J.E. MACDONNELL #28

COLLECTOR'S SERIES

Fleet Destroyer

Index

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This is the real Macdonnell—written, not in his study during the last few months, but actually while closed-up at B-gun... afloat during the war.

"...a vivid impression of life in an Australian destroyer. FLEET DESTROYER is a worthy addition to Australian naval literature."

— *MELBOURNE HERALD.*

FLEET DESTROYER

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

FLEET DESTROYER

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I wrote this book during the time the Eastern Fleet took to steam from its base in Ceylon, lambast Sourabaya, and steam back again (the obvious rejoinder won't get you anywhere); the final chapter dealing with that raid being written on a filched signal pad at "B" gun, waiting for our planes, and theirs, to return.

The captain once said to me that as soon as this destroyer flotilla, of which our ship forms a unit, left Australia, it became the "forgotten" flotilla. I'm inclined to agree. Then, too, the work of a Fleet destroyer is interesting, even to me; I thought you might feel the same. Hence the earnest scribbling en route Java.

Few people know there is a flotilla of Australian destroyers, manned and officered by Australians, serving with Admiral Mountbatten's Eastern Battle Fleet. This is their story, really, for on the big jobs, and most of the small ones, we've all worked together.

There is, of necessity, much left out of what our Fleet destroyer's done—particularly ashore in the "Pearls of the Indian Ocean!"—and, with Admiral Somerville's promise in mind, much more to come.

Here, then, is her story; and the story of a thousand men of the Royal Australian Navy, men who have fought from Murmansk to Moresby, and most places in between, and who, positioned between Jap-occupied East Indies and the land of their birth, are even now seeking the main obstacle to their return there—the Japanese Fleet.

J.E.M.
At, sea, May, 1944.

FOREWORD

Some three years ago it was my pleasurable duty to read in manuscript a short story by J.E. Macdonnell. The manuscript had been submitted, in accordance with Service regulations, for Naval approval before being offered for publication. A few weeks later it was a source of satisfaction to see it in print, a discerning magazine editor having seized the opportunity to publish it.

That was, I understand, his initial essay as a writer. Since then he has written, and published, many short stories and articles, and has amply fulfilled the promise which that first manuscript held.

J.E. Macdonnell writes of the Navy life he knows with a vivid and convincing pen. That life is the life of the Royal Australian Navy under active service conditions in wartime. Under such conditions the author has served in cruisers, destroyers, sloops and corvettes in various theatres.

In this present volume he tells something of the story of one of the "N" Class destroyers of the R.A.N. But his book is more than a mere record of events. Most of us who can guide a pen have it in us to make such a record. Macdonnell goes beyond that. His sensitivity makes him an interpreter. His vivid touch gives life and colour to his writing.

This is his first book, a milestone in the career of an Author. It holds within itself the justification of the hope that it is, as was that earlier manuscript, the precursor of more to follow.

HERMON GILL,
Lieutenant-Commander, R.A.N.V.R.
(Now Official Naval War Historian.)
Melbourne, January, 1945.

PREFACE TO POCKET BOOK EDITION

The last book I read—or opened—which carried three prefaces went under the sonorous title of The Palingenesis or Great Geological Changes In The Mesozoic Formations Of The Midlands. These days prefaces, at least in a book which deals merely with the structural changes in a torpedoed ship, are a bit old hat. But I was so pleased when the publishers suggested that they should reprint Fleet Destroyer that I couldn't quite resist adding another to the pages of "I" stuff.

Via this preface-page, I would like to tell Commander Gill—to whom much is owed—that between "his first book" of the final paragraph of his foreword, and this present page, there now stand 43 novels. And that is the real justification for this third pre-facing insertion—because the central character in Fleet Destroyer, H.M.A.S. *Nepal*, deserves published credit for serving as the inspiration for most of those novels. She actually is the fictional vehicle in which Commander Bentley and Lieutenant Randall and Hooky Walker pursue Germans and Japs and their own eventual fate.

As well, it must be admitted that Fleet Destroyer is really a composite of experiences which happened to the Australian destroyers screening with her. So I hope for no condemning broadsides from Able-seaman Ginger Wakeenshaw when I claim *Nepal's* B-gun got that Zero when in fact it owes its demise to *Quiberon's* X-gun. In those days no ship's name could be mentioned, and today I have forgotten which ship got what. But it matters little—all we were concerned with then was that some b... got the b... *Nepal* was the finest ship in which I served: she was all grace and guts. She was modern and powerful and heavily-gunned, rating forty thousand

horse-power and thirty-six knots, and she was manned in my time by a crew of officers and men to be remembered. Also to be remembered is the fact that she was so new to most of us who joined her in Sydney that it was a very shaky unit indeed of the R.A.N. which sailed that day in 1944 to do battle with the foe. A few months later... but you'll see about that.

I don't dare filch another page, so the dedication will have to lie here: This book for a fine fighting ship, Davy Jones rest her bones, and for a captain who should have turned pale with nervous terror in face of his responsibilities, and who did not.

J.E.M. Ashore, 1961.

CHAPTER ONE
DRAFT NOTE

SHE IS LONG and lean. All destroyers are. Her high bow falls away from the bullring of the foc's'le at an angle of thirty degrees. The graceful line of her deck stretches aft for three hundred and fifty feet. Her squat bridge, streamlined funnel and long twin guns enhance the impression of speed and guts.

Our ship has probably been seen by more people than have seen all the rest of the British Fleet put together. We can't claim this distinction as a result of some stupendous action—though, of course we do claim that no other ship in any other Navy is worked half as hard—but because she is the destroyer on which the sea sequences of Noel Coward's picture. In Which We Serve, were actually filmed.

So, having seen that rakish hull spuming across the screen, you will, I hope, feel a closer kinship with her real story, and having seen her go, if the Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet's information about the presence of a powerful Jap fleet in these waters is correct, you may know what she looked like. But talk of this operation when it's over.

I suppose there's no other machine packed so chock-a-block with power and destructive force as a modern Fleet destroyer. From her sharp, sloping stem to the deep-seated screws under her stern, she is a steel hull packed tight with lethal machinery and a multitude of instruments whose sole purpose is to ensure its maximum amount of destruction in the shortest possible time. She's no "greyhound of the seas," nor a "maid of all work." Her speed is put to more dramatic purpose than catching hares or rabbits, and no female with teeth and claws like she mounts would come into the maid category.

From my corvette I watched her slide into her berth in the dockyard, three hundred and fifty feet of her, lean, and low in the water. She had come back from twelve months' overseas service for a refit, and in a month would be back over there again, with a practically new crew.

We sailed that day in the corvette for a week's convoying, and on return the signal was waiting, as I half-expected it would be. The first-lieutenant handed it to me on the quarterdeck.

"Petty-office J.E. Macdonnell, from Townsville to Nepal, on relief joining." Less than a dozen words, manufactured by some writer way down in the drafting-office in Flinders, a bloke who probably had never heard of me, but whose eyes lighting on my official number was about to send me halfway round the world. And, luckily, back again. In a ship which, in over fourteen years at sea, was to become the first one I had really loved.

But all that was in the future. Three present words were all that mattered now—"on relief joining." That wasn't so bad; if my relief arrived in the corvette in time I looked like landing some long leave, and as it would be the first for fourteen months the idea was not unattractive.

But no relief joined, and while the destroyer lay quietly alongside, we sailed again. At the end of three weeks I was desperate, and approached the captain. He was dubious at first, as I was the only permanent-service petty-officer on board; but reflecting, no doubt, that I'd be away for the better part of two years, and that the destroyer would be sailing in a week, he let me go—bless him.

That afternoon I stepped aboard. I'd been in most classes of ships, from heavy cruises to sloops, and this was my second destroyer draft. But what a difference! The first boat—she lies off Ceylon now—had been laid down in 1918; this one, with all the modifications gained through four years war experience incorporated in the slim hull, was comparatively brand new.

Her squat bridge and funnel, with the two forrard twin guns advancing their grey barrels before it, reminded me forcibly of a hammerhead, drawn back to strike. The impression was enlarged by the cut of her flared foc's'le, running smoothly aft to the low stern. She was heavily-gunned, and fast, and lovely to look at—the sort of ship sailors stop work to watch as she slips through the lines down-harbour.

I met the first-lieutenant, and recognised in the authoritative young lieutenant a midshipman I'd kept watches with as quartermaster in a cruiser years before. Then, more important, I met the coxswain, and found an old friend; and stepped ashore on leave almost at once...

Things aboard were in a shambles, a rude denial of her trim outer lines. Only a few of the older hands knew each other, and I had 40

men in my division, none of whose faces or names I knew. The chief bosun's mate, a man who'd been in the Service almost my lifetime, gave me a sailor to get my gear inboard on return from leave.

As we walked through the dockyard I questioned him, for he'd been in the ship since commissioning. The first, of course, was: "When do we sail?"

He was a native of Goulburn, and was not encouraging.

"Sooner the bloody better! This flamin' joint gives me a pain in the old dulackey. With a bit of luck we should get clear of it in a day or two."

I reserved further questions for a Sydney native who, if not well informed, would at least be optimistic. In a destroyer the upper-deck is divided into three parts, foc's'le, iron deck, and quarterdeck, for purposes of cleaning and manning guns. I was made captain of the iron deck, which meant I would be given a third of the seamen complement with which to clean, and be responsible for the efficiency of that part of the ship extending from the bridge aft to the quarterdeck, both sides.

Everything included therein was mine, all mine, as I should very soon find out if the motorcutter or whaler weren't slipped smoothly when coming up to a buoy opposite the commodore's flagship, or if on all that spreading expanse of light grey there was one spot of alien matter.

But although a man is supposed to be seaman first, with all else running well astern, it was my guns I first inspected. The twin mounting squatted directly below the bridge, a long barrelled quick-firing 4.7-inch, housed in an armoured shield which left only the rear, round the two breeches, open.

My last destroyer's guns had been single four inch breech loaders, trained and laid by hand. These two, at the flick of a switch, could be trained with your little finger on the wheel, at a speed—well, fast enough to follow a Jap fighter crossing your bows. With their long snouts, bores glistening with oil, the thick sliding breeches set side by side, and above them, heavy recoil cylinders to receive the shock of discharge, they looked vicious, and comfortingly deadly. They were the absolute latest in destroyer guns, and she carried six of them. With a lifting pride in my heart I walked aft to begin the more prosaic inspection of the funnel.

We were, at first a heterogeneous lot. The ship had retained a backbone of staid permanent service hands. The rest were reserves, or "Rockies." One had been a grocer's assistant, another a railway porter; there was a tram conductor and a car sprayer, a public schoolboy, a shoemaker and a lad from Brisbane who put patterns on silk for ladies' dresses.

However, that was 12 months ago. Men of the Navy are trained to fight by possibly the finest disciplinary organisation in existence; by means of complicated and ingenious instruments these lads, only a few years ago being thrilled by the futuristic adventures of the Sunday comic strip heroes, were now actually performing feats of gunnery magic quite compatible with the imaginings of the story writers.

The gunlayer of my gun is a seventeen-year-old youth, a former student in accountancy at a Melbourne night school before, believing that "every bloke should have a go," he left a dim-eyed mother to come away to war.

Now at the alarm he jumps on his gun, twirls his laying-wheel with an expert hand and shouting "On by director!" with an elan that took me the better part of four years to master.

Those twin guns, immensely costly, have been put into his young hands by the exhaustive research of Britain's best scientists and the productivity of a war-geared industry, and the gunlayer, aged seventeen, throws their long bellowing barrels about the sky with the assurance of a man master of his tools.

Sometimes a flotilla of destroyers carries out what is called a concentration shoot. For purposes of effective gunnery it is imperative that all guns fire at once, possibly fifty or more of them, and here is where a former young bank clerk, now telegraphist, enters the organisation.

In the Navy sixteen months, yet highly trained, he works the W/T key in the transmitting station which despatches the firing signal to all those ships astern.

On his say-so the concentrated effort of a thousand men working a million pounds' worth of machinery is brought to a successful conclusion.

But all this took time, and on that blustering, rainy day we left

Sydney for overseas the young gentlemen mentioned were in all probability flaked out in the messdecks, wondering what in hell they'd let themselves in for—*Nepal* possessing all of the rolling and stomach-churning propensities of destroyers in general. We were standing by to slip that night, shivering in wintry rain, and I'd told a young able seaman to cast loose the racking on the forrard spring. A keen and eager young face was thrust up before mine through the murk and a well-modulated voice enquired:

"I beg pardon, sir? I didn't quite catch your order."

"Cast off spring racking." Casually, mind busy elsewhere. "The racking? Ah, yes. Right you are." He went away.

