know they existed. At the moment of the reading of the order, however, I doubt if any man paid the slightest attention to those threatening words. The strike was over.

Discipline had not even been bruised and had taken us through to victory. It was still the main binding force of a powerful navy which we were prouder than ever to be a part of. With pride too, the ‘few’, the ‘handful’ that the Board blamed for Invergordon could count their achievement. They knocked Britain off the gold standard. They caused the cancelling of excercises for some ships of the Fleet. They brought about the recall of ships to home ports from the unfinished cruise, an event which had last happened with the declaration of war in 1914.

That, up to the time of receiving the new Admiralty Fleet Order, was the list of favourable results of the activities of the ‘few’.

Within a few seconds of Captain Prickett’s announcement the forecastle on Norfolk was empty. It needed no pleading, no threats or trickery; the men’s aim had been achieved, the strike was off. A short time later the Norfolk was steaming down the Firth on her way to sea. As we passed close to one of the big ships a crowd of men lined up on the forecastle gave vent to an ear-splitting cheer and Captain Prickett on the bridge of Norfolk exclaimed, ‘My God! Have they started again?’ It was not, however, a cheer of defiance but a cheer of victory.
During the three days’ trip to home ports we were without news. The only radio receiving set was in the wardroom, and the moment when the commander of Norfolk had invited a few of us to listen to it had passed, never to return. For us the show was over and we were once again the ‘ready boys, steady boys’ of the British Navy. But the admiralty, fuming in defeat, was plotting its revenge.

There is an old sea story showing how something perfectly ordinary can be made to appear extraordinary. The story goes that a captain warned his boozy mate that if he again appeared on the bridge inebriated, he, the captain, would enter it in the log. Despite the warning the mate turned up next day in a drunken state and he captain duly entered it: ‘Today the mate came on the bridge drunk’. When, however, the captain came to relieve the mate, he found this entry in the log: ‘Today the captain came on the bridge sober’.

A similar technique has been used to suggest that on its return from Invergordon the Atlantic Fleet got a frosty welcome from the British people. Writers on Invergordon have alleged that, in defiance of tradition we were not cheered as we entered harbour. Of course we were not cheered, and there was no such tradition. The three towns had seen the ships moving in and out of harbour so often that they were not excited by the fact. To have cheered every time they returned would have meant a permanent cheering party. Whatever scheming and intriguing was taking place at the Admiralty, as they prepared to break their promise that no one should be penalised for Invergordon, we on the ships felt nothing out of the ordinary going on around us. True, the local paper at Devonport had a banner headline to greet our arrival: ‘Home In Disgrace, Sailors’ Wives Turn Husbands Away From The Door’, but this was just a ridiculous example of yellow press journalism. If we had agreed to allow further disruption of any kind, it would have been possible to organise such a demonstration of sailors and their wives at the editor of that paper would have crept around the back streets of small European towns for the remainder of his life. No one was more disturbed by the cuts than sailors’ wives or, as they were officially designated on more than one occasion, ‘sailors’ women’.

By this time the investigating commission set up by the Admiralty had arrived at Devonport and was now sitting in the barracks interviewing seamen and collecting their complaints. This was merely a time-waster, during which hundreds and thousands of lower deck men repeated practically the same story. Had the commission discovered a handful of ratings whom the cut would have hit specially hard, the Admiralty would not have made exceptional rates for them. The lower deck had made its one demand, one big one: we do not intend to serve for such pay. There was nothing more to establish, for if the proposed cut had been reasonable and bearable, there would have been no mutiny and no need for commissions. The Admiralty, however, had taken a 180 degree switch, and from doing nothing whatever had now launched into action every kind of investigator, commission and informer to contribute to the cauldron of fables, half truths and direct lies which, when boiled, would make the whitewash for the guilty parties. My Lords of the Board of Admiralty.

I had an early sign of things to come. On our passage south I had written a letter to Captain Prickett about the consequences for the Navy if the cuts, as originally proposed, were carried out. My letter was somewhat on the lines of the manifesto, but more elaborate. I was invited, as were other seamen, to talk to the captain in his cabin and explain my own position. Also present at the interview was the paymaster commander who, I take it, was to back up the captain with figures showing how wealthy I was.

I was a single man, I smoked but did not drink. According to my papers I enjoyed a fairly good reputation amongst the officers. At that time I was engaged to be married to a girl who was the only child of parents much better placed financially than were the parents of the average sailor’s wife. I had a promising career in the Navy and was fully intending to continue my service to pension and rise as far as a man of proletarian origin could. It is possible that the war might have helped me even further – or put me at the bottom of the sea. In fact by my action at Invergordon I simply threw all this away.
Right away Captain Prickett began talking about my individual case, pointing out that I had no financial commitments to be threatened by the cuts. From the Sunday evening when I made the first speech in the canteen, I was concerned only with the lower deck and the impoverishment of the best fighting service in the world and how best to stop it. But this was beyond the captain’s comprehension. Someone brought up in a society where the children are daily asked what they are going to be, daily warned that they cannot hope for a good job without going to college, as if a diploma were a pair of trousers, indispensable, finds it difficult to accept a non-selfinterested action. For people who are launched into the rat-race when they begin to walk and who learn the underhand tricks of infighting for position and rewards, the idea of being a crusader, if only briefly and small-time, is as alien as a Catholic priest propagating voodooism.

So Captain Prickett stuck to his line of argument, occasionally appealing for confirmation of his points to the paymaster commander. Very soon I saw that it would develop into the poor man begging the local philanthropist to intervene on his behalf with the heartless landlord. Actually it was because of Prickett’s behaviour at this meeting that I eventually refused to go before the Admiralty commission who pursued the same line in their ‘investigations’. That it was a policy deliberately pursued I am convinced, because I caught Prickett taking a surreptitious glance at my letter, which was hidden under other papers on the table. When he saw that I had noticed the move he immediately covered it up again. It was not a benefactor’s interest that Prickett had in me. He was, I think, looking for ‘ringleaders’. (It is curious that a college student at the head of a movement is a ‘leader’, but a worker similarly placed is inevitably a ‘ring-leader’.)

The authorities knew quite well that it was the Admiralty which had inspired the strike and kept it alive, but they persisted in looking for something deep underground, a politically motivated person or, better still, a group. To begin with all jobs were shifted around. I for instance had had, before the strike, a so-called ‘quiet number’, which kept me away from daily surveillance by my divisional officer. That I hated this job, a trained seaman gunner who wanted to go to school again to advance my qualification was of no consequence either to the people who gave me the job. I had been taught a little about everything that shoots, from a 2.2 rifle to a fifteen-inch turret gun. I had actually come out top of the class, but with a job such as I was doing, I would soon forget which end of a gun did the shooting. In the meantime I could polish the metal legs of the mess table till my officer smiled and said ‘Well done’.

Almost immediately after the ship set sail for Devonport, however, I was shifted to an ordinary upper deck job and it was then I discovered that I was the object of surreptitious observation. Quite often our commander found an excuse to make some remark or other to me, but he spent more time looking deep into my eyes, no doubt searching for something he had not noticed in all the year and a half we had served on the same ship. Our commander was one of the most popular officers on the ship and we affectionately called him ‘Jigs’, after a strip cartoon character of the time. From behind he looked exactly like the real ‘Jigs’, even to the crease across the seat of his trousers. The nicknames that men give to their officers is more informative than many people think. If an officer is given a number of nicknames, and more and more are conjured up, it is a sure sign that he is far from popular. If on the other hand he gets one which sticks to him, one can be certain that he is respected. Commander Dunne was always ‘Jigs’.

He gave me quite a number of crystal-gazing stares, which did not worry me, while my own divisional officer kept clear of me. The unfortunate man had no doubt received a reprimand for not being able to detect my latent mutinous tendencies. When men were being sought to appear before the Admiralty Commission, my divisional officer approached a seaman standing a few yards from me, and asked him to ask me if I wanted to appear. Evidently the reprimand had been no light one. Evidently, too, the search for an underground organisation among the men was being paralleled by a campaign to find scapegoats among the junior officers, whose daily contact with us had failed to discover potential rebels.
If evidence were needed that no outside influence inspired the mutiny at Invergordon, that evidence was supplied by the Communist Party of Great Britain. When the news of the mutiny hit the world, many people and organisations reacted to it in their various ways. One of these was the British Communist Party, which had long harboured a desire for contacts in the Royal Navy but had up till then failed to realise its desires. This absolutely unexpected event offered, in their estimation, a splendid chance not only to get contacts but to achieve even more. Immediately after the ships arrived in home ports, the Communist Party sent two men to Portsmouth, obviously for the purpose of inciting the Fleet to further rebellious activity. It was an action which demonstrated the Communists’ complete ignorance of the lower deck, for the two men chosen were as unsuitable a pair as it would be possible to find. One was a miner and the other a woodworker, the sort of men described by sailors as not knowing the fat end of a ship from the thin end.

Their adventure was doomed to failure before it started, for, as anyone with even a butterfly-wing contact with leftist politics should have known, the moment the rumblings of resentment were faintly audible, all the organs of security were on the alert. Not so the CPGB. The miner and the woodworker set off for Portsmouth so deep in the grip of their important mission that they failed to hear the clanking of the handcuffs in the pockets of the policemen following them, and having plunged into the adventure head first, they hit bottom head first, as might have been expected.

