

My War

By Lt C F Dance RNVR

With my yachting experience I had joined the supplementary reserve of the R.N.V.R. in 1937 and was attached to the Bristol division with headquarters on H.M.S. Flying Fox and in 1939 was called up as a Sub Lieutenant R.N.V.R. I said cheerio to my wife and family and went for training to H.M.S. King Alfred at Hove in Sussex. It was bitterly cold, our training quarters on the sea front were half finished and cement dust was everywhere. We were billeted in the town, but instead of our training being for six months, it was only for a few weeks and we rushed off to man mine- sweepers. Ships were being mined and torpedoed all up the East coast and the Thames estuary and we were needed immediately. I did a mine-sweeping course at H.M.S. Vernon at Portsmouth where snow was thick on the ground and was there ordered to join H.M.S. Ombra at Southend. After a fruitless journey I discovered she was at Grimsby, but I was posted to the mine-sweeper H.M.S. Garry, a coal burner. My first impressions of Grimsby were poor, in a complete blackout with thick snow everywhere. However after minesweeping for a few weeks at a time in heavy weather and blizzards, it seemed a paradise to get back to.

My parents had moved from Birmingham to Bath in 1936 or 37 where my sister Frances then lived married to a school teacher, Frank Alexander. My brother too, back from his world tour playing football had got a job there. He joined the territorials in 1939 and was at his first camp when war broke out, so he was in it from the start. Since his house at Bath was vacant, and Birmingham seemed likely to be a target for bombers, Kay and the children moved there at the end of 1939.



The winter of 1939/40 was bleak with gales and blizzards and mine-sweeping the North Sea was an anxious time. There were wrecks all up the east coast either from torpedoes or generally from mines. I was serving on HMS Garry and swept the searched channel from the Humber towards the Thames estuary. Sometimes we assisted the fleet sweepers Skipjack, Dunoon, Halcyon, Selkirk etc., most of the which were sunk as war continued. Apart from the weather and the mines we often had to contend with attacks from enemy aircraft and we lived, and slept if we could, in our lifebelts. A merchant ship the Chivy Chase was mined and sank just ahead of us as we escorted a convoy south.

In 1940 I was promoted to Lieutenant and ordered to take command of HMS Liffey, another mine-sweeper, and armed with a 12 pound gun and Lewis guns. She was then boiler cleaning at Grimsby and while she was in dock, Kay and Daphne, then about two

years old, visited me and we stayed at Cleethorpes for two days.

My first assignment was to take the Liffey to stand in for the Outer Dowsing Light Vessel, which had been bombed and damaged by enemy aircraft. We were there a week in gales and blizzards marking a turning point for convoys which loomed up in the gloom. When a replacement light float arrived we were ordered back to mine-sweeping down as far as Sheringham Shoals, an area full of mined and wrecked ships.

Eventually we sailed north to the Firth of Forth to Port Edgar, near the Forth Bridge, were after a while I transferred to take command of HMS Syringa, a more modern mine-sweeper of 650 tons and a crew of 28, and armed with a 4" semi automatic gun and machine guns.

With her we sailed south again to Hartlepool and commenced sweeping down the magnificent Yorkshire coast as far as Flamborough head. This was the period when the Germans over ran Belgium and the British army had to be evacuated from Dunkirk. Just after that, on sailing to Portsmouth, we passed the many wrecks in that area and could see smoke and explosions over the Belgium coast. From Portsmouth we swept from the Nab Tower out into the channel and saw many ships of all types escaping from France as the Germans drove on. The old French battleship Bretagne and the new destroyer Leopard were among them and also, a strange sight, a dredger packed with refugees, including gendarmes, and with belonging and bicycles in the dredgers buckets.

At this time, when France was over run, and invasion was expected, Britain, and Empire, was fighting alone. The enemy was assembling fleets of barges and ships in readiness in various French ports, and the danger was very real. We were switched to anti-invasion patrol in the English Channel and patrolled at night from the Isle of White up to Dungeness, drifting during the day in the area of Beachey Head, where we might get some protection from shore based anti-aircraft guns. Once when we were coaling in harbour I snatched a few hours off and wired my wife to meet me with the children at Salisbury, from Bath were they were then living. I caught a train but an air raid delayed our departure, the half way t Salisbury an enemy lane dropped a stick of bombs ahead of the train, destroying the track and by the time I arrived it was time to return.