I leaned over the guardrail near the torpedo tubes until I could see the first-lieutenant on the lower bridge. In a minute or two he waved his arms in the peculiar gesture common to seaman, which means "Let go everything," and then retired from the edge of the bridge, presumably to report to the captain.

I shouted to the blurred shape in the waist:

"Right! Slip that spring!"

I waited. Nothing happened. Again the shout:

"Slip that bloody spring!"

An anxious voice reached me from the shadows.

"Are you speaking to me, sir?"

I rushed forward to the bollards round which the wire was made fast, and heard a faint singing whine as the whole weight of the moving ship came on it.

"Stevenson, where the hell are you?"

"Here, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me! Why haven't you cast this bloody wire off? What! The racking's still on! Didn't I tell you..."

And while I cut and hacked frantically at the bar taut on the wire, whipped the turns off, cleared my leg from the snaking coils round my shin, and let the greasy steel slip out through the fairleads, just in time, the well-modulated voice went on:

"I'm afraid I must confess I haven't the remotest idea of what a racking really is, but one must pretend, mustn't one, and do *something,* even if one's knowledge is hardly up to scratch."

So we sailed. It took hour piled on hour of heartache, but by the

time we made Fremantle en route to the Indian Ocean, we had shaken down pretty well, parts of ship organised, guns' crews detailed and drilled unceasingly by the gunner's mate (old "gate and gaiters"), seaboats exercised at sea, fire-drill, collision stations, repel aircraft stations and a multitude of other stations carried out every afternoon in the dog-watches. The captain, on whose adequate shoulders devolved the whole responsibility for the fighting efficiency of the ship, had a heavy task. He discharged it with an experienced zeal that was both exemplary and catching.

He is not a big man—more husky and broad. His face is richly laid over with the patina of wind and sun and sea, a deep permanent bronze, and his eyes are wrinkled at the corners, narrowed from long practice at staring over vast reaches of sun-reflecting water.

We call him—not in earshot—"Dad." I'm not sure why. Certainly there's nothing paternal about him, unless it's because he fathered us newchums through the novel gunnery and seamanship requirements of this powered new ship.

Power of command? He was born with it. Here's the scene, and it happens every morning at eight. All watches fallen-in near the tubes, ready for the day's work. Dad comes walking from his sea-cabin forrard to the bathroom down aft near the wardroom. Dressed? Yes—in a great toga of a white bath-robe, sandals on his feet, towel over one shoulder, toothbrush in his hand, soap in the other. The first-lieutenant roars and all hands snap to attention—and not a single smile as the Roman senator strides past, nodding his bare head in acknowledgment of our salute. That's power of command. Not from three rings on his shoulder: from the force of his personality, and the respect he's engendered.

I've never heard him raise his voice. Not even on that classic occasion when the cable officer on the foc's'le was trying to warp the bow in, and the young sub-lieutenant three hundred feet away on the quarter-deck was zealously engaged in getting his end in first—with a large fender raft against the ship's side amidships.

The Owner leaned over the port windbreak and called in a penetrating but controlled voice aft:

"All right, Sub.—don't *bend* the bastard!"

He has fifty thousand horsepower at his command, and he handles

her three-hundred-and-fifty-feet length like a motor-boat, with that casual efficiency peculiar to destroyer drivers.

Coming along side in any craft other than a destroyer is a pretty prosaic affair, but here one can really appreciate the touch of a master hand. He stands on his open bridge, which is about the size of a kitchen in a Bondi flat, and crammed with navigational, gunnery and torpedo-control instruments, and lots more besides, dressed in an old one-piece submarine suit from Gieve's in Bond-street, on his shoulders three salt-green gold rings. His cap is worn at that certain angle which only pukka naval officers seem able to effect.

He brings her in at ten knots, the pier close by slipping by at seemingly suicidal speed—there's nearly two thousand tons of steel to stop. Then, precisely at the right moment, he leans to the voice-pipe,

"Port twenty. Half astern both."

The slim bow swings off, the stern comes in, she shudders under the pressure of her screws dragging her to a stop, then out go the lines. He turns to the first-lieutenant:

"She's yours, Number One."

Then, with wires singing everywhere, he's walking aft.

The Old man is a disciplinarian, but combines with his tenets of regulations a happy understanding of the shortcomings attendant on crowding two hundred men in a ship three hundred and fifty feet long—luckily for us.

The coxswain's favourite warning for requests for leave out of watch:

"You're biting the apple deep, me lad."

CHAPTER TWO
WE JOIN THE FLEET

IF YOU LIVE by the sea and you've seen at some time or other a ship of the Navy slipping down-harbour, a picture of seamanlike neatness from the anchor a'cockbill on her flare to the snowy white ensign on her gaff.

But this appearance—one which invariably comes under the magnified scrutiny of the Senior Naval Officer—is obtained only through assiduous adherence to the first-lieutenant's Standing Orders.

I've often thought of the strife in the hearts of men when I watch a destroyer put to sea. All you can see on the upper-deck are the lines of seamen smartly fallen-in—and cursing as the hot sun trickles the sweat down their backs. All the rest of the ship's company are shut inside the messdecks. Behind tightly-clipped watertight doors, at the barrier, so to speak, are cursing stokers unable to get aft to the engine-room, in their hands the fannies of water they've dashed forrard to get, and standing an excellent chance of copping a blast from the stoker P.O. for taking so bloody long about it.

But the Christians in the arena had it soft compared to the bloke who'd dare to walk along that upper-deck out of the dress of the day once she'd slipped her berth.

If there is a Fleet of any size in harbour, as you pass down the lines you pipe each ship. That means hands are called to attention and stood at ease as many as twenty times before the dirty little boom-vessel pipes you through—we're always senior to her...

So one sunny morning *H.M.A.S. Nepal* eased her long length through the anti-submarine boom, zig-zagged down the channel, turned, flicked a swirl of white foam from her counter and headed straight out into the Indian Ocean blue.

Half-an-hour later all you could see of Australia was a low blue back past our wake; it mingled with the clouds till you weren't sure whether it was there or not; then the clouds changed, and you saw quite plainly the unbroken rim of the far horizon.

For twelve drill-filled days she pursued a course straight across the ocean. The captain had told us we should raise the Seychelles Islands at 1600. At 1605 on the twelfth day the rim of blue ahead

was broken by a jagged bump, then another, and an hour later we were snuggled in alongside the oiler waiting to receive us. The navigation, the organisation, were faultless. But then the Old Man had specialised—in navigation. It was in the Seychelles, sometimes called The Pearls of the Indian Ocean, that those amorous propensities which were later to gain for our credit the opprobrious appellation of "glamour ship" were first manifested.

Most of the girls on this island paradise are French—and most of them were thirsty for a change of face, and method, and the excitement which the unexpected arrival of these burned Bondi Blokes seemed to promise. That night a dance was held.

Thinking that Australian mothers and wives and sweethearts would be relieved to know how well their lads were looked after overseas, I went, for the purpose of interviewing for a Sydney women's magazine, Madame la Presidente.

Madame was in charge of the welcome proceedings—why is it that destroyermen are feted everywhere overseas, while the cruiser unfortunates are left to fend for themselves? Perhaps a sympathy with our life aboard that two thousand tons of fighting efficiency we call home? Or maybe the talent ashore dreams that destroyermen are as dashing and virile as their vehicle?

Whatever the reason, we never cavil. As Madame came towards the crowd, of which I have been put in charge, I though that this promised to be a very good night indeed. Madame was a widow—and very lovely.

Her hair was blackly lustrous, her evening gown was off-shoulder and startingly white against the tanned gold of her skin, and it subscribed fully to that decolette effort for which French ladies are nicely known. Her lips made a scarlet wound in the oval of her face. She saw the notebook in my hand. Her voice was vivacious:

"Ah—the *correspondent!* Tonight I will give you something to write about...!"

A very good night indeed... I heard an appreciative murmur from the forcedly celibate mob behind me. Then, from a room near the end, by the orchestra dais, which I found later led to a wide, tree-shaded verandah, a bevy of manna for sea-struck sailors flowed into the room. Some looked demure, most wore their eyes and their lips

opened. It seemed everything was to be provided. The mob surged forward.

It may, of course, have been the moon. Or perhaps the slumbrous, scented tropic night. Or maybe destroyer sailors need no meteorological aid. But as I passed from the light of the ballroom to the velvet shadows not long afterwards I saw figures, everywhere, very close together in a friendly and purposeful national alliance. The fleet was in.

One heard: "Come early, please. Edouard will be at the hospital till five, and we will take the car and go into the mountains." *That* had taken a fraction over fifteen minutes!

Anxiously, two couples further down:

"Beely, please, you must not drink any more of that wine—it is made in the native village. It will keel you! And you weel be no good for..."

"This? Gorgeous, if I could set up a stand of this jungle-juice in Wynyard right now, you could have my deferrers!"

Beely was the only—official—casualty of the action. The captain, happening to notice the inanimate mass in the bottom of the liberty boat as she came along-side, required his presence on board for the next fourteen days.

Madame requested that I should have the captain allow us ashore early the next day, and to extend the leave till midnight, when she would show us what colonial French hospitality really could provide!

I assured her grandly that I should have no trouble with the Old Man; probably bring him along too—one's capacity for Sydney beer being a rather unreliable measure when jungle-juice was the order of the night. We left the good people at ten that night, revictualled and reconditioned after our twelve days at sea, and ready, nay eager, for the morrow. Next day we sailed.

Heading still straight across we passed to the north of Madagascar. Here the ship was covering old ground. She'd been screening close inshore with the British Battle Fleet when a cruiser's broadsides whistled overhead to silence a refractory battery on the shore, and had stood by the commandos when they went in at Tamatave Bay.

A few days before we were due to sail into our East African base, Dad informed us pleasantly that as the ship's paintwork had deteriorated somewhat on the trip across, despite flat, calm seas, we could look forward to plenty of dirty work, all the odd, uninteresting jobs, on

arrival, for Commodore (Destroyers) had a salutary knack of apportioning them to the chattiest of the flock under his command.

We had two days; and at the end of that time there sailed into Mombasa harbour a sleek thing of shining beauty. There came the expected flicker of light from a hut beneath the White Ensign ashore. Suddenly dubious, we waited. The message ran: "Your ship looks quite neat—if there had been one man fallen-in on the upper deck."

In our zeal to make this first impression stick we had turned out boats and booms instead. But another destroyer went to sea that afternoon.

Followed the usual run of jobs for a long-range destroyer—screening the Battle Fleet (small as yet, though with developments elsewhere, promising to be shortly enlarged) on exercises, escorting the more valuable convoys, with now and then a return trip to Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Once, in the Seychelles, *Nemesis* came stalking—or boating. Or so a certain petty-officer who shall be nameless except for the initials "N.D." thought.

We were waiting to go ashore, all lined up near the tubes, when this boat hove in sight. Curious, we saw that it held a native coxswain, and a middle-aged man dressed in white duck in the stern-sheets. What intrigued us was that we knew he was Edouard K—a doctor ashore; what fascinated us with an unholy delight was that he had laid across his knees a double-barrelled shotgun.

This looked like first-class entertainment. Edouard had changed from cuckold to killer. N.D. changed from an idle spectator to a white-clad streak bolting for the safety of A-magazine.

The boat came alongside and its armed occupant came up the gangway. The officer of the day met him firmly—not, it must be recorded, through any sympathy with the bolted one's amorous doings ashore, but because a shotgun delivers via its mouth many steel messengers, and the captain might not take too kindly to having half-a-dozen of his men incapacitated through the reprehensible conduct of one. But the officer of the day's stern approach was met with a friendly smile. Even then, he was not wholly disarmed of his caution. These Frenchmen... especially middle-aged Frenchmen with beautiful young wives... But the visitor merely said:

"Good afternoon. I am Doctor K—from the hospital ashore. I was passing on my way to a little duck-shooting on the island yonder and I wondered if your sick-bay had all the supplies it requires?"

The officer of the day breathed in deeply, and then out again. He smiled. We felt thwarted.

N.D. did not go ashore that afternoon. He thought of it, and had gone so far as to arrange a signalling system between the duty signalman on board and the petty-officer of the patrol ashore, but that small boat could return from, or deviate from, that duck-haunted island without the signalman seeing it, and our philanderer was not sure, not at all, whether the Frenchman's appearance on board was not an elaborate decoy to get him ashore. He had a craven lack of relish for being set up as a duck himself...

So the rest of us—N.D. being the only man of loose morals amongst us—dipped out on our entertainment, and instead mildly entertained ourselves with what a sailor usually does ashore in islands like the Seychelles; buying tortoise shell ware, rare books, visiting the local opera house, things like that.

I had taken a good deal of deliberation, as is usual in a step of such magnitude, much heated argument as to the dubious advantages to be gained, and the obvious drawbacks should we ever be lucky enough to make Durban again, before the four of us put in to see the first-lieutenant. There were the torpedo gunner's mate, the chief quartermaster, the petty-officer of the gunner's party, and myself.

