

Days of Yore

In 1942 I was a Leading Seaman in T.S. Enterprise (the Londonderry unit of the Navy League Sea Cadet Corps), one of the four such units in Northern Ireland. At that time the port of Londonderry was a vital link in the Battle of The Atlantic and it was not unusual to have as many as fifteen warships (corvettes and destroyers) berthed (three abreast) alongside and others berthed alongside the bunkering tanker "San Ubaldo". The small commercial port had been converted into a naval base (H.M.S Sea Eagle) shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939 but the name was changed to H.M.S Gannet about 1941 when pasture land in nearby Eglinton was developed as an airfield for the Fleet Air Arm and claimed the name H.M.S. Sea Eagle. The airfield adjoined our farm - Doneybrewer - and when an aircraft took off from No.1 runway it was not unusual for the vibration to dislodge ornaments - and awaken the sleeping occupants. We remained there until about early 1942 - when a Westland Lysander crash landed in the orchard (pilot unhurt) and my father decided to give up the uneven struggle -and we moved to the other side of Londonderry. The Sea Cadet Unit enjoyed a very close relationship with the Royal Navy and we were frequent visitors aboard many of the warships. The names "Skate", "Scimitar" "Saladan" "Venemous" and "Lincoln"(an ex US Navy lease-lend destroyer with four funnels) bring back many happy memories. On several occasions when the ships were operating within the confines of the Lough Foyle some of us would be invited aboard and allowed to participate in many of the basic tasks being undertaken by crew members. One one memorable occasion a destroyer carrying out engine trials in Lough Foyle received information that a U-Boat had been sighted just off Moville (in the Irish Republic) and she was instructed to investigate. The four Sea Cadets were incarcerated in the Wardroom until the emergency was over but they all had exciting stories to tell when they disembarked.

In 1943 I was one of four Sea Cadets from Northern Ireland selected to become Unit Physical and Recreational Training Instructors (P&RTI) and to achieve this accolade we were required to travel to Portsmouth Royal Naval Base (HMS Excellent ?) for the requisite training. Thus it was that one cold and wet February morning I bid adieu to my anxious parents at Londonderry railway station and boarded the train for Belfast - in full uniform. The train was crowded with servicemen going on leave or on postings and my "NLSCC" shoulder "flash" aroused a deal of interest - and humour. At Belfast I changed trains for the port of Larne where I - and many "other ranks"- would pick up our ferry to Stranraer. Wartime travel demanded that commissioned Officers used the Belfast - Heysham route but the lesser mortals used Larne -Stranraer. On arrival Larne, in the early afternoon, we were taken to a dockside shed to await the arrival of "the next boat" - and nobody seemed to know when that might be. After what seemed an eternity - and a mug of tea and a roll from a Salvation Army canteen lorry - we realised that our ferry had berthed and we were instructed to board. Now - our numbers had increased twofold but I soon found the other three Sea Cadets - two from Belfast and one from Bangor -and a friendship that was to last for several years was established. We sailed out into the Irish Sea in total darkness -and almost immediately started to roll and pitch alarmingly. The passenger complement comprised many WRNS, ATS and WAAF's and many of them quickly succumbed to the weather conditions but, they were not alone, and many sailors, soldiers and airmen joined them at the shipside rail ! On arrival Stranraer we boarded a waiting train - again overcrowded - and headed for London. By this time I had been travelling for almost 24 hours and my only food had been the Salvation Army "tea and a bun" in Larne. We had cat-napped on the ferry but tiredness was creeping in. We parted company to look for seats and I was

fortunate to find a window seat in a carriage designated as "First Class". It seated eight and one of those was a young U.S Army Officer who expressed interest in my uniform - and age. It transpired that he had delivered an aircraft to "Sea Eagle" a few days before and he remembered our farm buildings ! Our train rumbled South and stopped at darkened stations (with names obscured) but I clearly recall one called "Bank B.Q" where we stopped for a while -and the bangs and flashes indicated that an air-raid was in progress nearby. By this time my hunger was intense and when I told my new friend that I had not eaten for many hours , he reached into his kitbag , produced a bar of "Hersheys" chocolate and gave it to me. Never will I forget the delight afforded my by his kindly action ; a large bar of milk chocolate in wartime England was a rarity ! Euston Station saw us part company and I rejoined my fellow Cadets to journey to Waterloo Station for the Portsmouth train. At Waterloo we found a cafe and ate a huge meal of fish and chips washed down with mugs of tea and a lump of Madeira cake before boarding the Portsmouth train where we arrived about two hours later - after a long stop "somewhere". At Portsmouth we saw several other NLSCC cadets and we joined forces to ask a naval rating (wearing an armband marked RTO) how to get to H.M.S.Excellent. He told us to wait and after about half an hour (and tea and a bun from a WVS van) a naval bus appeared and we were whisked to the Naval Base where we met more Sea Cadets. An Officer appeared and told us that we would be berthed aboard a ship called H.M.S Foudroyant and that he would take us to "Unicorn Steps" to board a launch that would take us to our new home. Another naval bus appeared and our group (which now numbered about 20) was taken to the dockyard and deposited, with our baggage, beside steps leading down to an empty pontoon. Time passed but eventually a pinnace came alongside and we made the short journey to our accommodation ship - the likes of which I had seen only in history books. It was now pitch dark and the "wooden wall" was very dimly lit and we climbed the accommodation ladder with a great deal of apprehension which marginally disappeared when we smelt cooking ! An hour later, having eaten an unrecognisable meal of vegetables and a piece of grey meat, mastered the intricacies of slinging a hammock and cleaned our teeth in very cold water - we donned our pyjamas, said our Prayers, and fell into a deep sleep. Almost immediately, or so it seemed, a bugle sounded and a uniformed Petty Officer walked amongst the hammocks, hitting each one with a long stick and shouting mild obscenities. It was now that most of us learnt how NOT to get out of a hammock and as we picked ourselves up from a cold wooden deck -and nursed our bruises - our Petty Officer friend offered some VERY obscene advice ! After a very cold shower, dressing and being shown how to "lash and stow" we were taken to the Mess Deck for a mass of cold dried egg, aged toast and margarine and a mug of weak tea without sugar. It was now just after 7.0 a.m. and I was beginning to wish that I had joined the Air Training Corps !

CRK 8/11/18 (To be continued if the Editor permits)

The Editor is only too pleased to include such memoirs, especially from our esteemed President who has been a major contributor to this journal over the past 70 editions.