Under the impression that Portsmouth was the place to go to, although Devonport was the centre of the mutiny, and still retaining the ‘drunken sailor’ image in their heads, they began a political pub crawl. Even when a co-operative sailor met them in the very first pub they called at, they were not in the least suspicious. Why should they be? Had not the sailors mutinied? Were they not ready to heave their officers overboard, as the sailors of the Russian Fleet had done in 1917? All that was wanted now was firm political leadership, and these two men, who had recently come from the International Lenin School in Moscow, were here to offer it. So they made their offer. But, as it happened, the sailor they were talking to, who listened to their political lecture and drank their beer, was none other than Stephen Bousefield, the telegraphist ‘interviewed’ by the captain of Warspite, under whose instructions he was now working. The seditious leaflets were handed over and straight away relayed to the intelligence service men, who, possessing all the evidence they needed, brought these two Communists to Winchester Assizes. There the same Bousefield appeared as the principal witness for the prosecution. The Communists were tried, convicted and sentenced.

From this story we can establish that informers were signed up from the first signs of trouble at Invergordon; that on the basis of their unreliable information responsible officers of naval intelligence made wild conjectures about events that had no place in the affair at all; and, most convincingly, that the Communist Party had no connection with Invergordon. Their belated attempts to make contact, at a time when the men considered victory theirs and meant to serve once more in the loyal manner they had always served, could lead only to the criminal courts.

Blinded by nightmares of revolution, dreamed up in their need for vengeance, the Admiralty had set all the security services of Britain on a massive search for hidden agitators, secret societies and all sorts of non-existent seditious groups that could never have found a square inch of fertile ground in the Royal Navy. Each security group engaged informers, agents provocateurs and casual snoops who invented what they failed to find. Even the man who ran the first meeting in the canteen on that Sunday evening, 13 September, was given at least three identities, and this despite the fact that the men on Norfolk knew who he was.

Whitehall demanded evidence of an underground plot and people, from the rank of captain down to the ‘white rats’ on the lower deck, let their imaginations run amok to provide it, even to the extent of reporting that meetings, secret and otherwise, had taken place among sailors before the Atlantic Fleet arrived at Invergordon. It can only be concluded that the different reports, including those made by responsible officers, were the products of afterthoughts, once the incident had aroused
suspicions of a plot. It is said that fear has large eyes, and it is possible that surreptitious glances between sailors engaged in some act against the regulations were remembered later and blown up to be read as sinister signals. It sounds childish, but it is only human: anyone can misinterpret the past in the light of the present, and I suppose this is what some of the officers did.

However, reading the reports assiduously collected by naval investigations overt and covert, by the dockyard police, public house scroungers and secret service informers, it is plain that the material is mostly half truths, distortion and just common or garden lies. Some of the shipboard informers seem to have been indulging in a grand leg-pull. I do not know who was responsible for organising the reports of preparations for further disruptive activity after our return to home ports. To call them the ‘Crazy Gang’ would be to insult a popular comedy team, but clearly someone had grasped the chance to collect a goodly sum of taxpayers’ money whilst the panic lasted. Somehow I missed out on the shareout. Twice in those days I was in a pub and nobody offered me a drink. In one a group of working men called me over to their table and pointed to a chap in a soft hat standing at the other end of the bar. ‘Be careful, Jack,’ they said, ‘that man’s a coppers’ nark’.

There were no plans for further disruptive action. We had gained our objective and saw no need to create some permanent illegal lower deck grouping. But the plot-searchers went on and fantastic stories continued to circulate about a planned enlargement of the strike. One incredible tale was that known elements, and I take it I was among them, were ‘agitating’ on the lower deck for more serious, anti-government action.

The ridiculous fable of the ‘march on London’, or as it might be called the ‘Mangel-wurzel Banyan Party’, made its reappearance, and was solemnly carried to King George V. But the Admiralty was pulling nobody’s leg. When Sir Austen Chamberlain, First Lord of the Admiralty, informed the King on Monday, 22 September, that a dangerous situation still existed in the Fleet, he was not just following normal procedure. He knew very well that King George V had been a full naval captain, for when the Duke of Clarence was alive, his chances of becoming a king had been slim, and he had gone the way of second sons, into the Navy, where he was far from being a popular captain. For instance he had a reputation for severity. Punishment for misdemeanours of a serious character could only be administered by the admiral of a particular unit. The captain conducted the trial of the man, then sent his recommendation to the admiral. This procedure was better known to the lower deck as a warrant, and it was common knowledge throughout the Navy that the late King George V, when captain of a warship, had more of these warrants than any other captain in the Fleet.

By facing a man of the character of King George V, who bore no love to the lower deck, with the bogey of revolution from within the Navy, the Admiralty could not fail to produce the results it wanted. Given the public assurance of no victimisation, the Admiralty could not charge anyone with what happened at Invergordon; it therefore became necessary to invent something that happened after it, if they were to have their revenge.

Whilst these things were taking place elsewhere, for us routine went on in the same old way, except that our ship’s company did a stint on the rifle range, where I walked away with a first-class marksman’s badge, amongst my scores being five bulls from five rounds at five hundred yards: no mean feat. Moreover, and more heartening than the winning of any badge, was the fact that, at the very time when the powers that be were scheming, in their underhand way, to work up evidence against me, the lower deck of Norfolk unanimously elected me as their representative on the Canteen Committee. I never took my place but my election remained, a resounding reply to the band-of-agitators theory, and a proof that the lower deck as a whole appreciated my efforts on its behalf.

Almost three weeks had we been in home ports, with the commission working every day, when the surprise signal came. We knew the Fleet could not spend much more time in port, but the order to move was still unexpected. All ships were to put to sea and rendezvous at Scapa Flow. Two hours
after this announcement and an hour before the ships were due to sail, the most outstanding men in the mutiny were collected together. From Norfolk Leading Seaman Richard Carr, Able Seaman James Shields, Able Seaman O'Toole, Able Seaman Frederick Copeman and myself were rounded up, along with one or two regular discipline breakers, thrown in to give the group a colouring favourable to the Admiralty. Here again the opportunity given by the official movement of ships had been seized; for, while we were to go to the barracks, our comrades in the affair were being despatched to sea, where for some three days on the way to Scapa Flow they would be ignorant of our fates. It was the move of people still scared by the Invergordon event. Although all available facts had firmly been established the complete lack of outside influence on the movement; although our behaviour after the strike was exemplary, they were still obsessed with the idea that action against us, whatever it was to be, should be carried out secretly, to avoid possible trouble. We were despatched to the barracks and left there until the General Election of 28 October 1931, which would bring a new Cabinet and new ministers, and therefore he who had made the promise of no victimisation would not be the one who broke it. The lessons of Invergordon had simply passed over their heads, not only of the politicians but also of those who were supposed to be our leaders.

When we arrived in the barracks we were joined by ratings from the many ships in the port, thirty-six men altogether, though Bond was not among them: the originator of the mangel-wurzel march on London was left in the Fleet to develop his talents. As was always the case when men entered the barracks after a period at sea, we first went through the ‘clothing class’, where our kit was inspected and we were ‘robbed’ of a few pounds from our meagre savings. After a week of that we were attached to the ‘Introductory Course’. This was a well-known course intended mainly for supplementary ratings, cooks, supply assistants and such people who, whilst at sea, had forgotten how to turn right or left and which end a rifle fired from. The moment the course started, under the command of two specially-instructed petty officers, we knew we were in for a bad time. Till dinner break we ran around the barrack square, our rifles held high above our heads.

This action was the decision of Commodore Laurence of the Royal Naval Barracks. By virtue of our being so unexpectedly removed from our ships, we had been recognised as the leaders of a mutiny in the most powerful fleet in the world, yet Commodore Laurence DSO was here attempting to subdue us with petty sadism on the level of Dickens’s Squeers. If his aim was to make us refuse this disguised punishment and thereby leave ourselves open to a very serious charge, he failed. At the end of the first day I suggested that every man should individually write a complaint of unlawful treatment to the admiral of the port.

On the third day we were marched into the drill shed, all other groups and classes were sent out, all the doors but one closed. Then through the one open door appeared Commodore Laurence and probably every officer in the barracks. They lined up in an arrow head, the commodore making the point. He was a big man with a powerful frame. He stood there with his legs astraddle, clasping his gloves behind his back as if they were a hunting crop. In fact that is just what he looked like, an overseer of the last century confronting his colonial slaves.

‘I hear,’ he began, ‘that you have written a complaint against me.’ (In fact we had not mentioned any name in our letters of protest.) ‘I have information that you are continuing your disruptive work and I, as commodore of this barracks, will take what steps I consider necessary in order to prevent your doing so’. He tried a little provocation, challenging anybody who had anything to say to step out, strangely adding ‘I am not afraid of you’.

Why a commodore DSO should be afraid of a group of ratings is difficult to imagine, but in those words we could measure the extent of his lack of understanding of the lower deck. We did not accept his offer to speak. Maybe it was genuine, but we could no longer trust him after such behaviour. With the words ‘Carry on’ to the petty officers, he turned round and walked out, followed by his suite. Whether he was afraid of us or not, the sadistic drill ceased forthwith, and one
by one we were invited to the division office to discuss our request with the lieutenant of the division.