The first-lieutenant rapped with his pencil on the request-book before him. "Now look here, you men. You must understand that it's regulations to keep your beards on for at least three months."

He looked at the T.G.M. Dave had just got really started with a fine black growth when the ship had gone to Durban, and that city being what it is, a sailor's paradise, had put a certain passionate pansy before King's Regulations and shaved it off.

"Even if we return to Sydney"—we smiled—"you must still keep it on." I started for the door, but was stopped by a quick hand, and a voice murmuring savagely:

"No you don't! All in, remember?"

The first-lieutenant, a bishop's son, grinned spitefully, and said:

"Permission granted."

The second day we looked merely unshaven; the third, looked, and felt, grubby; the fourth, like beach-combers; the fifth, like nothing on this earth.

At this stage of growth the bristles are about an eighth of an inch long and, particularly under the chin, itch like all hell, I longed for a sharp, clean sweep of my razor, but someone had remarked that I should look noble with a neatly-trimmed Spanish type. Though the someone was the gun-trainer, who might have had an eye to the future and a spot of leave out of watch, I secretly agreed with him, and put up with the itch.

Unfortunately, not all my shipmates were gifted with such keenness of perception, and one heard sotto voice remarks as one went by, chief among which being something about the "wandering Jew."

Fourteen days went by, before, one fine morning, I applied my hair brush. Tenderly, reverently, hopefully, I applied it. To my dismay it slipped easily over the hair on my upper-face. Then, as it approached the more hirsute mass on the chin, I felt the bristles grip. I was a man!

Followed such tender care as passeth belief. All day there was at least one of us before the mirror, stroking, brushing, studying carefully the growth. I watched my friends' production carefully, prepared in the intolerable event of being outgrown to apply the Samson and Delilah act. But we remained much the same, and in three weeks we had the first trim.

Then, of course, came the day when we put into Durban for a minor refit. On the way up harbour we passed an Australian destroyer on her way out. That night the ladies of the city invited the ship's company to a dance at an hotel.

In the full pridefullness of conscious manhood—we'd found at Basra up the Persian Gulf the houris of Omar delighted that the infidels showed some sign of following in the ways of the Prophet, and acted accordingly—we entered the gaily decorated ballroom and surveyed the talent.

I spotted a charming curly-headed drop of promise down near the orchestra, and crossed for the first dance. She seemed to shudder as I bent. "I'm sorry. I have this one."

There were plenty of girls. Why bother? But when I'd been refused four times I began to get a bit hot under the beard. They couldn't all have been engaged, for there were no men not dancing. None, that is, without beards. Now, I'm really not such a hideous looking fellow, and really I dance quite well. This was no good. I approached the first curly-headed lass.

"Look here. You're not dancing. What is there about me that repels you?"

She looked at my lower face.

"What, this?" stroking it with practised hand. "Please remember I'm only asking you to *dance."*

Then she spoke. Her voice would've made ice-cream shiver.

"How dare you even come near to me, let alone speak to me! Don't come closer! Keep away, now! I know what you are. It's a wonder they allow you ashore at all!"

"For the love of Mike, why not!"

"You know well enough why not! Don't try that innocent act with me, sailor! All right, if you want it spelled out for you—I know that all you men with beards have contracted a—a—social disease."

"Good God! who told you that?"

"You can't fool us. The Australian sailors from the other ship told us to beware of all men with beards, and told us why. Now you can get out of here."

We got out of there, the quartet of pariahs. Some day we'll get into a port ahead of our racial defamers.

With the commander-in-chief's promise of forth-coming operations against an enemy with whom we'd been up to now mainly on the defensive, an exercise was carried out whose smoothness and efficacy of execution was imperative if we were to reach his bases: oiling from a battleship at sea.

It was rough, with big furrows of toppling green rolling down on us as we drew slowly alongside the flagship.

Our bow passed her stern, eased cautiously ahead till we were in position to pass the hoses. The two ships, battleship and destroyer, thrashed along side by side, forty feet apart, the slightest mistake on either captain's part, with those waves lifting us thirty feet each time,

promising to send us right inboard.

On the foc's'le the watch was mustered, the chief bosun's mate standing-by with a heaving line. In accordance with the British Navy's tradition of doing a thing always the difficult way, in case you had to, we were assuming the time was night.

Therefore the flash from a line-throwing gun could disclose our position to a waiting enemy, and human muscle and skill had to take the place of a gun. If the line were badly thrown, if it fell short and had to be recoiled and heaved again, some minutes would be wasted, and with many ships to refuel, a similar mistake at each ship would add up to many minutes lost, and in so many minutes lost...

The chief bosun's mate was a small man, but chunky. He leaned back, right back until his right, throwing, hand almost touched the deck. For a second he crouched back there, and all the experience of a lifetime at sea was in his judging eye and the strength of his throw.

Then he threw. The weight arced across the wave-tossed gap, trailing the line behind it, and the Buffer gave a grunt of satisfaction as the line caught and held. Someone on the battleship's foc's'le grabbed it. Megaphones shouted orders over the wind, and the heaving line ran steadily out to the big ship. There was a two-inch messenger rope attached to the heaving line, and by the time the two-inch line was hauled aboard us, the battleship was ready to follow it with a three-and-a-half-inch line, and that was strong enough to have entrusted to it the immense manial spring towline on which the rest of the operation depended.

From other parts of the ship other heaving lines had been thrown, other messengers passed, now that the two ships were riding more or less comfortably harnessed together with the heavy manila.

The cable officer stood by the capstan forrard as the ships surged and plunged over the waves. It was up to him to ease the strain or take it up, keeping the ships at a constant distance apart without allowing the towline to part under the continual jerks to which the waves subjected it.

On the bridges the captains were fighting with screw and rudder against the other tendency of the ships to crash together.

Further aft, abreast the bridge, the first-lieutenant and petty-officer of the watch were supervising the swinging out of the boom and cradle which was to take the oil hose from the battleship.

A loftier wave than usual squeezed into the narrow passage between the ships, came slapping over the deck and soused the petty-officer thoroughly. He said again the expletive he's used when the swinging boom had caught his head—his vocabulary in these uncomfortable circumstances was not over extensive...

Two stokers struggled with the heavy hose connection when it was hauled inboard, there was a moment of feverish and cursing activity in which spanners and feelings played the most part, then backs were straightened and an oily hand waved to an engineer across the way. He in turn waved to a rating on the engine-room telephone. The hose pulsed, and the destroyer drank thirstly.

The ship's black-room gang looked on, wet and tired, but pleased. The ship's first-lieutenant looked on, wet, untired, and unpleased. He normally worried as little over fuel as the black-gangers concerned themselves with the state of the ammunition supply. But now that viscous black liquid which some called "gold" was right up out of its usual element—ready to drip through the connection on to his precious deck, be washed aft by the lathering water, and be slopped up over the paintwork in a greasy patina of filth.

But the stokers, who valued their leave just as highly as the upper-deck swabs, had secured the connection tightly. Number One's fears and mental vows of reprisals were unjustified. The oiling progressed.

Oil wasn't all we wanted, however. On those other messengers rigged across, bundles began to dip and sway over the water—bags of freshly-baked bread, of old magazines and papers (for those poor bastards on the "boats"), a can of ice-cream for our tiny canteen; and, lastly, a small, official-looking canvas bag which the first-lieutenant grabbed as soon as it came inboard and hurried with it up to the bridge.

That bag contained important documents and orders for one of the aircraft carriers to starb'd, and we were to be the postman.

I slipped up on to the bridge to try to catch a glimpse of the admiral. He was a full admiral, and you don't see those every day—in Whitehall, perhaps, but not at sea.

Above me, tier upon tier of bridges, conning-towers and control-tops, towered the superstructure of the battleship. Above all, on a slender t'gallant mast, stood out in the wind the white and red-crossed flag of the admiral. Everything about her was massive; from her

jutting bow and bulging sides to the great guns, thicker than a man's waist, stretching from her turrets.

There was one man standing with a group of officers on one of the lower bridges, but a little apart. He was a man of middle height, chunkily built, dressed in khaki, and the heavy gold on his cap glittered in the sunlight. It was the commander-in-chief.

He was looking down at us, now and then pointing out some feature to his staff. Once, he had driven a destroyer himself, in another war. This was the man on whom Mountbatten depended for the prosecution of his plans in the Indian Ocean.

We'd worked mighty hard during our boiler clean in harbour just before, and the ship was the cleanest I'd seen her. We found later what he had been saying to his staff.

On the notice-board of a Dutch destroyer we secured alongside on return to base, I saw a signal from the commander-in-chief to the effect that the Dutchman, who apparently was a bit below standard, should with benefit model herself on *Nepal's* appearance. It was worth the scrubbing and polishing to read that. And it must have made Dad's day.

But though she dwarfed us in size, hauling us along like a motor-boat, it was pretty to watch the difference in motion. The battleship, like some great juggernaut, ploughed solidly on through the waves, her bows throwing out a colossal wave each time one hit her.

We, on the other hand, light and responsive, rose and swooped like a swallow in an effortless grace of motion. And, big as she was, it was subtly satisfying to know that those ten tubes now pointing fair at her great guts could rip her wide open to the sea...

We were ready to slip now. This was the part I liked to watch. The captain leaned over the bridge and gestured to the first-lieutenant; the chief bosun's mate bent over the guard-rail, a hammer swung, the towing ship dropped open and free, then a splash as the towing hawser fell into the sea. Quickly it was hauled in on the battleship.

The captain, watching, judging, saw the big wave come rolling down between the two ships. Choosing his moment with practised skill, he ordered:

"Starb'd twenty."

Just as the bow swung off under the rudder's pressure the wave caught her. With incomparable grace, decks heeled over till the sea

raced past level with the lee gunnel, she wheeled away, her stern whipping round within a few feet of the battleship's side, in every line a careless insouciance. In two minutes the battler was a mile astern.

CHAPTER THREE
SOME ASPECTS

THE SURGEON-LIEUTENANT pulled himself along the bucking upper-deck, one hand gripping the lifeline running the length of the slippery waist, the other fending himself off the motor-boat, then whaler, as the ship tossed and screwed in a full gale. He staggered through the lane which instantly opened in the group of men outside the sickbay, and stepped inside. The figure on the bed, eyes closed and jaws clamped tight, rolled from side to side. The sick-berth petty-officer dropped the bone forceps he was holding on the sterile tray and grabbed him quickly. A stifled groan squeezed through the white lips.

The surgeon hesitated a second. It was quite impossible to stand without support. Every now and then a wall of green water washed over the clamped portholes. Then he looked again at the patient's leg. He nodded to his assistant.

"We will operate," he said.

The figure on the bed was the captain's cook, and the projected operation was the setting of a compound fracture of his right leg. Through the skin of his shin the tibia point thrust in a sharp, splintered point.

The ship was running at twenty knots before a big sea. It was on the starb'd quarter, and she rode like a surfboard, each wave threatening to swing the stern round and broach her to, broadside on to the huge rollers. Only the most concentrated care on the helmsman's part prevented this.

The captain's cook was down aft behind the depth charge throwers when it happened, waiting for a chance to dash forrard between rolls.

The ship shuddered as the wave hit, then over she went, further, until the lee waist was under a foaming maelstrom of white. He hung on desperately. Slowly she came upright, but before she could labour back to an even keel the next one caught her down.

The wave crashed down on the upper-deck in a thump and smother of white foam and green water. The cook was washed clean over the guard-rails. When the captain, manoeuvring with everything he knew, had brought the ship up to the swimmer so that he had only

to reach his hand out and grab the scrambling net lowered over the side, we couldn't understand why he didn't get his legs in the mesh and climb up.

But we realised when he was hauled inboard on the end of a line.

The first-aid party was in the sickbay now, a stoker petty-officer who'd just come up from the boiler room, three officers' stewards, and a petty-officer cook. Their faces were tight and white beneath their tan as they involuntarily glanced at the leg.

These men constituted the surgeon's theatre nurse, his trained nurses, and assistant-surgeon—had he been in any sort of a hospital ashore. Under his sterile cape the boiler-room man still wore his greasy overalls; the petty-officer cook followed the doctor at the tiny sink, washing the flour from his hands.

While a steward washed the sea lice from the patient's body—he was covered in a thick scale of them—the surgeon's quick hands had a sterile dressing over the wound. Then the splints were applied.

The sick-berth petty-officer was busy with a table which on closer inspection could be recognised as that one before which the Old Man saw defaulters. On it he placed a compact little Oxford vaporiser, the last word in extempore anaesthetist's equipment. It had a small plate attached, with the legend:

"Presented by Lord Nuffield."

I wondered what other philanthropy of the motor-magnate was more appreciated...