When on anti-invasion patrol we were often at action stations during the day, with enemy planes in the sky and dog fights overhead, and at night we could hear, and smell, the E. boats which torpedoed many ships. I was lucky to be on sick leave when my ship was attacked in the Channel, was shot up and my gunner killed and a seaman wounded. In addition a bomb went through the engine casing into the engine room without exploding. The weather at times was foul, and our boats were slung out at all times, we lost two as the ship rolled.

I was due to take a gunnery course at Whale Island, and was to leave the ship in two days, when I received a signal while in Portsmouth Harbour. It signified that the invasion had started and we were to put into operation the secret plan for this contingency. All ships with any sort of armament were to put to sea to repel the invaders, but first we were to anchor in the Solent to await further orders. All night we swatted up the signals and instructions, while fierce aerial fighting took place overhead and made sure our 4" gun and machine guns were ready for action. It was an anxious time but in the morning another signal signified "false alarm" and we returned to harbour. Next day I reported for my course at Whale Island. Here we spent every night in trenches dug as primitive air raid shelters, while bombs fell all

around. As we retired to our chicken wire bunks in the trenches so early I got plenty of sleep, but by the light of the hurricane lamp, did little study. After passing the course, my next appointment was Auxiliary Vessels Gunnery Officer in charge of gunnery training for the Bristol Channel area, based at Swansea.

As I was ashore here for most of my time I rented a house for my family, and my wife Kay, George and Daphne moved down from Bath to Mumbles. Here we were to see the destruction of the centre of Swansea when after three nights of air attack, the town was left in ruins. From Mumbles the centre of Swansea looked one enormous fire. Apart from Swansea my chief centre of activity was Milford Haven, where huge convoys of merchant ships assembled with escort vessels. I had twelve months as Auxiliary Vessels Gunnery Officer. I had requisitioned a large shed on the South Dock at Swansea and training had begun on all guns and we went on practice shoots at sea. Aircraft recognition too was an important instruction as many of our own aircraft were fired on in the early days.

This was a crucial time of the war, France had fallen and Britain and the Empire had been fighting alone. Much equipment had been lost at Dunkirk, and ammunition and guns were in short supply. Losses of merchant ships torpedoed reached terrific proportions and our battleship HMS Nelson was sunk with great loss of life, though we gained revenge when the Royal Navy sank the German battleship Bismark. Then Japan entered the war on the side of our enemies, after destroying the American fleet in their treacherous attack on Pearl Harbour. Soon the Japanese had captured Hong Kong and Singapore and sunk our battleships Prince of Wales and Renown. The position could not have been graver but I can recall no atmosphere of defeatism and Winston Churchill, now Prime Minister, rallied the country with fighting speeches.

I was next ordered to join HMS Flying Fox, an old sloop now used as a gunnery training ship for gun-layers appointed to DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) and commanded by Commander Lawrence RN. This ship, based in Bristol docks, passed out gun-layers after about a month's intensive course on 6", 4", 12 pound guns and 20mm Oerlikon guns, and the various machine guns which included Lewis, Browning 5, Hodgkiss and Marlin. We had a massive battery of guns at Severn Beach for practice and we fired 4" and 12 pounder guns towards the "Denny" islet and an aircraft towed a drogue for Anti Aircraft firing. Bristol was attacked on many occasions by air and the centre was a ruin and many buildings around the docks were destroyed. The "Flying Fox" was lucky not to be hit as bombs fell all around.

The men needed relaxation and I managed to start sporting activities and formed a soccer side in the winter and a cricket eleven in the summer from ratings taking the course.

American forces now began arriving in Britain and at times we helped them with our training facilities, especially the U.S. Naval personnel manning guns on merchant ships. British aircraft construction began to catch up and the R.A.F. were now on the offensive.