I never knew the name of my interviewer but I knew what his instructions were as soon as ever he spoke. He pointed to my complaint and asked ‘who wrote this for you?’ Of course a dull, half-literate able seaman could not write such a letter, there must be some ‘outside influence’, and here was a clue to this mysterious somebody lurking in the offing and urging sailors of His Britannic Majesty to seditious action. When I answered ‘I did’, perhaps I said it with such calm conviction that he really believed it. Anyway he switched to another tack and began talking about politics. All this, he assured me, was ‘high politics’, which neither he nor I knew anything about. He just blinked when I quietly said ‘it’s a pity, sir’.

Undoubtedly he knew I was to be discharged, but that I was being held until the end of the secret service investigation; for had it produced the desired results I would have been court martialed.

The fact that I was due to be discharged came to me by another source which the authorities had not taken into account. I was ordered to have a routine revaccination and because, with my first vaccination on entering the Navy, I had suffered very much, almost losing my arm after six weeks in hospital, I simply refused to have it. The surgeon-captain of the barracks interviewed me and said he would have to consult someone about my case and would I come back next day? I did so and he just looked at me and said ‘it doesn’t matter, you may go’. Then I knew I was to ‘go out’.

Nothing, of course, came of our requests, except that Commodore Laurence backed down and we joined up with all the other ratings in the barracks and waited. That we were due to ‘go outside’ was not only known to us but, in a certain way, desired. It was a very risky enterprise, given the large number of skilled workers unemployed, but there was one consideration which made discharge imperative from our point of view. If any of us had remained in the service, the future would have been very bleak indeed. Should I, for instance, have been drafted, after two or three years, to a ship where some totally unsympathetic officer of the old school type was commander or captain, the inevitable result would have been a serious charge brought against me, and my consignment to the naval jail.

No one had the slightest desire to make a sojourn, however short, in the establishment just across the Tamar that bore a noble name, White City, and a terrible reputation: the place where ex-masters-at-arms with a penchant for brutality did their worst to men whose crime was sometimes no more heinous than a breach of pettifogging discipline. Carting a heap of bricks back and forth in the yard without a break whilst the warden yelled abuse, was just one of the reputed delights of the White City. The really choice item was the daily loader drill in gasmasks, with the warders goading their prisoners to break every record they had thought up. No prison reform society ever visited that hell on earth and the inmates did not make complaints about the texture of their pyjamas, as convicts, according to the press, do today. Evidently nowadays the more dreadful the crime, the more certain the complaints. I am sure that the next grievance will be lack of escape facilities provided through the good officers of the Society For The Care And Comfort Of Bloody Murderers, Gangsters and Dope Pushers.

Then, on 3 November, I was working in a barrack room, pushing a cloth over metal bag-racks for the lack of something better to do, when I saw Leading Seaman Richard Carr in the act of packing his bag under the supervision of a regulating petty officer. Without waiting for my inquiry he said ‘I am going out’ and before I could gather further information, I heard a voice calling my name. Another regulating petty officer took me straight to the commander’s office. Behind the desk where he usually dealt with defaulters stood the commander of the barracks, holding an impressive looking document in his hands. Without any ceremony he began to read the Admiralty letter ordering my discharge to shore, and, as if by an afterthought, kindly informed me that I was entitled to unemployment benefit. In the next hour or two twenty-four of the thirty-six men removed from the
ships were rushed round from office to office, finally to be passed through the main gates to the world at large.

By six o’clock I had signed all the documents, drawn my final pay (including thirteen shillings towards the purchase of a civilian suit), and received my naval papers. They read rather strangely: ‘Third of November 1931, Conduct: Very Good. Ability: Superior’. That was the last of my six-monthly recommendations, the highest possible for a lower deck man. Immediately underneath was: ‘Third of November 1931: Discharged to Shore, Services No Longer Required’. I still wonder which of these two entries, made at the same place on the same date, really reflects my character.

12 Inquest

Two of this century’s outstanding figures have left us definitions of history, the written version of history, that is. The intellectual Anatole France gave an appropriately intellectual definition: ‘History is not a science, it is a deception’. The second celebrity is Henry Ford I, no intellectual but a straightforward, hard-headed business baron, whose definition was in keeping with his character: ‘History is bunk’.

To these definitions I, who am neither distinguished nor famous, perhaps a little notorious, would like to add my contribution: ‘And historians are the bunkers of historical bunk’. Bible students say that in the course of time the original text has been so chopped around, distorted and altered that the authors would not recognise a single comma today. At least the process took four thousand years to accomplish. But the story of the Invergordon mutiny in 1931 has been so rehashed by writers and official document compilers that, after only forty-odd years, I find it difficult to recognise the incident I participated in.

In the latest, ‘most authentic’ account by David Divine, Defence Correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, so little space is devoted to the activities of the lower deck that a reader might wonder whether the strike was actually run by sailors or by a group of panic-stricken senior officers, few of whom knew what to do or when to do it. As one of the lower deck men who were there, I declare, without fear of contradiction, that the sequence of events described by me is exact and true, and any different version only hearsay, imagination and exaggeration.

Someone who got near the truth in summing up Invergordon was Yexley when he said ‘That what may be called a strike in the civil world would, in their case, be mutiny, hardly occurred to them. Many people think of mutiny as bloodshed, the anxiety of the men blinded them to its true meaning’. But Yexley did not go far enough. Put briefly, the men of the lower deck were like a father, unable to swim, who sees his only child fall into a deep lake; at first he hesitates, then discards all fear and dives to the rescue, knowing as his head strikes the water that it is a tremendous risk but that he must take the one chance in a million or forever be responsible for his child’s death.

We took that million to one chance and won, not because we were led by experience agitators but because the people responsible for protecting us failed in their duty, not only to us but to the country. Despite their gold braid, their honours and their orders, they cowered before incompetent politicians and crucified the finest body of men in the world. They hurried to make sacrifices for the good of the country, but they did not realise that with their large pay, privileges and extras, it was

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9 These may not be his exact words, but if not I must beg tolerance as I have translated them from a Russian translation of the French. His point is clear.
10 Pen-name of a former able seaman, James Wood, who edited in turn *The Bluejacket* and *The Fleet* in the inter-war years.
not themselves they were sacrificing. They sacrificed, in fact, both the lower deck, whom they did not even trouble to inform of their gallant gesture, and the prestige of the Royal Navy. What they had really done became clear the moment the men refused duty. Instead of acknowledging their blame and resigning, however, the Board of Admiralty took the measures described in the last chapter against the strike leaders of the lower deck, and then set to work to find a scapegoat with enough gold braid to look impressive, but not so much as to make it impossible to hang the can on him. Admiral Tomkinson was the chosen victim.

The disgracing of Admiral Tomkinson was not achieved until February 1932. It took time to mature. Whilst I was going through the process of being kicked out of the Navy with the best of character, Whitehall was conducting its own 'secret' inquest, with a view to finding the necessary scapegoat and covering the Board of Admiralty with the thickest coat of whitewash ever prepared by that experienced whitewashing firm. Alas, the sins already paraded before the public were too blatant to be concealed by the slapdash artists they employed. Moreover, the Board's obstinate belief in its own righteousness and its complete misunderstanding of Invergordon led it into further blunders. For instance, they appointed Admiral Kelly, Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet and instructed him to conduct an official inquiry into the whole affair. Now Admiral Kelly was not only efficient, but was unswayed by bias of rank, and he approached his task with an open mind. He found his answers where nobody else had looked for them. He went to the lower deck and, after an almost microscopic study of every event, small or significant, he drew the one and only possible conclusion: the Board of Admiralty were guilty of mishandling the affair from the moment the cuts were first suggest to the closing chapter.

Understandably the Admiralty were not anxious to publish the full text of Admiral Kelly's report (a gap which no later writer has filled), so they set about drawing up a 'table of guilt', demonstrating, rather in the manner of a detective story diagram, which of the various participants should carry what degree of blame. Unlike the detective story diagram, there was no arrow pointing to where the body lay, but chief responsibility was shared out among the First National Government, the high command of the Atlantic Fleet, the officers and men 'of a few ships of the Atlantic Fleet', the imaginary agitators and the mutineers; whilst a very minor degree of responsibility attached to the secret service for failing to find any agitators and to the Admiralty themselves. It was a magnificent gesture on their part to admit a little guilt – like the unmarried mother who was still a virgin because her baby was such a teeny weeny one.

Was this 'table' a part of the screen behind which the Board was preparing to disgrace Admiral Tomkinson? Several months elapsed before the public of Britain and Admiral Tomkinson himself suddenly discovered that he was responsible for Invergordon; or, to be precise, responsible for not taking the measures which the mutiny at Invergordon called for. It can only be assumed that, long after the mutiny was over, the Board decided that force should have been used to suppress it. Evidently the Admiralty had so convinced itself that 'only a few' were involved that they could see no problem in Admiral Tomkinson’s finding enough 'loyal' men to carry out a punitive mission. The Mediterranean Fleet did not strike, the three main depots did not strike, the men of the destroyers did not strike and neither did the men of the submarine force, so 'loyalty' was general and mutiny the aberration of a few.