The patient's squinted eyes followed the preparations. Then he pursed his lips. I lit the cigarette and held it there; he drew deeply. The sick-berth petty-officer took up the bone forceps, then quickly laid them below the level of the patient's eyes. But he'd seen—and guessed. Then he grinned. Guts.

Soon all was ready. The surgeon eased himself along the swaying bulkhead and placed the ether mask on the patient's face. In a little while the clenched fingers opened, slowly, just a little. The surgeon beckoned his anaesthetist, the stoker petty-officer, to the machine. His voice came muffled through his mask.

"Keep the lever between ten and twelve."

The stoker nodded. The sick-berth petty-officer handed a case of instruments to each of the stewards—they would have been tossed

off a table. Scalpels, forceps, muscle retractors gleamed silver in the glare of the yard-arm group slung above. That cluster of lights was normally fitted above the boat-boom while the ship was in harbour.

The surgeon moved to the right side of the bed.

Like a breath of wind it went through the mess-decks and up to the bridge. The bosun's mate saluted the captain and reported:

"He's under, sir."

The captain leaned over and spoke into a voice-pipe:

"Decrease to Nine O revolutions," then, to the chief petty-officer waiting beside him: "Take the wheel, cox'n."

The waves came rolling up from astern like moving mountains of green, the wind's voice in the rigging was a strained sort of scream, but nothing, not the wild sea nor the wind, could alter the steadiness of the coxswain's big hands on the wheel. The ship, the men, were with the captain's cook.

Down in the sick-bay the surgeon worked laboriously, every minute or so bracing himself against the bulkhead as she rolled.

The wound was shaved, then cleaned with ether soap. The scalpel moved slowly, surely, and the broken shin came away. But the wound was too small to allow of satisfactory examination.

From one inch it grew to two, three. The surgeon looked into his assistant's eyes and pointed to the dead muscle flanking the bone. The S.B.A. looked, mentally noted, and nodded. Noted, too, the uncommon strength of a wave and the frailty of human tissue when flung against a taut guard-rail on its way over.

The surgeon, one hand braced against the patient's thigh, took up a pair of long forceps and withdrew carefully the slivers of splintered bone. When the useless muscle had been dissected they were ready to set the bone.

The stewards laid their trays on the deck and moved up to the patient's shoulders. The sick-berth P.O. took a firm grip on the foot. Beside the vaporiser the stoker kept the fluctuating level "between ten and twelve."

The surgeon stood abreast the break and nodded. Gently at first, they pulled. The two ends of creamy bone drew apart as they stretched further, until the lower spear-shaped point lay an inch below the V of the upper part. Gloved hands guiding, at a spoken word they eased carefully back; the two bones, point and V, came together perfectly.

It didn't take long for the wound to be dusted with sulphanilamide powder, filled with vaseline gauze, and the plaster-of-paris splint applied. Then the gear was stowed away.

The patient was covered up warmly, still unconscious. The stoker petty-officer climbed down to A-boiler-room. The chief cook finished off his batch of bread in the galley. And in a little notebook the surgeon wrote:

"The anterior tibial artery is not always completely inaccessible."

It wasn't until Jap torpedo-bombers attacked us one night, off Sabang in Sumatra, and I spent a most appreciative quarter of an hour at B-gun watching the firework display from the battlers, that I fully realised what it must mean to those unseen heroes down below when the guns join action up top.

Theirs is nothing of the heart-jumping thrill of sustained and accurate gunfire, nor the exultation which leaps in your throat when you see a yellow-balled aircraft plummeting seaward, spuming smoke and red flame.

Shut up in a windowless space crammed tight with pounding machinery and roaring furnaces, pipes carrying superheated steam a few inches above their heads, between them and the sea outside less than an inch of the ship's skin, they listen, and wait.

I went down below in the after engineroom, five minutes before the ship carried out a depth-charge attack on a suspected submarine, screening the Battle Fleet off Ceylon—and had to stay there.

The engine-room artificer was showing me some entries in the log, when from the alarm bell on the bulkhead above our heads an abrupt, nerve-shocking clamour shrilled out. Action!

Both E.R.A's dropped everything and leaped for the big throttle wheels, one on each engine, standing ready with their eyes magnetised to the indicators before them. I could imagine the captain on the bridge leaning sideways to the voice-pipe.

The pointers on the indicators moved suddenly. They steadied again, pointing with urgent and peremptory fingers to "FULL AHEAD." Before the clang of the bells had died the throttles were turning, spinning till they jammed wide open against the stops.

From the encased turbines on either side came a fierce and rising

whine. The propeller shafts whirled till they were single flashes of spinning silver. And the quiet engine-room hum was changed into a mighty, powered scream.

The atmosphere was already murky with hot oil fumes, my ears deafened with the scream of tremendous power unleashed. Just through the watertight bulkhead were the boilers supplying the steam to drive those thrashing screws. It was almost unbearably hot in there, yet the stokers must keep their overalls up, for a stumble against hot steel or the bursting of a high-pressure steam main would mean flesh peeling off like a boiled beetroot.

As soon as the action alarm had sounded the stoker petty-officer in charge of the boiler-room had jumped to the oil fuel and increased the pressure to maximum. The pump forces the thick fluid through a nozzle in the furnace in a fine spray, which burns with a roaring, white-hot flame.

The ship had raised full speed, the hull throbbing with restless power. As the engines took more and more steam with the opening of the throttles so the petty-officer and his men watched carefully their pressure dials and water-gauges. A slight slackening of vigilance with that fire of seven hundred degrees F and the safety valve blows up the funnel with a roar and loss of steam.

The atmosphere was tense. We were all waiting for it to come. Soon it did. A voice through the pipe, thinned with the distance from the bridge:

"Stand-by for depth-charge attack."

A minute, two, then a hammering thud belted against her thin sides. The boiler face seemed to leap out at them; loose deck plates jumped a good four inches from the deck. Again and again the ship shook as the patterns exploded behind her, the hull receiving the full blast transmitted through the water.

I grabbed the nearest stanchion as she heeled over. We knew what was happening up top. She was turning for another run. Back over her course, and the violent operation was repeated.

Five minutes more and it was all over.

"Decrease to One double O revolutions."

A bit more than ten knots—roughly nine-revs to a knot. Throttles were eased back, two sprayers shut off, steam pressure decreased to normal. At her steady reduced speed the ship steamed on.

I climbed up through the engine-room hatch, and ah! the blessed sunlight and air!

Looking astern, I saw a large ulcerous patch of creamy white on the blue face of the sea. Next time I would be damn certain I *saw* what caused it!

Whenever two or more are gathered together, there you will always find a gentleman exhibiting qualities which distinguish him from his fellows.

The gunner on the bridge, for instance, who slipped the awning jackstay block on the Old Man's bare head, and then had the incredible temerity to grin. The ordinary-seaman bosun's mate who "sugared" the first-lieutenant's morning cup of cocoa with soda. And of course, the buffer, or chief bosun's mate, one Toddy Vale, the man responsible for our distinction in being the only destroyer in the Fleet served with ice-cream.

Toddy was short, his head as bald as his thumb, and one of the few old sea-dogs who really rolled as he ambulated. He was also, naturally, a first-class seaman; he was a destroyerman, and he was responsible to the first-lieutenant for the seamanship efficiency on the entire ship.

One would like to record that this yeoman service of ice-cream provision was performed altruistically in the interests of the ship's company, but one finds a regrettable relation between the advent of the ice-cream firm and the reported buzz of a spell in Durban.

Toddy had been to the Bombay races, hence the happiness in the brown faces of Motee and Co., book-makers, and finances had somehow to be resuscitated before going south.

Luckily we were in dockyard hands at the time, and Indian yards being no different from Australian ones—like race-tracks—a packet of cigarettes here, a tin of tobacco there, worked wonders.

Each forenoon would see the buffer's bald-headed figure rolling out of the tinsmith's shop with a Hindu workman, hands making intricate signs of measurements. Slowly the urn took shape, then the gadget inside which churns up the mixture.

The outside barrel, an old vinegar cask, was already ready, though the fact that someone had hung a *Ditch All Offal* here sign on it

while drying on the upper-deck had delayed proceedings somewhat. Many are the hands to whom credit is due. The chief stoker, with all his vast experience of water-tube boilers, super-heated turbines and reciprocating engines, was called in to alter the shape of a hole from round to square—most important, this, as it made all the difference between the churn revolving round the ice-cream and the ice-cream revolving round... anyway. Toddy explained it, and I know it was most important.

And a host of others, from the canteen manager to the able-seaman butcher who was determined, at first, to stick to his Standing Orders to open the refrigerator only once a day. A serious obstacle, one requiring the exercise of remarkable tact (he had the Jimmy firmly on his side) and one overcome only by a promise of four absolute certainties for next Saturday.

At last all was ready. Owing to the fact that we were already halfway to Durban, the first mixture of eggs, tinned milk (sorry, I'm sworn to secrecy here) was mixed in a hurry and fell a bit short of expectations.

For half an hour a man under punishment had sat in the bosun's store churning away industriously, thankful he wasn't up the mast with a bucket and scrubber, and at the end of the prescribed time the bag-covered lid was removed with a solemnity due the occasion.

The buffer dipped his new silver ladle into the depths. It came out dripping a soft, oozy, viscous mass which looked for all the world like used turret oil.

But was he deterred? An alteration here, a slight adjustment there, and the machine was once more ready. This time a somewhat closer adherence to the recipe obtained, and one hot night a short, bandy-legged figure dripping with perspiration marched triumphantly into the mess, in his hands a plate of cold, firm, snowy-white ice-cream!

It was really delicious, and in four minutes the ordinary-seamen, pushing and fighting, had cleaned out the can at four annas a time. The challenge to Peters was firmly launched.

Among the more established institutions in the ship, one lists the "jewing firm."

Ours is run by the coxswain, who on his electric sewing machine

(power free) will run you up anything from an overall suit to a blimp-bag. These last are comparatively recent innovations, and bid fair to become a most valuable adjunct to the well-dressed matloe at sea.

Made of blue jean with a long shoulder strap, the blimp-bag is fitted to carry a rolled-up life jacket, red light, tobacco and matches, malted milk tablets, money socked away in a rubber sheath, and anything else in the nature of life-saving innovations a sailor can devise.

It can be worn over the left shoulder, beach style, across the chest on the back, or, as is usually the case when manning guns in a hurry, with a round turn around the neck!

For a slight remuneration one's initials will be stitched on the flap in red or green silk, depending on what watch one is in, port or starb'd...

Yesterday there appeared on the notice-board a declaration affecting very closely the efficient running of the ship.

It was typewritten—in parts—with capitals appearing, with lofty disregard for the accepted statutes of typing, in mid-sentence, and here and there a pencilled line inserted. Across the top in large block letters ran the arresting caption:

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Following was a tabulated list, which ran something like this:

Hammocks	washed	1/6
Bedcovers	„	l/-
Dickey Fronts	„	3d.
Socks (each)	„	2d.

(Space forbids the complete list. One must consider also the free advertisement). This manifesto was signed by "Tug" Wilson, "Lofty" Dobell, "Bungy" Williams, and "Pinnochio" Riolo, of the "Lily White Dhobying Firm, address No. 7 Mess, Torpedomen's Mess Deck." On the bottom of the page, written in as an after-thought, was the injunction:

"Throw your dirties in the bucket at the foot of the ladder."

Thus are captains of industry born. The buffer and I are firm friends now, for apart from the sterling qualities I have just discovered

in the little bloke's makeup (being a captain of one of his tops, his product is free), he has as good as promised me a position, possibly an executive one, in his ice-cream firm outside after the war.

Guaranteed recipe for cockroach killer: Contents of parcel posted Christmas '43, received June '44. Mix spilt plum jam with biscuit pulp; add two sticks powdered cordite; place in kit locker.

You've all heard, of course, of that wonderful invention, asdic gear. This is used for detecting submarines below the surface. When in dry dock the apparatus is removed from the bottom of the ship for inspection purposes, its removal leaving a large hole through which ingress and egress from the ship can be effected, though of course it was never used for this purpose—until one night I was duty petty-officer.

Doing rounds about nine o'clock at night, I heard a scuffling and a whispering under the ship. Making my way quickly and quietly down, debating whether or not to call the anti-sabotage guard, I found two shapes bending under the hull, busily engaged in something inside the asdic hole. In my best sabotage-checking voice, I thundered:

"What the hell's going on here?"

I heard a stifled, "Oh, hell!" a clinking noise that sounded suspiciously like bottles being dropped, then two young asdic operators pulled their heads from inside the hole, unbent, and confronted me.

"Please, chief," piped a voice, "I was showing my cobber here how the oscillator fits inside..."

It trailed off, the owner no doubt realising the incongruity of instruction in anti-submarine warfare in the bottom of a smelly dry dock at nine o'clock at night.