At last, in 1944, after long secret preparations the "2nd front" began. British and American forces stormed ashore in Normandy after the great force had been ferried across the channel in an enormous fleet of ships, landing craft and R.N. vessels and escorted by the Royal Navy. The landing was more successful than expected due to false information filtered to the enemy.

I had been about two years on the "Flying Fox" and was now ordered to take over D.E.M.S. training on the South Atlantic station based at Durban. This meant saying "Au

revour” again to my wife, who was then expecting David, and who had continued living at Mumbles.

I sailed from Liverpool, after a dreadful train journey in the “blackout” jammed in the corridors like sardines, on the fine French troopship “Pasteur”

The “Pasteur” was a fast ship and sailed without escort. She took mostly R.A.F. men to Freetown in Sierra Leone and, after dropping them off, we continued to Cape Town. After the blackout in Britain it was amazing to us to see lights again and neon advertising etc. After a short spell in Cape Town and Simonstown where I called on the Captain in charge D.E.M.S., we travelled by train on a three day journey through the Great Karrov, Kimberley, Kroonstad, Boomfontein, Ladysmith and the rolling hills of Natal to Durban.

I was lucky to be sent to Durban. Although Japanese submarines had torpedoed ships in the Indian Ocean, Durban had escaped attack. However, it was hard work as Durban was the big port for the allies once the Sues Canal was closed. Every merchant ship and some Allied war vessels, sent their gun crews for a two day refresher course. This was spent in our “Dome” where air attacks were simulated, or on our range on the coast where we fired at drogues towed by aircraft, and occasionally I flew in the aircraft to observe the firing.

I lived partly ashore (at times we had days at sea for firing) at Fleet House - a large residence run by the Navy League on the lovely Berea overlooking Durban City. About 20 officers were billeted there and were a great crowd. On a leave I spent a fine week in the Drakensburg Mountains and climbed into Basutoland - nearly 10,000 feet. A friend of mine in the R.A.F. based in Pretoria also flew me up to Johannesburg and Pretoria in a De Havilland Rapide and once in a Dakota.

It was in 1945 that a wire informed me that I had another son (David) and that Kay and baby were O.K.

By 1945 Allied forces were advancing on all fronts towards Germany and by the middle of the year the great news came that the war in Europe was over. Japanese forces too were in retreat everywhere and before long the first atomic bomb was dropped on to Japan, causing unconditional surrender to the great relief of the many Allied Prisoners of War held in dreadful conditions in Burma and elsewhere

It was good to feel one could relax and prepare for a normal life. Gunnery training ceased and we commenced disarming merchant ships as they reached port. I also played cricket, first for the Royal Navy, and then for the South African Naval Forces in the war time league and was picked to play for Durban in a two day match versus Pietermaritzberg, where we stayed the night. About this time too I was best man at the wedding of a fellow officer who married a South African girl in Pietermaritzberg.

A Hunt class destroyer was under repair in Durban before proceeding to Malta. I had completed my job in D.E.M.S. and so was appointed as watch keeping officer to H.M.S. Lauderdale to join in February 1946. Hunt class destroyers were of about 1,000 tons armed with four 14 inch guns, and 8 to 10 oeliken or Bofors guns with a speed of 32 knots. We sailed via the Mozambique channel to Mombassa and then to the Suez Canal and eventually paid off at Malta. I spent a short time there exploring the island before being put in charge of about 10 officers and 120 ratings proceeding to England via the ‘Medloc’ route. We went by the troopship to Toulon where we spent several nights at a transit camp at Hyeres in

unpleasant snow and rain, before we embarked on our special troop train to Dieppe. We went via Marseille, Montpellier, passing Carcassonne, and to Toulouse. On leaving the latter place, our train was in collision with a goods train causing damage and injuries, I suffered a cut on my face which did not need attention. When we reached Dieppe and embarked on the cross channel ship, it was cold and raining and we realised that we were nearing home.

When in March 1946, my train pulled into Swansea, I was reunited with my wife and family and saw David for the first time and started my end of war leave at Mumbles.