A more purblind summing up of the situation could not be found in the whole of British history. The lower deck throughout the Navy was behind the men of the Atlantic Fleet. There are only one or two minor incidents to support this, but I believe they confirm it beyond doubt. I have already recounted how the men of Norfolk unanimously voted me on to the Canteen Committee after the strike and without any canvassing on my part. In addition to this overwhelming vote for me, to a position I never had the chance to occupy, there was a second demonstration of support. After I had left the Navy the men on the Canteen Committee moved that I, and the other discharged men, should be sent a grant from canteen funds. This act needs no commentary: it was more heartfelt and sincere
than all the Board’s declarations of pseudo-loyalty. To the commander who was presiding, it was a bombshell, and he quickly vetoed the suggestion, although in practice, he had no say over the allocation of funds to which officers did not contribute. A small postal order to supplement my salary as the fifteen-thousandth member of St Pancras Labour Exchange queue would have been most helpful at that time, but it was a still greater uplift to feel that solid support which only the lower deck is capable of. The voices of individual sailors spoke of support for the strike everywhere. One man who had no reason to be kindly disposed towards me said: ‘It doesn’t matter what personal injury he did to me. I only know he did this for us’.

Being put on the spot, Admiral Tomkinson knew that a strike so all-embracing and solidly supported could not have been answered with the measures the Admiralty was later to prescribe; but that, on the contrary, such action would have led to a catastrophe in which Britain would have suffered damage more serious and lasting than Invergordon ever did. As it were, Invergordon led to widespread reforms in the structure of the Royal Navy, particularly in the relationships between officers and men. I was assured of this by a present-day, serving, naval officer whom I met at a reception in Moscow, and who respected me as one of the body of men who had brought about those reforms. He told me that after Invergordon the Navy was so radically changed in every way, that it was the only British armed force ready to meet the threat of Hitler when it came. Judging by Dunkirk, the gentleman was right; and he could not have paid the lower deck a greater compliment.

So, as I come to the end of the Invergordon story as I saw it and know it, a few conclusions may be drawn: That the mutiny was a purely naval affair, started by naval men alone, conducted by naval men and ended by naval men, without the least interference of any shape or shade from outside; That the men were forced to take an action which was in every way against their creed of loyalty to the service and against their political beliefs, if any; That this was their only alternative to allowing the cuts to become operational and thereby reducing the Navy to the level of a fleet of Greek raisin boats and their families to poverty; That the Admiralty had, without the least protest, thrown to the wolves ninety thousand men, the bulk of whom had signed their lives to the service at a very tender age and for whose care and welfare they were responsible; That when the Admiralty met resistance they resorted to devious methods to save their own careers and their future awards and honours; That in addition they prepared the downfall of a brother officer whose efforts on behalf of the service were worthy of the highest praise.

What motivated the Admiralty to betray the men they were called upon to lead, to start a smear campaign against them, and finally to break their promise of no victimisation? However these facts are examined, there seems but one explanation: class prejudice. They were high-ranking officers, with distinguished careers in war and peace and in some cases noteworthy personal achievements to their credit. Yet, at the least sign of any differences with the lower deck, they became obsessed by an uncontrollable urge to persecute and punish, with the vicious spleen of a Judge Jeffreys. Scarcely one measure of any kind, carried out by the Admiralty and concerning the lower deck, was not based on class prejudice, from their refusal of the simplest requests of the Welfare Committee to the major event of Invergordon.

As one historian puts it: ‘There are good and bad Boards, and this Board was very bad’.
13 The True History of Mr X

From the lately released naval papers, on which the most recent version of the Invergordon mutiny is based, it is not difficult to see why I was never court-martialled. Try as they might, the secret services could not produce evidence of a link between the leaders of the strike and any sinister organisation intent upon upsetting the country. The secret services did their best, but their best was a concoction of half-truths, lies and fabrications which would not have deceived an infant. Their report, it appears, was based mainly on information from an anonymous Mr X, who adroitly got it all from Wincott himself.

Mr X may impress others. He does not impress me. He served on Norfolk with me and was about as important as the ‘p’ in pneumonia. However, let me tell the story as it happened.

Having checked in my bag and other belongings in the Sailors’ Mission on 3 November 1931, I took the midnight train to London, travelling in a full carriage, where the only female was a young woman whose face was vaguely familiar. I paid no attention to her. The male occupants of the carriage kept me busy with questions about Invergordon, still fresh in the minds of the British public, and it was only when we drew near to Paddington that the young woman leaned over to me and whispered ‘Do you know Terry Gentry?’

Then I recognised her. She was the wife of Terence Gentry, an able seaman on Norfolk who, we believed, had been invalided out of the Navy before Invergordon. I had seen her visiting the ship when it was at Devonport. When we left the train, we walked along the platform together and she told me that she, her husband and their small child were now living in London and that Gentry was working as an agent, for what she did not say. She gave me their address, somewhere on the Edgware Road, and, promising to call on them when possible, I went about my business.

My first call was at the offices of the old Daily Herald. I telephoned the paper and was invited to come along and meet a Mr Gideon Clerk. He received me in a very friendly manner and during the course of our long conversation said he would phone a naval contact. It turned out to be Admiral Dewar of Royal Oak notoriety.

It was in 1927 that the conflict aboard the Royal Oak, which came to be called the ‘Officers’ Mutiny’, took place in the Mediterranean. According to the official version it involved an admiral whose name was Collard and a captain whose name was Dewar and these two gentlemen so far forgot their gentlemanly obligations as to quarrel before witnesses, ending up by washing their dirty linen at a court-martial. When one officer objects to another calling a third ‘bugger’, one wonders what further ridicule they are prepared to inflict on the Royal Navy, a service with a world-wide reputation, the envy in those days of every other maritime power. At home and abroad scorn for the silliness of the ‘Officers’ Mutiny’ was universal, but there was another side to the story, not officially recorded, unless the Admiralty has super-secret archives which no one is allowed to see. And this version, passed from mouth to mouth, illustrates my contention that the story excluded from the records may often be the true one. According to the unofficial version, the conflict between the high officers was only a portrayal of the general situation on the Royal Oak. Just before the incident which led to the court-martial, the captain had ordered the lower deck to be cleared so that he could address the men. The ship’s company crowded on to the deck, a fact which was, in itself, an intimation that something was wrong, because usually the men stand in ordered ranks. Then Captain Dewar added to the disorder by saying that the crew was mutinous, words he repeated several times. At that something happened which could never have taken place aboard a well-disciplined warship: from different parts of the crowd came that very impolite sound known as a raspberry. It was repeated again and again until finally the angry captain dismissed the men without having re-established order and himself disappeared below.
This same Dewar was now confronting me in the offices of the Daily Herald. He seemed very interested in my appearance at the newspaper offices and asked me to tell him the story of Invergordon as I knew it. I proceeded to do so. Suddenly he turned to Gideon Clerk and said, sounding both disappointed and annoyed, ‘But he can’t tell me anymore than I know already!’ With that he brought the interview to an end and said goodbye to both of us, shaking hands with Gideon Clerk and ignoring me.

It was later, when I was on the street, that the reason for the sudden change in atmosphere became clear to me. The admiral had not come to hear my story but for an entirely different purpose. Captain Dewar had, of course, been an intelligence officer when serving and no doubt still had his contacts. It was the intelligence officer who had conducted that interview, not an admiral interested in the affairs of the lower deck. Like most of his fellows he was obsessed with this idea of a secret organisation. It seemed that it had taken them like the Great Plague and that they, like the untutored doctors of the fourteenth century, were convinced that everybody was bound to get it one day or other. Later, when the official papers became public property, I discovered that the disease continued to hang around for a long time after Invergordon and that the maggots, who had been bloating themselves on taxpayers’ money existed for many months on the corpse of the decaying fable.

After paying a visit to some friends at a quiet little resort on the east coast, I returned to London, fixed myself a room in the Paddington area with a church-going landlady, and joined the ‘seekers’, that is the unfortunates looking for work.

Then I visited Gentry. He, his wife and child were living in one room over a newsagent’s shop, and by the disorderly look of it, Gentry’s agency business was giving very weak returns. I asked if there might be an opening for me in this agency. I fancied myself as a talker, although my Leicester accent was very prominent and, to avoid looking foolish, I had dispensed with aitches altogether. He seemed reluctant to introduce me to the secrets of his trade or to explain why his work was so irregular. Soon I discovered that it was a racket. For next to nothing he bought tea-dust from a tea-packing works, packed it in impressive-looking packages and hawked it round small enterprises and the houses of retired businessmen, whom he talked into buying a packet at a fabulous price with the promise of a £2 bonus if, when he returned in two weeks’ time, they gave him a letter of recommendation for the ‘company’. Of course he never returned and they got no bonuses.

When I next visited the Gentries they looked very down in the dumps. His persuasive powers had deserted him, the racket was not paying dividends and the landlady, tired of asking him when the rent was coming, had given them notice to quit. They changed to another, cheaper, and of course smaller, room and, to pay the deposit, I lent him five shillings from my meagre savings.