I poked my head up to where "the oscillator fitted," and discovered that these two enterprising youngsters were using the asdic hole, an invention devised by Britain's finest scientific brains to ensure that the life-blood of a nation flowed free, for the purpose of smuggling beer into the ship!

The idea was so original I hadn't the heart to charge them. Your sailor son or sweetheart or husband may be lacking those feminine qualities necessary to carry out a successful shopping operation in,

say, King's Cross or Bourke Street, but you should see him ashore among the needle-witted bazaar merchants from whom he buys those Eastern curios!

Step ashore with Nutty Ferris and me on a shopping run. We're in Bombay harbour, and Nutty is desirous of buying something to raise a sparkle in his girl's eyes back in Drummoyne.

As we step from the boat we're immediately besieged by a clamouring mob of guides, gharry boys, coconut sellers, mobile finger-cleaning merchants, and even one bloke with a tray full of betel-nuts.

The bazaar, street after street of narrow open-fronted shops, is a seething mass of unwashed humanity. The Indian sun beats down fiercely and successfully draws up into the malodorous air the emanations from the bodies to whom bath water is a rare phenomenon.

Above the cries and bargaining there is the experimental ringing of pots and pans, the chinking of the money changers, the tempting offers of cheapness at the old clothes stalls, the challenges of the dicers on their straw mats, the vaunting of new cottons and embroidered silks, of excellent brassware, kettles and vases and wine cups.

There is the choking of the narrow inlets with oxen and carts, together with much uncomplimentary remonstrance in terms and gestures that would make an old Australian bullock-driver feel at home.

Nutty's Pamela had once expressed a love of brassware, so we head for the curio shop of one Ben Sulmein Salmadar, an Arab from Mecca. We halt outside, and at once a suave oily voice bids the sahibs enter—no buy, of course, just look. Anything the sahibs desire: cigarette trays, egg cups, suitcases, or perhaps a rug from the Vale of Kashmir.

Very cheap, sahib, very cheap, an honest shop, this one, sahibs. In accordance with our experience of other Ben Salmadars, we feign disinterest, and cast but a cursory glance at the really gorgeous rug he is holding.

The voice becomes more pressing as we go to walk on. Protesting that we really don't want to buy anything, Nutty and I enter the musty shop.

The process starts. The main thing, of course, is to pick up and display interest in everything but the article you want. Then, when the shopkeeper quotes a price, cut it immediately in half and start beating him down from there.

Nutty picked on a shining brass rose bowl, exquisitely engraved and carved by hand into an intricate pattern of flowers. Ben wanted 24 rupees—£4/8/-Australian—for it. Nutty looks at him. He laughs.

"I only want the bowl, not the flaming shop."

He turns to a silk shawl embroidered with a silver Taj Mahal. After half an hour of fingering pretty well everything in the shop. Nutty looks at me, and we both turn for the door. Ben is beside us in one swift leap.

"But, sahibs, you have bought nothing! And I have attended to you myself..." Tone hurt, conveying the magnitude of the honour conferred.

Nutty grins. "After all, old, boy, we didn't want to buy anything." He leans casually against the counter. "Matter of fact, I rather like that rose bowl." Now the bowl's out of the bag. Now real action is joined. "But, apart from the fact that I'm Petty-officer Ferris and not the Maharajah of Nizam, the thing's not worth more than 12 rupees."

By this time Ben has the object d'art in question out before us, and they're into it. Follows ten minutes of masterly diplomacy. If Nutty could only argue like that, one thinks a trifle evilly, at home in Drummoyne, he wouldn't need to buy his pleasures with rose bowls...

The Arab is becoming a bit desperate as he finds himself down to eight rupees. But below eight he refuses to go. Nutty plays him with consummate skill, with horse-trading experience gleaned in Madagascar, in Mombasa, in Hong Kong and Algiers. And when old Ben wearily turns back to the shelf with his rose bowl Nutty knows he's reached the limit.

Almost. He plays his final card, pointing to a set of brass serviette rings.

"How much?"

"Twenty rupees, sahib," comes the not hopeful answer.

Nutty muses a moment. "Tell you what, Ben. I'll give you ten chips for the rings if you throw in the bowl for six."

Ben Sulmein mops his brow and without speaking wraps up the articles, then silently takes the money.

We stroll out into the white sunshine. Looking back, we see Ben chuckling with his assistant, and gesturing after us. Makes us feel a bit dubious.

Next on the list is a couple of pairs of silk stockings. We march into a big European store for these. Nutty seems a trifle less sure of himself as the very pretty Anglo-Indian girl advances towards us from behind the glass-topped counter. "Yes, sir, what can I show you?" Smile, delivered from up under very black eyebrows; body leaning forward just enough, revealing a hint of Nature's bountiful endowment.

"Ah—I want two pairs of—er—champagne stockings, size three, please."

She reaches behind her, and, laying out a flimsy affair that I presume is silk, murmurs:

"There you are, sir. Two pairs. Thirty rupees, please."

I stagger. Nutty wipes his mouth. The girl smiles, flatteringly. Nutty pays over without a murmur.

As we walk out the door, he remarks, in an apologetic tone:

"Of course, a man must pay for the real thing. But..." false chuckle, "didn't we see old Ben off, eh?"

"Sure, we saw *Ben* off."

"Oh pack up laughing! Let's get up to the Cages."

It was still early afternoon, and though the sailors' best friend in a foreign port is supposed to be the publican—much to our regret we didn't rate a girl in every port—Nutty and I felt like doing something other than swilling suds all day and night.

His reference to the infamous Cages had been half-joking. But now we decided to take a taxi and have a look for ourselves. This street of brothels was so infamous that even the pock-marked cab-driver looked a bit dubious when we gave him our required destination. Until Nutty said:

"For Peter's sake, man, we only want a look!"

The cab rolled off. I'll omit the way to get there, just in case young sailors under the age of consent get any ideas. But it didn't take long, and then we were moving slowly down the street.

I was glad we were behind closed car doors. It was a long street, narrow, filled with filth, bounded on both sides by one-storey mud-

brick hovels. The windows were barred, hence the designation "Cages."

But the doors were open, and through them we could see that the furnishings in each hovel were identical—a tattered and dirty curtain, held back to reveal what was meant to be an inviting bed. Neither the beds nor the intended occupants of these couches of bliss were inviting.

They sat just inside the front, and only, door. They grinned at us, they held out dirty claws of hands, they made lewd and suggestive gestures. They were dressed in thin cotton saris that wouldn't resist a puff of smoke, and they bared themselves, each in turn, as we drove slowly past. Economy-minded, these devotees of love—they wore nothing but the sari.

Some, especially the younger ones, were quite astonishingly lovely—at least in form. Many Indian girls are like that. Small oval faces, creamily-brown skin, shining black hair. These denizens of the Cages could have been like that, if they had washed once a week. Now, though their physiogonomy was attractive, their bodies were dirt-smudged, their hair was lank strands, their finger-nails were talons.

They had the caste-mark in the centre of their foreheads above the nose, their tongues were bright red from chewing betel-nut, and their mouths were heavily scarlet from lipstick. And we came close to gagging at the stench of the street.

"My God," said Nutty, "now I know why this joint's out of bounds!"

We'd thought about that part of it; and had decided that if the patrol caught us we'd say simply that the taxi had taken us here without our knowing his route. We were right just as long as we didn't get out of the car. Some hope...

"Let's get out of here," Nutty grunted, "makes a man lose his faith in the old what-name."

The taxi deposited us back in the city. What now? We were still at a loose end, and yet all about us there must be entertainment for weeks. If only we could find it...

"How about," I said, "Bombay as the tourist doesn't see it?"

"Sure. But how? We get a taxi, he'll just take us to all the normal sights—temples, things like that."

"Come with me," I invited him.

Through my newspaper connections I had met an Englishman, a sub-editor of the "Bombay Times." He had been here for years, knew his way around. He was also like most newspapermen the world over, and I knew where to find him.

We walked into the bar of the ornate Taj Mahal Hotel, just opposite the harbour wall and the Gateway to India. Here, in this world-famed watering place, I found my man.

"Have a gin," he invited automatically, "how's the writing going?"

"Fair enough. But I'd like to send back something on India."

"Great Scott, man, it's been done to death!"

"All of it?" He looked at me shrewdly for a moment. Then he drained his glass.

"The paper's been put to bed, I'm free. All right, then—if your stomach can stand it."

In a minute or so we were driving in his car along a picturesque sea road, on one side the blue distance of the Arabian Sea, on the other ultra-modern blocks of concrete flats. They were let to wealthy Parsees, Hindus and Brahmins.

We came to a European quarter inhabited mostly by British officialdom and visitors, and the car slowed, I saw a ragged native squatting near the sea wall. He appeared to be doing something to his left leg.

The journalist stopped the car and led us over. The Hindu looked up as we approached, and leered horribly from a pock-marked face.

"Alms, sahibs, alms for the love of Krishna," he whined, thrusting out his leg.

I looked down. The ankle was swollen to twice normal size, and round it hung a filthy black piece of rag. Above this, the skin edges putrefying, was an ulcer two inches wide. I know now what he had been doing to his leg—he had been stirring the ulcer with a dirty stick.

"Why in hell do you do that?" I asked him, disgusted. "Don't you want it to get better?"

"Ah, sahib, then the white man would give me no money. But if it is kept red... Alms, sahib, alms for the love..."

Nutty threw him a rupee.

Soon we were out of the better-class suburbs, and, still travelling along the curve of the bay, entered an area of dirty brick houses, the street swarming with polyglot India, so that the car crawled along. Even this was new to us, for all native quarters were out of bounds to Servicemen.

There were thin-legged Hindus with the caste mark in red on their foreheads, pantaloon'd Mohammedans, tall, grave Mahrattas, Pathans, and Sikhs from the hill country, bearded and turbaned. And everywhere, in doorways, climbing on to the car, scampering through pedestrians, cows and bullock-carts, hundreds of yelling half-naked children.

Then the car was climbing a hill, one side of which dropped steeply to the water. The other side was densely wooded with green, cool-looking trees. Nutty pointed to a cluster of trees close together and to the right. Above those trees circled a flock of what appeared from this distance to be large black crows.

"What birds are they?" Nutty asked.

"You'll see," was all the answer he got.

The good journalist, keeping the tag-line last...

Our guide took us to the top of a hill, and there below us lay the whole city spread out, modern flats, public buildings, Hindus and Mohammedan temples, hovels and tents, all bounded by the blue, blue sea. Bombay, of course, being on an island.

We could still see the grove of trees, and the birds hovering above, but now we were close enough to ascertain that they were not crows. They were vultures.

As we watched, something, some movement, disturbed them. The grisly flock flapped suddenly into the air. But not for long. In a moment the lot of them swept downwards, out of sight behind the trees.

"Now would be the time," my friend remarked cryptically.

He read the question in our eyes. We drove towards the grove of trees and he explained, with professional aptness, the reason for the vultures.

In India the Parsees are a wealthy sect, and they have a peculiar method of disposing of their dead. Among the trees we were approaching was a circular brick tower with its top open, entrance to which was strictly guarded. Inside were half a dozen slabs, or tables, of hewn stone. On these were laid the bodies of the dead.

After due ceremony the mourners and relatives retired from the place. And in three or four days it was flooded, and the bones washed out to sea. Nutty and I looked at each other. Now we knew why the vultures had swooped down, why they had been disturbed. The place was called the Tower of Silence.

We drove up to the main gate. It was not large, more like a slab of concrete. In the lower portion was a square hole with a wooden door—about the size of a coffin.

At the gate we were stopped by a Parsee official, who pointed to a notice. It read:

"Parsees only allowed in this compound.

Visitors must produce permits before admittance."

My friend explained that it was practically impossible to obtain a pass. He added that he would get us in if we really wanted to. Nutty looked dubious, but I had committed myself back in the Taj Mahal bar. So off we drove round the hill for a mile or so, then stopped before an iron grille in the brick wall.

This was a priests' entrance, and we had to be quick. Through the gate we walked up a gravel path under the trees towards the Tower of Silence, on the opposite side to the guard. Now and again a vulture would rise, flapping heavily, above the trees, and settle down again.

The phrase "where no white man has trod before" is hardly applicable anywhere these days. But I think the number of European eyes that have seen what we saw that afternoon are few.

The inside of the circular wall was quite plain, no ornaments of any kind, just the half a dozen stone slabs and a mark round the wall where the flooding water rose. The vultures were busy round a table directly below us. But we were very quiet. The birds were not disturbed.

I've seen a few nasty sights in five years of war, but to the end of my days I know I shall regret having intruded into the Tower of Silence.