About that time I was coming home one evening when I was attracted by the speakers at Hyde Park Corner. One of them, obviously a Communist, was talking about the Invergordon mutiny, which he was sure was the blood brother of the Baltic Fleet revolt in 1917. He maintained that the only reason the sailors had not ditched a huge weight of gold braid was the absence of real political leadership. Anyway I introduced myself to this speaker and he invited me to a meeting near Paddington Labour Exchange, where I was now an honorary member. With Gentry I turned up at a meeting and said a few words, after which this person took me to a rather shabby-looking office, equipped with even shabbier furniture.

A young chap who was there introduced himself as Alum Thomas, secretary of the International Labour Defence, a Communist front organisation, whose purpose was to defend people accused of political offences. Through a door at one corner was another room, occupied by another front organisation. Although I had not invited him, Gentry was still tagging along with me. On our entry the young man talked first to him and told him to leave the place and never come back, whilst I was told to leave my naval papers, which would be returned to me the next day, and meanwhile to stick
around. That night I was taken to a crowded meeting somewhere in Shoreditch. Very soon I was appearing at regular meetings for the Communist Party although I was not a member.

Some days after my introduction to the Communist Party, Gentry came to my room and asked me to put him up for a little while. He had done a midnight flit from his lodgings and sent his wife and child back to Plymouth. Always the good Samaritan I spoke to my landlady, who promptly agreed and as promptly raised the rent.

I was returning home late almost every evening and one evening, when I was very late, my landlady met me at the bottom of the stairs. With her best church-going frown on her face she informed me that a guest was in my room with the other er, er, gentleman. Gentry and this guest were sitting before the fire and he immediately presented her to me as his cousin, but by the look of her I guessed she was cousin first, second or third, to about half the men of the district. I told Gentry to take her out and hand her over to any spare cousins who might be hanging about.

Fortunately I was due to go to my friends on the east coast the next day, so I closed up the room and disposed of Gentry.

The folks I visited had, besides other possessions, a neat little café, and early every Sunday a regular customer called for his usual breakfast of tea and toast. It happened that I was sitting before the fire of the family dining-room when the bell rang that Sunday. The dear old lady who ran the place went out to answer the summons and I went with her. The regular visitor turned out to be a slight, neatly dressed gentleman somewhere about fifty who greeted us with a very charming smile and in a rather pleasant and cultured voice. After ordering the usual he took a seat at one of the empty tables. It was then I noticed the dog-caller, and having seen that face above a dog-collar in almost every newspaper of the country for days on end, I had no trouble in guessing that here was the Reverend Harold Davidson, the Vicar of Stiffkey (pronounced Stukey, which stopped the low wits from making crude puns). We began to talk. Instead of a high-pressure mixture of Casanova and Don Juan, which the charges against him led one to believe he was, here was the type of man who could be pictured with a group of children in some local church, timidly saying ‘Now children, shall we dust the hymn-books?’ I was amazed. The man was charming. True, it has been said ‘Charm is one of the most dangerous gifts of nature’, but he smiled in a very disarming manner and did not lose his smile all during our talk. When he said without pathos, without emphasis, ‘Do you think I am guilty?’ I answered ‘No’, and I still believe it.

On my return to London Gentry had disappeared and I began to work in the offices of the International Labour Defence organisation and to speak at meetings, for which I was very much in demand. I had a little room for which I had to pay ten shillings a week, so when one of the young men doing clerical work in the office suggested I should room with him, I welcomed it. His room was bigger and more convenient, but what was attractive was the financial arrangement: the tow of us would between us pay the fifteen shillings rent. However, as I had guessed, there was a snag. There were several candidates for the room and if I wanted it, I had to take it immediately, on an evening when I happened to have a big meeting and would not be free before 11 pm.

We managed to overcome the problem. It was arranged that he would bring the key to the office and I would bring my suitcase which he would take home, leaving me to make my own way to the room after the meeting ended, around 11 pm. I was extremely surprised to waken in the new room next morning and find two gentlemen sitting on a small couch looking at my bed and waiting for me to regain consciousness. It did not take me long to put a professional label on them, for although they did not have big feet they had the inevitable bowlers in their hands.

I did not question their presence or ask how they knew where to find me, when nobody except my friend and myself was aware that I had moved to this room. They did all the talking, what there was of it. Their chief, the man in charge at Bayswater police station, would like to see me, they said. Of
course, they reminded me, I was not compelled to go: It was entirely voluntary. And of course, I reminded them, if I refused, they would come the next day with a piece of paper ordering me to go. They mutely agreed to my ‘of course’, and I got dressed. They had a car waiting and off we went.

The chief, who was wearing civilian clothes, started a conversation about Gentry, leading up to the inquiry whether he and I had any talk about a rather brutal murder of a twelve-year-old girl in a Bayswater basement. I said we had talked about the matter in the way people do when such things are blazoned across the front pages of newspapers. There were more questions. Where had Gentry been on such-and-such a date? Was he ever in an excited state? Was he secretive? Then I was sent home and heard nothing more about the business.

Shortly after that, when I had joined the Communist Party, I was sent down to Portsmouth and then Plymouth on a speaking tour, and there I met Mr X.

In Plymouth I was housed for my stay in a room over a shop and the first meeting arranged for me was held in a small hall in Devonport where, in my more frivolous days, I had spent my evenings dancing. The hall was full but only one man in the audience was in naval uniform. It was Gentry. After the meeting he approached me and expressed great satisfaction at seeing me the speaker for the evening. Then he told me in brief the story of his return to uniform.

He began his story sotto voce, as if he were a little ashamed. He had not been invalided out of the service, but was a deserter. His cousin in Paddington, it appeared, had given him a present of which in his penniless state he could not be cured, so he had turned himself in the Navy. Where the cure for that kind of present is quick and efficient. Then he received another present, ninety days’ detention for desertion. Of course neither of these presents was the sort one puts on the mantelpiece for public admiration, but he was very anxious to tell me all the details. I was most touched, but the questions I kept to myself were: ‘Since when have such cousins given anything gratis? Where did Gentry get the money to buy himself such presents?’ For he never had a penny of his own those few days he was at my place. The answers were clear to me but I let him continue with his story.

He was now serving his detention in the White City but had been allowed out because his mother was very ill, as proof of which he promptly produced a telegram announcing the emergency. I almost burst out laughing. Either he was very badly coached or they had grossly underestimated my brain power. The telegram was written in ink with neither time nor place of despatch, just a blank form and the writing. For all that, I kept myself under control, sympathised with him about the illness of his mother and promised to see him about.

As I left the house next morning with the local Communist secretary I saw an obvious Special Branch man standing just a few yards away. When we moved off he followed. He made no attempt to cover himself, just plunged after us some five yards or so behind. We then decided to part to establish which of us he was interested in. If he continued to follow me, I was to inform the secretary by telephone and cut short our programme of activities for the day.

He did continue to follow me. After about an hour of this shadowed progress, I went to keep an appointment with a young lady whom I had been on friendly terms with before I left the Navy. After all, Devonport was my port division and in my dancing days I had made quite a number of friends. When we met I pointed out my unsolicited bodyguard and described what had been happening. She clapped her hands with excitement. ‘How wonderful!’ she said, ‘Let’s go everywhere and see if he comes after us.’ We walked round every floor of the local Selfridges, examining goods in every department; so did he. From there we went to a continuous performance cinema; he sat just behind. From there to a tea shop; he came in too. And everywhere the three of us went he kept the same distance, as if he had been instructed never to let the space between us by any more or less than five yards.
At about 6 pm I parted with my friend, promising to be at her house that evening. I turned down a narrow street running parallel to the main street in Plymouth, and there, by a pub, I saw Gentry, approaching me from the side, with his head down, as if this were an accidental meeting. He greeted me effusively, nodded at the pub door and suggested taking a glass of beer. I did not refuse. I was getting only seventeen and sixpence from the state, so why not add a few state coppers to the total, if only in kind? It was over this state-paid glass of beer that the real conspiracy began. Looking round with the exaggerated secrecy of a ham actor, Gentry squeezed out of one side of his mouth the words, 'If you have any leaflets or anything to distribute in the barracks, give them to me. I'll get them in for you'.

'OK,' I said, looking round in the same ham actor manner. 'There's a piss house across the street. Let's nip over there and we can talk.' It was empty when we came in, but the clump of heavy boots dashing up to the entrance stopped me socking Gentry and landing him right in the excrement. I told him to go to his ailing mother, and walked out alone; but the tail still stuck. However, by means of the old motorbus switch, which was very easy in Plymouth then, I lost him and spent a pleasant evening in delightful company.

So Terence Gentry, deserter, small-time crook, whoremonger and syphilitic, went down in the annals of naval history as 'Mr X', an undercover, ocean-going James Bond, who exposed to the British Secret Service the nefarious plot of Wincott. I have perhaps devoted a lot of time and space to a figure who did not even rate the honour of being burnt on a bonfire on the Fifth of November. But he is an example of the sources of information the Admiralty were prepared to use in the panic caused by Invergordon.
14 I Join the Communist Party

Travelling around the country under the auspices of the many front organisations in Britain gave me a new insight into a way of life lived by a large part of the population but never really presented to the public by writers of note, except by a few failures. It seemed to me that almost every street of every town yet there were no films about it. It is not my job to ask why this should be so, and anyway if I did, the Professors of Gabology would all rise like one man and hand out a verbal thrashing that would leave me a mental invalid for the year or two left to me on this earth.

However in those days I came upon this life every time I visited a town. True, I had the most valuable pass-key one could wish for: my own working-class accent. Unlike the intellectual type who does not know the difference between slumming and helping, I did not have to prove my credentials by standing at the corner of the street with a flowing red tie for everybody to see and shouting ‘Daily Worker’ in an accent which would have got me a chair at Oxford without any exams. As soon as I appeared amongst these people, they knew me for theirs. They showed me respect and in some cases admiration, after all I had made a bit of a name for myself at Invergordon, and they recognised it, although they all made the same mistake of thinking it had been something of a ‘Potemkin do’. In that they were wrong.

What interested and impressed me most were the little moments when the difficulties these people were facing came staring out at me. Following a tried and practised pattern I always arrived in a new town with a copy of the Daily Worker on view. The chap appointed to meet me knew me immediately, came and introduced himself and announced that he had been made responsible for me whilst in the town. They usually invited me first to go to their homes and have a bite, and then go on to the meeting place.

Everywhere I met the poverty of the unemployed. It is true that I was brought up in poverty, but the poverty of the poorly paid worker cannot be compared with the poverty of the unemployed. The poorly paid worker has a bright day at least once a week, the day when he collects his wages. For then he has the joy of picking out a penny here or there to give to his children. He knows he can scrape together the price of one trip to the cinema for him and his wife. However drab his life may be in the main, those little pleasures he still enjoys. It is the unemployed man who is denied even the simplest of these pleasures: for him pay day is a burden over which he has time to brood, gradually giving way in many cases to a despair which is reflected in the state of his home. Except for the ‘good Samaritan’ groups that can always be organised around the hardest-hit cases, nobody was interested in the unemployed, especially not in helping to stop their moral decay.

That was where the Communists came in. one felt the difference as soon as one entered the house of an unemployed Communist. There was the same poverty as elsewhere. The little treat prepared for the visitor from the centre was obviously something they never had themselves. The little pale-faced child with the big round eyes, watching the strange man eating nice-looking tasty bits and hoping he would not eat it all, was there just the same. But there was an atmosphere of confidence, there was no sign of moral decay.

That was the picture I met when I went on these speaking trips, and the reason for it was that the Communists, whilst not offering anybody a rose garden, raised a feeling of hope. The slogan of the workers becoming the masters is as old as the hills. It is the same as the biblical saying that the last shall be first etc. But when an unemployed working man is told day after day that he must create the new world himself, he feels an inspiration that no charitable organisation can provide. True, he will take a hand-out from these organisations but he will never become part of them. For him they are either the enemy or near to it, the enemy being the person who knows not poverty.

He is ready, therefore, for a man who speaks his own language, who lives in the same insufficiency, but whose determined militancy imparts a moral uplift to those few he has collected round him.
For a person of my experience, who had seen and, to some extent, undergone injustices, it was the high moral standard of these people, their insistence on doing everything on behalf of those whom they called class brethren, which was the great attraction. It was least of all the will-o'-the-wisp idea that there existed a country where this idea held sway. For those who had looked on the world from the end of Wigan Pier this might be an attraction. But the Navy had at least given me the possibility of seeing the world better than many people see it, and during those travels I had become convinced that loaded tourists and newspaper correspondents were about the most ill-informed people of anybody in the world. One cannot see a country by driving round town in an excursion motorbus, nor learn about it by hanging round the bars of the best hotel, picking up fairy tales from drink scroungers. I, at any rate, had made a very simple discovery: that if the poor man gets the crumbs from a rich man’s table, the crumbs are somewhat different in different countries. Some are small and very dry, others are bigger and more nutritious.

I joined the Communist Part in July 1932 and, to begin with, it made little difference to my speaking in London and round the country. Then, in August, I was delegated to my first international congress, the first World Anti-War Congress, held at Amsterdam.

The hall was a huge velodrome with tables for representatives from all nations, spread all over the wide floor space. In those days halls were not fitted with facilities for simultaneous translation, so the congress was a real Tower of Babel with German the predominant tongue. In fact it soon became clear to me that the Germans were running this show, as the Soviet delegation, which included Maxim Gorky, had been refused visas by the Dutch authorities. When our little delegation tried to arrange for a representative to be elected to the speakers’ tribune, the man we talked with was Fritz Eckert, a member of the German Central Committee. The members of our delegation wanted to put forward my candidacy, but Eckert vetoed it right away. He said that first of all the British party was very small and secondly he knew that the sailors at Invergordon had sung ‘God Save The King’. It was pointed out to him that this was an anti-war congress, and that therefore anybody who was against war could speak, whether he sang ‘God Save The King’ or not. We finally wore him down and he reluctantly agreed that I should speak.

Not before I had learnt, however, that there was a peculiar sort of ‘class’ ladder in the international Communist movement. The German Party was at that time the biggest in numbers, other than the Soviet Part. It had over four-hundred-thousand, paid up, card-carrying, members. Its candidate in the German presidential election, Ernst Thaelmann, polled over ten million votes. The Party had a large apparatus and a widespread publishing concern, printing quite a number of daily, weekly and monthly papers and magazines. Besides these largescale propaganda media, there was a mass semi-military organisation called the Red Front Fighters, which claimed to be a counter-organisation to the Nazi Storm Troopers. So whenever there was any International Front affair outside the Soviet Union, the Germans took charge of it and imposed their will on it. They were good Communists to their own way of thinking, only they forgot to prefix the name with the word ‘German’. The influence of their nationalism was to be tragically proved in the bitter lessons of the period of Nazi power and the suffering it brought the German people.

In November of that same year I made my first visit to the Soviet Union, this time as a delegate to the international congress of the Labour Defence Organisation, for which I worked. Its head, at that time, had been a very well-known figure in the revolutionary movement before the October Revolution, although originating from an aristocratic family. For some strange reason aristocratic revolutionaries were not at all rare in Tsarist Russia. One poet of that day described the phenomenon in a short verse which I shall try to give in prose translation: ‘In the West, when the dustman wants to become a duke he makes a revolution. In our country the dukes make the revolution. Maybe they want to become dustmen.’
Yelena Dimitrovna Stasova was a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party before 1917. She had spent some time in Siberia in exile. After the Revolution she was a secretary to Lenin and subsequently occupied important state posts. A very well-educated woman, she knew all the chief languages of Europe. She was a strict disciplinarian and had a biting sarcastic manner for people who made feeble excuses when they were taxed with laxity in their work. The employees of the organisation all knew her as ‘the Tiger’, but she was far from being a fierce character. On the contrary she was charming and polite in her everyday contacts with people. She died a couple of years ago at more than ninety years of age.

However on our first meeting at this congress in 1932 she was hale and hearty, for there she delivered an eighteen-hour speech to us. Of course, there were breaks, and it stretched over two days, but the lady did all the speaking for this time.

After a sightseeing trip around the country, which took in Erivan, Tbilisi and other towns, I returned to England through Germany on 1 February 1933, the very time when Hitler was preparing to take over completely.

Back in England I continued my public speaking obligations in different towns until a cablegram from Canada sent me speeding through England on a rescue mission. The telegram was very brief and rather confusing: ‘Kacik being deported to Yugoslavia on board Montrose’. I had to dig up a little party history to know what it was all about.

It appeared to have begun in 1930, when the whole Central Committee of the Communist Party in Canada was arrested and the members given prison sentences from two to five years. Amongst those who had a two-year sentence was Tom Kacik, who had escaped from prison in Yugoslavia, where he was under sentence of death, and had got to Canada. There he had received political asylum and had begun working for the local Communist Party, as head of the large Yugoslav contingent. He had now finished his time in prison and was being sent home, where his death sentence still awaited him. Hence the telegram, a cry for help to save this man from the gallows. The Montrose was due in Liverpool in a few days, when it was expected we would make some effort to prevent his dispatch to Yugoslavia.

We had the telegram, we had the desire to save him, but apart from that we had nothing, and quite a lot was needed: a car, since a rescue operation by train was out of the question, and money for expenses. However it seemed that a man knew a man who could get another man to lend us his car. As the owner of the car was the son of rich parents, who were much against him mixing with the Reds, the car’s delivery was to take place under special circumstances. He was to drive it up to our office and leave it outside, facing the window, and after we had given him time to get clear we would take it over. We agreed not to look out of the window during this manoeuvre in case our observation of the street should expose his connections with us and thereby lead his father to changing his will. So we sat deep in our one-room office and counted on our fingers the minutes necessary for him to get away. The we looked out of the window. That was not the only looking we did, for we looked at each other more amazed than ever before in our lives.