We regained the car, and I for one was quite ready for the India I should see in the lounge of the Taj Mahal. My friend, however, possibly because he was a newspaperman, had to continue the story. Maybe he thought our appetites had been merely whetted.

Sticking to the macabre, he took us next to the burning ghats. The car slid to a stop outside a high brick wall, over the top of which hung a faintly aromatic haze of wood smoke. Just inside the gate was discernible a huge pile of logs.

The Englishman spoke fluent Hindustani, and he argued and pleaded with the gatekeeper for five minutes, with the thing ending as we knew it would—with the production of his wallet. Even then the permission of the mourners had to be obtained—another ten rupee note. We were in.

It was not until then that the significance of the mourners struck me. I didn't mind seeing the place, but... not in use. "Look here!" I said, "we can't go in there now. I mean to say..."

"Oh, you won't see much," he grinned slightly. "Unless you've got a vivid imagination..."

With mixed feelings I approached the square where the smoke was drifting lazily up. We passed through an archway, and automatically removed our caps. Our Hindu guide told us that that was not necessary, as the business was merely routine, and anyway, this was the seventh today! But we kept them off.

The mourners numbered about 20. They sat in the shade of a sloping roof supported by the brick wall, a sort of lean-to, squatting and talking and watching the square. There seemed to be no tears. They seemed to be simply waiting.

In the centre of the square were four iron stakes, about ten feet high, placed one at each corner of a rectangle ten by four feet. Their purpose was to support the logs of wood laid lengthwise between them. The wood was piled up for six feet. Then there came something white, limp. Then, on top of that, another three or four big logs.

The bottom logs were burning steadily. The smoke rose slowly upward to the remote blue sky. And on the sixth log up the something white lay still, waiting. The guide told us the usual time was four hours.

The mourners talked and squatted and chewed betel-nut. And waited. The smoke thickened and the flames licked higher.

We did not wait four hours.

There were other things we saw that afternoon; cruel, stomach-turning, unprintable.

By now, day was fading. My friend said that he wanted to drive to the top of the Tower hill again—to show us a sight "to wash the taste away."

Even before we made the top of the hill I was in a maze of wonder at the transformation in the sky.

From a central point of indescribable brilliance low down in the west a flood of variegated light radiated to every point of the heavens, diffusing in its furthest parts to a soft, pink glow on the undersides of the fleecy clouds.

The colours ranged from deep blood red to scarlet and pink, from yellow to brown and black, with here and there, dispersed like relieving banks, strips of the deepest blue. The water shone with a brassy glare, and the brown hills of the mainland beyond were bathed in a lambent fire.

For a long time we gazed, silent, watching this extravaganza of fiery colour. It was resplendent. It was garish. It was cruel.

It was sunset over India.

CHAPTER FOUR
FLEET AND FLOTILLA MANOEUVRES

ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET, Lord Chatfield, once wrote:

"Destroyers have in the past forty-five years grown in size, in speed, in guns and torpedo power and cost; they have become invaluable for many other purposes than those for which they were originally designed; but their old function remains: to guard the Fleet against attack by the torpedo." We were getting stronger now, almost each week bringing with it a new addition to our force. And as each ship came out of the horizon to anchor in the strongly-defended harbour of Trincomalee prepared to receive it, the importance of the destroyer flotilla assumed new significance. There were more big ships to protect, and the more there were the greater became their attraction for Japanese submarines.

So that almost constantly the growing Fleet was at sea on exercises, which were in reality offensive sweeps, to ensure that efficient understanding and cooperation existed throughout; and, of course, with the big fellows putting to sea, so went we.

We would invariably go out first, perhaps an hour ahead, not only to sweep a path for submarines, but to indulge ourselves in destroyers' own highly-skilled and dangerous little game, flotilla manoeuvres.

Destroyers at exercise never fail to stir the old pulse, no matter how often you've witnessed the game. Not only the sight of those lean grey ships creasing through at speed, but the knowledge of what superb seamanship goes into the execution of the seemingly effortless manoeuvres. And that knowledge raises a feeling of absolute confidence in the captains who will take you into action. Perhaps that is one of the intended objects...

Destroyers drill and form in much the same way as a squad of soldiers ashore. They move in line ahead, single file, turn into line abreast like a platoon, form fours, or sub-divisions, advance and retire at the flicker of a light.

But these ships, two thousand tons of driving steel, manoeuvring only two hundreds yards apart, often less, are crashing through sometimes heeling seas at twenty-five knots, thirty miles per hour.

The slightest error of judgment, the least moment of indecision, can mean a shearing, buckling collision, and Service oblivion for the commanding-officer.

The masts of destroyers in line, with their signal halliards draped neatly down to the deck, tucked in at the waist, as it were, and the switchy sway of the mast's tapered length, remind me of a slender girl on a dance floor.

We were in line-ahead for the beginning of the manoeuvres, eight of us, the sea as flat as a river, the land a low-lying blur over to port.

A hundred yards ahead the leader, or guide ship, sank her stern in the water and spawned a smother of white foam from her tail. We were so close that the acrid fumes from her funnel caught our throats. Astern, a bow-wave creaming from her sharp fore-foot, followed the next in line. Shortly the first signal hauled up the leader's mast: "Alter course together ninety degrees to starb'd." As one the eight grey bows swung off. They leaned over to port, and in a moment the flotilla was speeding at right angles to its former course, now in line abreast, side by side. Now and then a bow would surge forward a little, having a peep, then under reduced revolutions sink back into line.

We split up into subdivisions then, our division comprising four ships, steaming in line ahead. Away to port, distance half a mile, cruised the other four. There was now to be performed a manoeuvre calling for the highest standard of individual skill.

Those four ships were to head straight in at us, turn, and take up position in the line as before, one ship between two others, our line travelling all the time at twenty-five knots. Imagine, in a motorcar, coming down a side street into a main artery, and squeezing your machine in between two cars of a line travelling at right-angles to you, distance between cars two car lengths, speed of the lot thirty miles per hour.

The signal was down, and in they came.

But the Navy usually tries things the hard way, in case you have to. When they were almost in position, assuming that he was dodging a falling enemy salvo, our leader altered the course of the whole line.

Then was provided for us watchers an exhibition of seamanship

the like of which I defy any other Navy to equal. The destroyer whose station was ahead of us was almost on us, due to the sudden alteration of course. Her captain stood abaft the binnacle, in khaki shorts and sun helmet, leaning casually forward of his outstretched hands.

I saw him bend to the voice-pipe. She started to swing. A cloud of foam was opening before her, her knife of a bow just inside the circle of our wake. Closer she came, skidding in sideways like a crab. Then, under the inertia of the turn, still slipping sideways, she slid neatly in under our bow, straightened up, and steered by the ship ahead.

My trainer said something unprintable, an ejaculation of pure admiration. And added:

"After that lot the flamin' skipper's entitled to his ruddy great cabin!"

Perhaps that was one of the intended objects...

For two hours the pack sped and twisted and slid over the sea, exercising every manoeuvre in the commodore's repertoire. Then the line formed up and headed at a sedate and steady twenty-five knots back to the Battle Fleet poking its armoured nose outside the harbour.

It is doubtful if any machine of warfare at sea has been designed which equals in complicated ingenuity a destroyer's most lethal weapon—the twenty-one-inch torpedo.

We were to carry out a dummy attack on the Battle Fleet this day, firing fish set to run beneath their bellies. Astern, the seven remaining destroyers of the flotilla followed our gyrations through the mine-swept channel like beads on a string. Ahead, like a block of flats on Bondi's skyline, waited the battleships.

But first a brief insight into the tight mass of delicate machinery packed inside these long, steel shapes; machinery which, when bared, looks like the medical charts one sees of human viscera, coils and coils of intestinal copper and steel pipes all jumbled together in a seemingly chaotic mass. Yet out of it comes a range of more than a dozen miles, a speed of forty knots, and a punch packing the blast of a cruiser's full broadside.

The modern twenty-one-inch torpedo, as fired from Fleet destroyers, contains six compartments of varying size.

In the nose, or rather constituting it, the warhead. This rounded steel body is packed tight with high-explosive. The violent composition can be exploded only by direct contact with a bare flame, so in the very nose of the warhead is screwed a primer.

Into this again small detonators of fulminate of mercury, one of the most sensitive explosives known, are fitted. To render this highly-dangerous concoction relatively harmless until the time arrives for it to do its work, a four-bladed propeller, called a pistol, is fitted over the detonators, on the very nose of the torpedo.

Due to the forward motion through the water these vanes revolve, screwing the detonators hard up against the primers. Not difficult to imagine, then, what the slightest bump does to that little lot!

Before we positioned ourselves, the battlers, perhaps to show what we dreadnoughts could expect were they fair dinkum, opened up with their main armament in a long-range throw-off shoot.

They were hull-down on the horizon, the massive structures and funnels jutting up across close on fourteen miles of tumbling sea. Fourteen miles—and they had to try to lob their man-high shells in line with a leaping, heeling target forty feet wide. Some of those battleships, we remembered, had been lobbing their shells on the beach at Salerno a few months before.

Through glasses you could see a black square at each distant masthead; the gunnery flag. It meant:

"I am about to open fire."

Looked like a concentration shoot, then.

Closed-up at B-gun we waited. We knew—we'd done it scores of times ourselves—that those monstrous fifteen-inch barrels would have been thrown-off ten degrees ahead of us, the targets. The director would be aimed straight at us, and the turret layers and trainers would be following their director pointers, to gain the utmost from the exercise. But the turrets, and the guns, would have been thrown-off. Wouldn't they...?

But there were four battleships. Thirty-two fifteen-inch guns. Thirty-two chances of error. Four directors, sixteen training receivers would have had their pointers altered. Instruments were not infallible, men had been known to make mistakes. If one of those turrets had not been thrown-off correctly; if one of those one-ton shells landed

where the director would be aiming...

Too late now for worry, or trust, or hope. Abruptly, along the horizon, there belched a rippling line of flame.

Directly above each bulking shape blossomed a cloud of dirty brown cordite smoke, blowing swiftly astern. I was in the rake party atop B-gun, waiting to plot the fall of shot. The rake, a wooden instrument shaped like a small rake, would tell us how far to the left or right the shells landed, and how far over or short. These errors would be signalled back to the firing ships.

But the shells should not land to our left—not if they had been thrown-off correctly. They should land ahead of our bow. Well ahead.

We counted fourteen seconds. That was a measure of the long range. Those one-ton messengers were hurtling towards us at a muzzle velocity of two thousand five hundred feet per second, each one flung by more than four hundred pounds of cordite. Yet we counted fourteen seconds before, ahead and on the port bow, there was a scream ending in a roar and the sea was convulsed into huge pillars of climbing white. "Over 100."

We altered course promptly towards the spouts, doing our best to throw them off. The next salvos landed dead ahead, straddling our line of advance perfectly. After that, dodge as we might, those enormous geysers followed our course, plunging with awful precision into the sea right ahead.

I thought of *Bismarck, Scharnhorst*—and Matapan. One of them had been there, too, when the Italian heavy-cruiser line was caught by the British battleships at night at point-blank range.

For fifteen minutes it went on, the firing so accurate that even the sight and sound of full broadsides of fifteen-inch shells bursting into the sea ahead became monotonous. Now that we knew all guns had been correctly thrown-off...

Then the distant blue flags hauled down. It was our turn.

Finished with the rake party, I went up to the bridge. There one was in the middle of things. Keeping well back, clear of Dad and the torpedo-officer, I listened to the dialogue.

The radio-telephone speaker near the pelorous crackled suddenly:

"From Joan (flagship) to Susan (us). Engage third battleship from the right. I say again: Engage third battleship from the right."

Then the signal yeoman, who had also been at Matapan, spoke without taking his eyes from his binoculars:

"Executive signal, alter course twenty degrees to starb'd, sir."

The captain spoke into the wheelhouse voice-pipe, whose side he never left:

"Starb'd twenty."

He spoke calmly, with a flat incisiveness to his tone. Yet now he was to be tested harshly; now was to be witnessed by officers immeasurably his superior the training programme he had drilled his ship at ever since she left Sydney. No mild reprimands from an understanding flotilla leader now; now he was to take her in against a battleship, his every move scrutinised by that ship's four-ringed captain and by the commander-in-chief.

Yes, I thought, *you're entitled to your ruddy great cabin...*

We had split up into two sub-divisions, and the three ships of ours, in line ahead, turned as one with the hauling down of the executive signal and plunged across the foam-splashed sea towards the line of target.

From the bridge you could see the brown of the next in line's upper-deck as she rolled, her bow wave racing aft in a streak of white, a giant's brush-stroke against the grey of her side and the blue of the sea.

"Speed twenty-eight knots, sir. Executive signal."

"Very well." Still calm, clipped. What was he thinking? What were his guts doing? You'd never know, not from the casual touch of his hand on the binnacle, steadying him, not from the composed set of his burned face.

A speed of twenty-eight knots is close enough to thirty-two miles per hour. Standing on the bridge you actually felt this speed. The wind whistled through shrouds and stays in a high-pitched whine, the funnel roared behind you, and every now and then she dipped her slicing bow and the bridge was swept by a lather of spray and spume.

Think of standing exposed on the running-board of a car at 30 m.p.h. in a rain-storm and you get some idea of conditions on the bridge of a destroyer at speed in a choppy sea.

After each swell the ship's bow smacked down into the trough with a shock and shudder. Now and again a wave caught her down,

and reared up over the foc's'le, leaving the decks streaming and lacy with white water.

The battleships were closer now, a magnificent sight, taking the sea green over their mighty bows. Even more spectacular were the destroyers with us. Every thirty seconds they disappeared almost completely beneath a great cloudburst of spray which flew high above their topmasts. You realised that your own ship must look exactly like that, and pride was embarrassing and fierce in you. Gimme the boats...!

We were in exact alignment, the three of us, three spuming bows dressed by the right. The muzzles of A and B guns below were cocked up at extreme elevation, sniffing towards the target. Came a report from the gunnery director:

"Main armament ready to open fire."

The signal yeoman spoke again:

"Alter course forty degrees to port together."

This was it. This was the turn to bring us broadside on to the target. And our ten tubes.

As the bow swung off the R/T crackled again. It was the battleship.

"Your forrard mounting is out of action."

A-guns fell away to their fore and aft position.

"You are seventy-five per cent, out of action. You should have full speed available."

With that multitude of barrels now trained on us, I thought we were getting off lightly. The admiral had left us three tubes, one gun mounting, and full speed.

And we'd almost reached our full power now. Nearly 2,000 tons of steel driving through at over forty miles per hour. Down in the after waist the torpedo-crews were closed-up round their charges. They hung on to lines and stanchions as the ship reeled and plunged like a thing possessed.

"Assume first degree of readiness," from the torpedo-lieutenant on the bridge.

The order was repeated, and the long grey tubes trained smoothly outboard over the ship's side. A few feet below their gaping mouths the spume-crested waves whipped past in quick retreat.

The crew closed-up at their firing positions. Number One at his

firing levers, Two and Three at the training handles, Four and Five at the breeches with cordite charges ready, and Number Six at the bridge telephone.

Closer. Here came the battleship now, beautiful with her massive superstructure, hideous with her grinning guns.

And now we were swinging on the full turn. Heeled at an acute angle, stern slewing round with all the torque that hard-over rudder and churning screws could give her, she spun round.

The torpedo control officer crouched behind his sight. It was a simple, three-pronged affair of steel. His orders came clear and fast:

"Target right-hand ship. Estimated enemy speed eighteen knots. Ship now making smoke. Deflection fourteen left. Forrard tubes ready, sir."

The captain flung back over his shoulder:

"Fire when your sights come on."

Staring through his sight, the T.C.O. watched the battleship's stern, then mainmast, then funnel, slide by his sight.

"Forty degrees to go, sir."

"Thirty degrees to go, sir."

"Swing faster, sir!"

Dad bent, and the heel became more acute.

"Sights coming on, sir." Then, as the huge bridge bulked dead in line: "Stand-by! Fire one, fire two, fire three!"

From aft three mouths flamed redly. Three searing shapes cut the water clearly, and three wakes stretched like ribbons across the sea.

The battleship was turning. But we were too close. The torpedoes lanced straight for her belly, disappearing underneath, and came, still running perfectly, clear out the other side.

We should by now have been reduced to a twisted mass of smoking metal, but we'd punched three fish into her.

The R/T came to life.

"Joan to Susan. I have a message for you. Exercise completed. Exercise completed."

The voice cut off. No praise, no admiration, no judgment. And no censure. That was all we wanted. The Royal Navy's measure of praise is traditionally meagre.

With the wind and waves now astern we were rolling easily to

the swell, eased down to a comfortable twenty knots. Eight cables astern the battleship was altering her ponderous bulk back into line.

The yeoman took his glasses from his eyes for the first time.

"Signal flying to reform single line ahead in fleet position, sir." A pause, then: "Executive signal, sir!"

The flotilla swung into position.

A "crash" destroyer's job is always an interesting chore. Positioned alongside her aircraft carrier, distant a couple of cables, she keeps station and waits.

Then, when a pilot comes in too fast, or too slow, or too low, she dashes up to the wreck, fishes him out, regains station, and waits for the next.

We have a seaboat manned all the time, fitted with an array of tube-cutters, axes, salvage suits, and so on, to rescue as much as possible of the aircraft before she sinks. But in most cases, particularly if the machine strikes with any force, the heavy engine just carries straight on to the bottom.

You always get a perfect of the doings on the carrier's flight-deck. I never tire of watching aircraft take off and land at sea, especially the Seafires on escort carriers we've had with us occasionally.

As the first Seafire comes screaming into land you wonder how on earth he will be able to pull up in time, how the pilot can possibly come in at the right level, with the ship's stern lifting twenty feet with each swell.

Watching, you feel sure that he must go zooming straight along and off the bows of the ship. Actually, there is across the flight-deck at a suitable distance from the landing-on point a device which would prevent this happening. They call it the crash barrier.

One morning I Saw four Seafires come in one after the other in swift succession, and every one of them was stopped in an incredibly short time, a few feet from the point at which its Wheels touched. It was such a superb piece of timing and skill, such a telling display of casual courage, that you just wanted them to go on and on.

I was interested in how the aircraft are pulled up in so short a space. Watching from the seaboat you'd see them touch down at

about ninety knots, then in the next second or so they'd be stationary. Later I found out:

The device is actually quite simple. Stretched across the deck at intervals of about a dozen feet or so are arrester wires made of extra-special flexible steel wire rope, immensely strong for its size. These wires oppose a certain nicely-calculated tension, but also give to some extent to the size and weight of the aircraft coming in. The aircraft lets down a hook and this engages in one of the wires. A hydraulic system something like that of a turret-gun's recoil arrangement pulls the aircraft up.

The first incoming Seafire swept once round the carrier, then her pilot lined her up about four hundred yards astern, aiming at the very end of the flight-deck. He is directed by a batsman, an officer who stands to one side with a couple of bright yellow-green discs in his hands, as though he is playing an imaginery and highly exciting game of ping-pong. If this batsman drops one of his outstretched arms, the pilot knows at once that his corresponding wing is too high, and acts accordingly.

The aircraft's nose pulled up and the tail dipped down so as to engage the hook. Lower and lower he came, seeming to hang on his propeller, landing flaps down; then he was over the first wire, just missed the second, and caught the third.

The wire gave, then held. The aircraft's tail whipped up under the strain, its nose jerked down, and the pilot's head threw forward. The next second it was safe on the deck, still.

But all was not yet over. When you were able to breathe freely again you realised that yet another Seafire was coming in behind the first. So two members of the flight-deck crew rushed out, dropped on their bellies against the slipstream of the propeller and wrestled to disengage the hook. Then the aircraft taxied forward to the parking section on the bow. The other came in, and the miracle was performed again.

It was obvious that speed was the essence of the operation, not only the speed at which the aircraft came in, but the time in which planes could land, refuel, and take off again in action. The rate worked up by these "pocket" carriers is very high indeed, so that the procession on and off the ship made a fascinating spectacle.

In the meantime a squadron of Barracuda torpedo-bombers had formed up above the carrier. Peeling off in precise formation, they came plunging down straight for the ship. A bombing run this time, not a torpedo drop.

They were aiming just ahead, to enable smoke marker bombs to be dropped, and three had unloaded with satisfactory precision off her bow, roaring away out of it into the blue, when the fourth bloke headed down.

Almost vertical, a black streak, he shot out of the sun, faster and faster.

We watched, fascinated. Somebody said: "God...!" Then, suddenly and quite definitely, I knew he wasn't going to pull out. Travelling at tremendous speed, still vertical, he flashed on and struck the sea in a back-thrust of flung water. We were quick, but it was hopeless. All that remained was a circle of foam on the sea.

Another time a torpedo-bomber was taking off. We watched him rush down the flight-deck, bellowing, bat-winged. He reached the end, sailed into space. Then he dipped lower and lower towards the sea.

If all our wills could have affected his flight he would have soared up like a rocket. But he couldn't make it, and a few hundred years ahead of the bow he met the sea with a whop and splather. The whole crew was picked up.

Once with the Fleet we were ordered alongside a battleship to take a message on a line. The battler was steaming at twelve knots, with an aircraft carrier, a big fellow, about four hundred yards away on her starb'd beam.

We had to come down from our position ahead, circle the stern of the battler and sneak in alongside.

Of course, we could have gone right round both big ships, cut across the carrier's bow, and in that way. But as they were four hundred yards apart, and we're only three hundred feet long, the Old Man had a few hundred yards to play with.

Which, in his opinion, was quite enough. So we came down the line, swept round, and headed in between battleship and carrier. Of course, it had to be close—but the big bloke to starb'd got a bit windy, and suddenly there were blowings of sirens and alterings of course and, I don't doubt, some hefty language.

She was about forty yards away then, and I saw the Old Man grin a bit behind his binnacle. He'd had her closer than that without touching. As it was, due to the carrier's altering course, her great bulk loomed above us, we heard the roar of her fans, and her quarterdeck was washed by the wake from our screws.

Next moment we were snuggled in under the lofty side of the battler, her crew, a French one, looking down at us open-mouthed. The line went out. Battleship Warspite, for some reason, was renowned as the finest gunnery ship in the British Fleet. During the Normandy invasion she stood off the beaches and with her fifteen-inch guns followed German tanks into woods and out again, potting them like a bloke shooting ducks.

No one knew why she was so uncannily proficient. It was the same no matter what changes in her crew or gunnery-officers. She was just a fine gunnery ship.

For some reason we've always been pretty good at bombardment. This day we were to carry out a shoot on a little-used track in the palms back about four hundred yards along the beach—another of those interminable exercises fitting us for the big things brewing as the Fleet grew and grew.

The actual initial target was a tall palm to the left of the others, representing a gun emplacement, on the silencing of which we were to strafe the road leading to it.

We had aboard a couple of Army liaison officers, who looked at the tree through glasses from well out to sea with a certain amount of apparent scepticism. They asked Dad if he weren't going in any closer.

Dad looked surprised. He turned. "Target's visible, Number One?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right."

The ship increased to twenty-five knots, turned, and headed down the coast. On B-gun there came a sudden series of sharp rings from the gun shield, and a rasp of training machinery as the heavy mounting swung. The long barrels trained past the target, came back, and steadied. The snouts lifted in the air, sniffing tentatively as the layer got on, then were still. The next second the ship exploded in flame

and smoke. We opened up with a ranging shot, up two hundred, found the target, and went straight into rapid salvos. The crew drilled in a smoothly-working cycle of efficiency, loading, firing, loading again, keeping always clear of those hot, recoiling breeches.

Round after round crashed out, with the hot cordite fumes catching your throat, the blast of each broadside setting your head ringing, the ammunition numbers slipping and sliding on the hot cylinders.

On the bridge the Army officers held their hats on with one hand and tried to steady their glasses with the other. One was heard to shout:

"I'm damned if I can see the target!"

He wasn't expected to. It lay, blasted and torn, flat on the ground. Along the dusty track geysers of dirt and stone spewed into the air until a straight line of dust and smoke edged the beach for half a mile. The Army observation post ashore signalled:

"Target demolished. Suggest stop wasting ammunition."

The check fire bell shrilled, we stopped loading, the guns fell silent. For some reason, we've always been pretty good at bombardment.

CHAPTER FIVE

THINGS WERE PRETTY QUIET for a while, with a run or two up the Persian Gulf to ease the strain of Bombay's stench. On return, I requested permission to go to sea in a motor-torpedo-boat on exercise with a destroyer flotilla of which our ship formed the senior unit. Permission was granted. As I hurried along the dockyard wall in Bombay between a red-leaded submarine and a new destroyer, a growling sort of roar came from the basin ahead. They were idling over, and I broke into a run. A white-clad figure waving from the bridge of *No. 282* bade me run faster. The sub-lieutenant reached out a hand and I jumped on to the coconut matting. The captain grinned at the sweat and said:

"Sorry, but we've had orders to slip half an hour early."

I would have been sorry if I hadn't made it. I'd thought *Nepal* was fast...

The captain called an order aft, then spoke into the voice-pipe. There was hardly a change in the note of the engines, but she moved slowly ahead, the spring took the weight, and her broad, squat stern swung out. In half a minute H.M. Torpedo Boat *282* was slipping down harbour past my destroyer at quarter speed, her engines a muted roar.