The chariot that stood outside had been, goodness knows how many years before, an Armstrong-Siddeley two-seater with a dickey. It looked as if the fifth owner had taken it to the knacker’s yard, tried to push it through the crusher and only succeeded in badly bruising it. So it was reprieved to take us to Liverpool. We went out to get a better look at this battered rickshaw. On the steering-wheel was fastened a piece of paper listing all the car’s defects and what one had to do to make sure they did not all operate together, as this would mean certain death to motor and motorists. One of the more outstanding defects was the steering-wheel itself, which had more than a half turn of free play each way. The radiator also leaked, but rags had been stuffed in cracks to ward off any threat from that quarter. It seemed from the long sheet of paper that the only thing in good working order was the sphynx sitting enigmatically on the radiator.
We knew we had to make the best of it. One must not look a gift horse in the mouth, even if the steed has lost several sets of teeth years and years before. At least the car went. It had arrived at the office, and we hoped this fact belied its appearance. Anyway we got it to a nearby garage and asked the attendant there to service it by midnight, the time we had decided to set out.

Exactly five minutes to the hour we arrived and sailed out of the garage at a good speed under the eye of the grinning attendant. We kept up a steady pace and soon reached the outskirts of London and the beginning of the Great North Road, as it was then called. It was when we were going up a small incline between rows of two-storey houses and shops that the motor died. We kicked it, cursed it and coaxed it, but it gave only one shudder, which was enough to bring us close to the causeway, and then expired. We were alone with this corpse in a deserted street, with the time going on for 2 am and no one about to lend us motorcars for love and kisses.

There we sat, looking at each other, not speaking and not knowing what to do, when a high-powered engine revved to a stop behind us. There was no mistaking that noise. We whispered to each other 'Flying squad'. We were right. A head was stuck through the window and a voice said 'What are you people doing here?' We said we didn't know: the car had brought us to this spot and was now refusing to take us away from it, let alone to Liverpool, our intended destination. The policeman asked to see our driving licenses, then walked round the car examining it from all sides and chuckling as he did so. 'All right,' he finally said, 'but you chose a bad place to break down.' He nodded to the houses, and we discovered we had stopped next to a jeweller's shop. That car certainly had it in for us. We pushed it into a side street and came back to the city by the first bus.

Later we discovered that the attendant had serviced it thoroughly but had forgotten one thing: to fill up the petrol tank.

For all that, we could not abandon our mission, a chap's life was at stake. So we started telephoning all over London and at last came upon a man willing and able to help. This was another of the well-loaded youths who were playing at Communism in the thirties. His father was chairman of the board of a large insurance company, and sonny boy was using his father's allowance to keep the red flag flying high. He lived in a flat in the area of Russell Square, where all the Bloomsbury intellectuals spent their days arguing the virtues and vices of this or that 'ism', and on Sundays went to the Film Society to see a Soviet film. To show how involved he was, he had the walls of his biggest room decorated with murals of tow-headed workers demonstration under the Red Flag in defiance of Lord Trenchard11 and his merry men. He had a new Morris coupe which he gladly presented to us, together with a real gilt-edged fiver. We were in clover and off we set again.

Without further setback we arrived in Liverpool at the very time when the local people were having a meeting in their hall. We went into a huddle with the local Party secretary and began to work out a strategy. Nobody in Britain had ever seen Kacik, and nobody knew whether he was travelling under guard or free. The Canadian court's deportation order meant only that they wanted him out of Canada, and where he went thereafter was no business of theirs. The British authorities had the right to prevent him landing in Britain or staying there, but in fact they were acting not altogether legally, keeping his arrival secret so that they would not have to recognise, officially, his landing on British territory. That was our key argument. But we had to find out Kacik's situation.

Most CP members in Liverpool were seamen. Amongst them we were lucky enough to find a ship's cook who, dressed up in his white cook's rig, talked somebody on the tug going out to meet the Montrose into taking him along. The cook had with him a letter for Kacik. If Kacik were free, he was

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11 I assume this is referring to Hugh Trenchard the first viscount Trenchard. Trenchard was general in the British army who was active in establishing an air force during the First World War. He was a close associate of Churchill, an arch conservative and actively threatened to shoot mutinying soldiers at Southampton docks in 1919. In 1931 he was made Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and intervened with force against many demonstrations and strikes in London. [Reddebrek]
instructed to leave the ship holding the right lapel of his coat so that it could be plainly seen as he walked down the gangway. People stationed at intervals in the port would tell him where to go and he would finally leave by a gate where a blue closed car was waiting with two men in it. He was to take a seat in the back and say ‘Let’s go’, and the car would set out for London.

As it turned out, however, Kacik was under guard, and when the other passengers left the ship, he was still aboard. Nevertheless the outposts we had placed everywhere remained in position. Shortly after all the passengers had been cleared, a black maria drove down to the ship and a number of policemen under the leadership of a local inspector got out. The inspector mounted the gangway and started to board the ship. Suddenly he stopped and looked back. For a moment he could not believe his eyes. The gangway was surrounded by Communists, every one of them known to him. It was a very unpleasant surprise, for it was clear that the secrecy of Kacik’s arrival in Britain was well and truly blown. Our outposts remained silent and waited. Later the black maria left the port and as it passed through one of the gates, we dropped in behind it and followed it to the police station where Kacik was to be housed until arrangements had been made for his further despatch through England.

Without stopping we dashed as fast as traffic laws allowed to the offices of the late Sydney Silverman. We explained the situation to Mr Silverman, particularly emphasising the death sentence awaiting Kacik in Yugoslavia and our view that his being held by the British police was illegal. Mr Silverman, who must have been as much against death sentences in those days as he was later, immediately got on the telephone to the immigration authorities. Their first question was how he knew of Kacik’s secret arrival. Mr Silverman of course did not disclose his source, but emphatically demanded the right to have a meeting with Kacik. It was granted. His intervention delayed Kacik’s journey to Harwich by twenty-four hours and thereby saved his life. Having heard Mr Silverman’s report of his meeting with Kacik, we decided to make for London post haste and there continue harassing the authorities. It was dusk when we crossed on the Mersey ferry and already dark when we hit the little town of Whitchurch in Shropshire and with it more trouble, or, as they say in the Navy, things started going in favour against us. We had filled our petrol tank before leaving Liverpool and on seeing this small town we decided to top up so that we might make London without another stop. At the first garage I called for two gallons of petrol. The owner casually asked where we were going and we told him London. At that a policeman appeared from deep inside the garage. He had evidently been listening to our conversation from the start.

I am sorry to have to state it, but he was the typical storybook village policeman and his paunch was a typical village policeman’s paunch. If he had been tied round with a piece of string in two or three places he might have been taken for a roll of bacon with a helmet. ‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re going to London on two gallons of petrol?’ He looked us up and down and his suspicions were confirmed. It was almost three days since we had left London, and during that time neither of us had touched a razor to chine. We had slept in our clothes, added to which was the fact that I had been wearing the same white collar all the time and it was now the new modern colour, pale black. The policeman did not exactly take us for Bonny and Clyde, after all my companion was also male, but I am sure he thought we were just as dangerous.

We explained about our almost full tank and challenged him to measure it. He did so, and as the mark on the stick confirmed our assertions, the suspicion temperature around that garage dropped a bit and we took our seats to speed off. If, two nights earlier, the ancient Armstrong-Siddeley had refused duty because we had not fed him, why should the new Morris, only just fed to the tank-cap, similarly refuse? It did, and try as we might we could get nothing out of it except a splutter. I got out and started to push, my partner steering. Then the policeman joined in, but there was still no

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12 Sydney Silverman (1895-1968) was Labour MP for Nelson and Colne from 1935. Before that he was a solicitor. He was the author (with R.T. Paget, QC, MP) of Hanged -and Innocent?
response from the motor. There was a little incline leading down to the centre of the small town, so
thinking this would help restore discipline to the works we ran and pushed. No go. We pulled up at
the next garage, the policeman remaining with us.

After a look at the engine the garage man quietly gave us the shattering news that the batteries had
run down because of a broken lead and it would be necessary to put them on charge all night. This
new delay put the criminal bug back in the policeman’s helmet. ‘Is that your car?’ he asked. ‘No,’ I
answered, ‘we borrowed it from a man in London.’ ‘Oh’, said the policeman, with a nasty shade of
doubt in his voice, ‘and what is his name?’ Well, that put the final stamp on our criminal characters.
Neither of us knew the name of the owner and we were unaware that in the right-hand, door pocket
was the insurance, complete with all necessary details.

But it was not the policeman’s suspicions that were worrying us now. We had to wait till morning
before we could move on, and our meagre finances were in danger of disappearing entirely if we
had to spend the night in some hotel. Then a brilliant idea came into my head. I turned to the
policeman and hinted that perhaps it would be a good notion if he took charge of us. He seemed to
suspect us in some way or another, so why not lock us up for the night? He fell for it and pulling a
bunch of keys out of his pocket, said, ‘Come with me.’ But my joy was short-lived, for as he got the
door of the lock up, he turned round and said to me, ‘Oh, young man, you are very cunning, but it
won’t was with me. You want me to put you up for a night free of charge. No, it won’t do. Wherever
you are here, I’ve got you.’

There was no point in arguing, so we went in search of some place to rest our weary heads. All the
doors were closed as it was now late, but at last we found a sympathetic old lady who agreed to take
us in. in the morning the bill she gave us with the breakfast made me look round to see if there were
any gold-braided funkeys carrying the tray. When I had got over the shock I asked her ‘Is this place
called the Ritz?’ But she told me to mind my language in her house. Reduced to our last few shillings
we made our way to the garage to find whether the owner was about to take the rest. He had more
humane feelings, however, and charged us only one-tenth of the sum the old woman had
demanded. Seeing no policeman about, I asked the garage owner where the roll of bacon was, at
which a door in the side of the garage opened and out came our friend. He had found the insurance
papers, telephoned to London and checked that everything was all right. We were free to go. Go we
did, almost breaking some of the current world records, and very soon we found ourselves on the
road to Oxford.

My companion, who was doing the driving, was an American, and he continually hugged the right
side of the road in spite of a thick fog which had settled down, turning the asphalt surface into a
perfect pitch for the Montral Stars ice hockey team, in addition to its other hazards. Then it
happened. Out of the fog a horse and cart suddenly appeared, standing at a gate on the right side of
the road, which my driver seemed to love so much. As he swung round, a huge van came tearing
from the other side. Our car skidded under the impact of the brakes and a corner of the van hit us
just in front of the right rear door. All the back part of the coupe was smashed to smithereens,
hanging over like a heap of unwashed Maltese lace. Miraculously neither of us was in any way hurt,
although plenty of glass had been shot in all directions. Moreover the chassis was in good order and
the car could go as well as ever, if no longer
with the contours given it by its makers.

After the usual writing and measuring by the police and the AA men, we mounted our wreck and
drove into Oxford to the amazement of the people, both students and otherwise. We stopped at the
first telephone box and I looked up the number of a student who was among those playing at
revolution at that time. (Judging by a letter I received from him a few years ago, he has found other
interests in the interim.) He told me to come round, and when we drove up to his house, in a classy
residential district, all the window curtains in the street surreptitiously twitched. His own housemaid
nearly fainted. Here we lunched, and then our student friend piled us into the wreck, drove us to the station, bought us tickets for London and after seeing us off took the car to the Morris works.

Back in London there was a telegram waiting: ‘Kacik leaves for Harwich today’. Then we knew that no more than for sinners is there rest for the unfortunate. Somehow we had to find another car, and we had already reduced the reserve borrowing park by more than fifty percent. But at that point fate began to blush a faint pink for all the dirty tricks she had played on us. The British immigration authorities had arranged with their Belgian counterparts that Kacik should be shipped to Antwerp, but fate moved in with a thick fog and the ship was diverted to the Hook of Holland.

Now it was the turn of our man, sent to Harwich to take what action he could. More by good fortune than by good choosing we had picked on the right kind of person for the operation he had to carry out. He had a most impressive looking pair of horn-rimmed glasses and an equally impressive leather brief case, as well as the face of a lawyer who never uses the same lie twice. As soon as the ship carrying Kacik and himself docked in the Dutch port, our man was first off and went straight to the Dutch immigration official, to whom he told a really hair-raising story. He had, he said, absolutely authentic knowledge that the British police were attempting to dump on Dutch territory the most savage and bloody Communist rebel in the world. He had been kicked out of Canada for taking pot-shots at ministers, setting fire to government buildings and making bombs as big as coconuts. The story worked, the scared Dutchman went straight to the ship and told these perfidious Britons that they would not get away with it, Kacik must go back to England.

In the meantime we had been raising a little hell in official quarters and they gave us a letter to allow us to see Kacik at Harwich.

At this point the search for transport began again, and fate was absolutely red by now, for she helped us find a man with a Bentley and another student with an Austin Seven. The owner of the Bentley was G.P. Wells, son of H.G. whom we had appealed to on humanitarian principles. Evidently the idea of chasing through England on a life-saving mission stirred the romantic in him, and he took our chief and some other chaps with him full speed to Harwich. Following behind, with, of course, no hope of overtaking the Bentley, was the Austin Seven driven by the student, and carrying the American, myself and none other than ‘I Claud’ 13, at that time editor of The Week as well as being, simultaneously, the owner, the publisher, the printer, the sales manager and the office boy.

If the previous dash had been fraught, this one was no less so. Ours was the smallest and frailest car on the road. In addition it possessed no light-dimmers, and the continual flow of trucks and vans passing us in the pitch-black night took us for a crowd of road hogs that needed to be taught a lesson, and flashed the full power of their headlights right in our driver’s eyes. Half the time we were driving blind and sometimes we passed so close to an oncoming truck that I, sitting on the inside rear seat, was slashed by the ends of the securing ropes on the trucks. There was never a dawn so gratefully greeted as the one that met us as we drove into Harwich.

There we collected our fellow rescuers and learnt that they had managed to pass five pounds in money and a Soviet entrance visa to Kacik, who was leaving for Antwerp that day. Years afterwards I learnt that he had arrived in Vienna at the time of Dolfuss’s putsch, and, taking advantage of the upset, had walked out of the train, bought a ticket for the Soviet Union and lived their till the Civil War in Spain. He served in the Yugoslav battalion, which was led by Tito, and after the collapse of the Republic was landed in a French camp, where he was offered a ticket to Canada by the Canadian repatriation commission. This he refused. He wandered around Europe for some time, and when the Germans occupied Yugoslavia, he attached himself to Tito’s partisans and fought with them to the end of the war. He died in 1949.

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13 Claud Cockburn, author of I Claud, London, 1967
Not foreseeing the future travels of Kacik, we returned from Harwich to send a delegation with a letter of protest to the Yugoslav Embassy in London. The letter was signed by the usual number of 'Good Friends', and at the head of the delegation was 'I Claud', who also wrote an article about Kacik for an American newspaper which he entitled 'Is this the Yugoslav Dimitrov?' - quite a popular name in those days. I imagine 'I Claud' was then serving his apprenticeship before joining the Party.

After the Kacik saga I was sent to Belfast to give some talks, and there I met a Communist who was so anti-negro that when he was obliged to refer to negroes in party meetings he could not avoid adding a whispered 'nigger'. When I taxed him with it, he pulled out the old excuse: would you like him to sleep with your sister? To which I always replied 'I would like his sister to sleep with me'. And there was another one who went to Mass every Sunday morning. I called it working on two fronts. Late, I heard that they were both expelled from the party.

On my return from Belfast I was told by the then secretary of the Communist Party, Harry Pollitt, that I was to go to the Soviet Union to work in the International Seamen's Club in Leningrad. So, on 17 May 1934, I boarded the Soviet passenger ship Smolny and on 24 May arrived in Leningrad to take up my position.

Epilogue

Now at the age of sixty-six, very happily married and having a regular income in the form of a pension plus what acting in some films and dubbing others bring me, spending my summers in a beautiful, country place about twenty-two miles from Moscow, I still believe that my life of extraordinary incidents has yet time and room for others unforeseen.

When I reflect that the first noteworthy incident was a school strike organised at the age of twelve, followed very shortly afterwards by an attempt to become a circus star, I have to admit that I had full and early warning that my life would be incident-prone. And so it has been. But I do not agree with those people who attribute their experiences, good or bad, to the fact that they are victims of circumstances. I tend to share Napoleon's view, whose famous question on being asked to promote an officer was: 'is he lucky?' For I too believe that luck plays a great part in the lives of those who experience more than the average person. A gentleman once said to me about his wife: 'She is so lucky that if she fell under a tramcar there would be a power failure throughout the town that very moment'. With me, I am afraid, it is the other way about. If I went down a street where no tramcar had ever run, one would decide to take that route just when I am crossing the road.

Now, no one must think I am bemoaning my fate. Nothing of the sort. On the contrary I have long discovered that luck can be disciplined and although one may win little profit (except experience, of course) one can, by the proper control of luck, squeeze out of any tight corner or difficult situation. Controlling one’s luck means never shrinking in the face of adversity. One must watch adversity as a good boxer watches his opponent, not only his fists but his eyes also. There is always that split-second warning that, if immediately accepted, gives a way out of trouble.

Neither do I have any regrets, anyway, regretting is the most futile occupation one can engage in. I joined the Communist Party and parted with it by force of circumstances. Now I belong to no party.

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14 Georgi Dimitrov (1882-1949), Bulgarian Communist who became an international symbol of martyred innocence when the Nazis tried to blame him for the Reichstag fire in 1933. He was acquitted and went to Moscow. Appointed General Secretary of the Comintern in 1935. First President of the Bulgarian People’s Republic after the Second World War.
but I regret neither joining nor leaving. Each occasion increased my understanding of people and left me with another gain as far as experience was concerned.

My break with the Navy was against my will, but I have never once regretted my role at Invergordon, for again and again I have received confirmation that the step I took was right. Most of all I value that small but significant event in the aftermath of Invergordon, the grant the Canteen Committee wanted to send me, a rare vote of confidence from men who were to prove their worth a hundredfold at Dunkirk, and as such more dear to me than any sum of money.

And I still look back with admiration and gratitude to the Royal Naval Training Establishment at Shotley. As was to be expected, it strengthened me physically, but above all it provided a firm moral basis and wide mental vistas which no other school for a boy of my class could have given. If, after almost forty years’ absence, I visit or return to Britain, I shall go to Shotley to pay homage to the school I believe to be—in fact am absolutely convinced is— the best in the world.