We were to meet the "enemy" destroyer flotilla at a pre-arranged spot some twenty miles offshore, and make our attack as soon as he was clear of the minefield and able to manoeuvre. The object—to train gunnery director and control crews in engaging a target so fast that new settings had to be set in the minimum of time.

Looking aft past the multiple gun turret, which had once been in the tail of a British heavy bomber, I could see the destroyers clearing the harbour mouth in single line ahead, six of them, lean-looking and speedy. I could imagine Dad's orders on his bridge:

"Lookouts, keep your eyes on those gnats out there. And if they get within ten miles of me without being sighted...!" The young skipper of *282* had his own ideas on the subject. His plan, shouted above the noise of three engines, was to detach three of his craft to attack astern from the quarter, then lead the other two in at full speed from ahead.

A long swell was running, and from ten miles we must have been pretty well invisible. The telescopic wireless mast had been housed, and apart from a small signal mast only her armoured conning tower stuck above water.

Visibility was unlimited, a blue sky shining warmly above us, and the masts and funnels of our targets came into plain view each time we breasted a swell. The skipper watched them for several long seconds, and knew by their altering inclination that they were turning, which meant the minefield was passed.

His hand moved to the revolution lever. I saw the sub. and signalman grip the bridge rail with both hands. As her engine note rose to a throbbing roar I did likewise. And none too soon. In a matter of seconds we were leaping through at thirty knots, the intention to get well ahead of the targets.

The noise from the engine-room was too great to allow of any intercourse other than by signs. But these men were well trained—they had come from the English Channel, where almost every night had brought its fracas with E-boats.

At the captain's nod the signalman braced himself against his tiny signal mast. The brightly-coloured flags stood out like boards in the thirty-knot wind, and in a moment three boats astern turned to starb'd and went spinning away over the sea towards the line of destroyers.

We tore on, her throbbing hull steady on-course under the cox'n's hands. Watching him as she bucked, I realised now why he was strapped with a broad leather belt round his back, and why beneath his feet was placed a six-inch thick rubber mat.

And now we were almost in position, the destroyer line in sight across the blue over our starb'd quarter. The captain moved the engine-room indicator and the mechanic below clutched in the bridge throttles. She was now controlled from the bridge.

Another nod to the signalman and a single flag stood out from the wind-curved halliards. The captain made a clockwise motion with his hand to the cox'n, the wheel twirled in answer, his hand reached out to the throttles. A shout to me which I interpreted rightly as "Hang on with your teeth!" and we were round on the run in. The captain pulled the three silver levers towards him.

I had thought before those engines made enough noise. They'd been almost idling. As the throttles came back a drumming roar filled the sky. The stern sank low in the water as the spinning screws gripped. With nearly two-thirds of her length clear of the water the torpedo-boat shot across the sea, on either side a flying spume of white water curving over in an arch which poured down on the stern abaft the gun turret.

The whole boat shuddered and bucked with power. I was filled with a sense of exhilaration. No wonder these men went in against the concentrated fire of defenders' guns to get at their targets—all you could think of was the tremendous, frightening power with which this thunderbolt imbued you.

The log needle was quivering on forty-four! Over fifty miles per hour. In a matter of seconds the destroyers were in full view, the knifing bow waves at their stems indicated that they, too, were at full speed.

My cap had gone in that last great burst. Bareheaded, I hung there beside the boy-captain, eyes closed to slits against the forceful penetration of the wind. Abruptly, we swerved to starb'd, and I recognised evading tactics—and how once from another ship we'd lobbed a full broadside just where we judged an attacking E-boat would turn. He did.

From then on I was jolted one way and then the other as the boat careered all over the sea. Suddenly from the leading destroyer's (*Nepal's*) side six flashes of orange flame stabbed at us. Once again I was on the receiving end—but unworried this time about the throw-off.

The black bursts of smoke, just above the water so as to rain a shower of splinters on the attacking craft, were a little behind us. Had the guns been aimed without throw-off the shells would have burst astern.

Next broadside was dead in line. Good old B-gun, I thought. Apparently I wasn't missed...

The skipper snatched a swift look at the two racing boats astern. Then he pulled the locking pins free from two black levels in front of him.

The destroyers were close now, a grand picture with the lines of

white reaching from their bows aft. Every glass on their bridges would be on our tubes. I knew what would happen when the fish were fired, and braced myself for the pressure of the full turn.

Our torpedoes were set to run beneath the destroyers' bottoms, their explosive-packed warheads substituted by a practice blowing head which, filled with compressed air, brings the missile to the surface after its run. I had forgotten that we would have to slow down before firing—our speed being so much greater than that of the torpedoes we would run ahead of them, or hit them as we turned—and the sudden drop from forty-five to twenty-five knots threw me forward on to the bridge rail, my nose taking the strain; as it transpired, the only casualty of the action.

The captain loosed both torpedoes in quick succession. With the levers' movement there came a whoosh of compressed air and the two cigars leaped from the tubes and entered the water clearly, screws already spinning.

He opened her up again as we heeled round, and again at full speed we tore out past the other two boats on their run in.

Astern, the parallel roads reached out to *Nepal*. But she was fast, too, had been built to spin almost in her own length. Rudder hard-over, screws heaving, she whipped round. The big guns had ceased firing, but I could imagine vividly enough the streams of tracer which would have been leaping at us from oerlikons and multiple pom-pom had that red, white and blue flag at our gaff borne instead a rising sun.

And as the two lines of calmed water passed her stern by twenty yards, and we came again in comfortable range of her twin 4.7's, I decided that I was quite happy to be a destroyerman.

We were too far away to discern the results of the following attacks, though a twisting, doubling line of destroyers offered plain indication of a certain amount of trouble. Offered, too, evidence of the superb seamanship of destroyer drivers, for each of those two-thousand-ton ships, moving at thirty knots, was in close order—two hundred yards apart. Still zig-zagging, *282* drew swiftly away from her target, until only the destroyers' thin masts showed above the rim. At last, with a welcome drop in speed, the little ship became steady again, and we turned for home, engines driving her at twenty knots.

We had a long way to go, and now we could talk. The young skipper was patently proud of his gutsy command, keen enough to have studied the history of evolution of the Navy's fastest, and, for their size, deadliest craft. My note-book was out.

Tremendous strides, he told me, have been taken in torpedo and torpedo-boat construction since the turn of the century.

In 1864, a Captain Lupius, of the Austrian Navy, collaborated with a Mr. Whitehead, manager of an engineering firm, in experimenting on a floating torpedo. The manufacturing rights of this weapon were sold to the British Admiralty for £15,000. My destroyer had Whitehead torpedoes in her tubes.

During the trials of the first torpedoes an average speed of 8.5 knots was reached for a distance of two hundred yards. Ours carry an explosive load of Torpex at forty knots for a distance of eleven miles.

The first seagoing torpedo-boat, the *Batoum*, was built for the Russian Navy in 1879. Her length was one hundred feet, horsepower five hundred, and speed twenty-two knots. She was fitted with two fore-and-aft fixed tubes in the bow, and fired four Whiteheads from an armoured conning-tower. Masts and sails were provided in case of a breakdown.

Japan brought out the initial first-class armoured torpedo-boat when the British yard of Yarrow, in 1885, built the *Kotaka* for that country. This vessel, the largest of the type produced up to that time, had a length of one hundred and sixty-six feet, a beam of nineteen feet, and engines which, with fourteen-hundred horsepower, gave her a speed of almost twenty knots. All vulnerable sections were protected by one-inch armour plate, and she mounted four machine-guns and six torpedo tubes. This vessel distinguished herself later in the Sino-Japanese war.

The period between 1890 and 1916 was devoted to producing a counter measure to the rapidly growing numbers of torpedo-boats. France in 1890 possessed 210, Germany 180, Russia 143, and Japan 24. Thus was created the torpedo-boat destroyer with the launching of Yarrow's *Havoc*. Her trials proved a success, and the Admiralty ordered six more of the same type.

In 1894, Yarrow launched *Hornet*—the first destroyer ever fitted

with water-tube boilers—and on her official trials her mean speed was 27.6 knots, the best so far attained by any vessel. With the turn of the century there has been a slow but steady increase in size, in speed, and in armament.

In the meantime the torpedo-boat was not far behind its natural enemy. England experimented with them in conjunction with the patrol of the Channel. With a trial speed of 33.5 knots they were not much good against thirty-one-knot German destroyers in any sort of a lop. Despite their small size they took too much space to turn in, and since their own torpedo was fired over the stern, headed in the same direction as the torpedo-boat, it was necessary to run at full speed when firing so as not to be over-run by their own torpedoes.

Since then, various other Navies have experimented with motor torpedo-boats. The most notable and well-known of these today are the extremely fast and deadly MTB's and the German E-boats. It has been suggested that the best defence against motor torpedo-boats in large numbers is attack by low-flying aircraft. But, apart from the difficulty of hitting a target weaving all over the sea at forty-odd knots, any plane which comes within range of the concentrated fire of heavy-calibre multiple machine-guns and oerlikons is going to know about it. The MTB is definitely an offensive weapon—against aircraft as well as against subsurface or surface craft.

It is no more a cure-all than the aircraft, my historical adviser told me; it will not replace any other existing surface craft. It will, however, be an important augmentation to any Fleet, large or small. Its operation is limited to its own little sphere, but within that special sphere it can become a destructive weapon of great deadliness.

Lesson completed; the low line of coast was coming up ahead. We entered the swept channel and coasted through the torpedo-net boom at the entrance. Past the empty destroyer berths—they were recovering our torpedoes, very nice of them—we headed for the basin.

A seaman whom I'd last seen in the gun turret heaved his line to a British soldier handy nearby. The stern-fast went out, and the skipper moved his indicator. Below in the fumy engine-room a pointer spun round to "Finished with main engines." Deep in her bowels *282* gave a final throaty growl, then silence.

CHAPTER SIX
THE DANCE OF THE OULED NAEL

DANCING GIRLS of the famed Ouled Nael doing their stuff in a moon-drenched circle of palms in the Arabian Desert may seem to possess a very slight degree of relevancy in a story of a fleet destroyer. But let me in with it—the memory will stay with me for years, and, as you will appreciate, we're not on board all the time.

It all started over Cocky's cigarette. The place was Khor Khuaai, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and we let go anchor opposite the tiny stone-built fort with its White Ensign on the rocky promontory, in the blue water of a narrow fjord—if that coldish name can be applied to a place under which the Arabs say Hell lies, keeping it hot.

From the upper-deck you looked out on isolation. Brown hills, absolutely devoid of all living matter, fell steeply to the water. The only sign of life was a dhow making slow way against the tide astern and the occasional flutter of the flag ashore. Cocky wore a lugubrious look on his homely dial.

But all was not lost. A light began flickering from the fort, and idly we read its message:

"Can accommodate forty men for pictures. *House With Seven Gables.* Bring own seats."

We'd hardly expected to spend our first night in Araby looking at George Sanders and Miss Lockwood, but it was either that or remain on board. We went to the pictures.

Carrying our camp chairs, we stepped from the motor-boat and walked up the sandy path to the fort on the hill. The pictures were shown in the open air, in a rock-strewn place, and we settled ourselves comfortably behind a group of white-burnoused Arabs. They were speaking quietly among themselves, a liquid-sounding sort of dialect, pleasing to hear.

Suddenly, the group rose as one man. I looked round, half-expecting to sight Dad. It was that sort of rising. Instead, we saw a tall Arab approaching. When abreast of us he waved his hand and the mob subsided. He sat down beside us. A sheikh, apparently.

We were not impressed. We'd seen plenty of the rank up the Red

Sea and in Alexandria, and any resemblance to Mr. Valentino was purely non-existent.

Cocky produced his cigarettes, handed me one, then without warning he turned to the Arab sitting quietly there.

"Like a burn, cobber?"

To my surprise, the sheikh inclined his head gravely and, reaching out a brown hand, took one of Cocky's fags. Shades of the hookah...

"Thank you," he said in good English.

Shortly afterwards, the pictures started. The show was mediocre, and I was more interested in the incongruity of the real scene—above, the velvet Arabian night, a star-dusted bowl, all around the ageless desert, and in front Arab tribesmen clapping and laughing as Miss Lockwood's trained lips did their stuff on the hero.

Then suddenly there came a brilliant flash of light from the projector, a hiss of sound, the screen was blank, and a puff of acrid smoke lifted from the little hut. The film had caught fire, a not unusual expectation in this sort of entertainment.

Ten minutes later we were still waiting, when the sheikh spoke suddenly to Cocky:

"Perhaps I could show you something when the moon rises? If you would care to come? The mosque is just across the water."

To Cocky's natural and slightly suspicious question as to what could be doing for two sailors in an Arab mosque at moonrise, the native answered solemnly: "Tonight a girl of the Ouled Nael dances."

A remembered stir of interest moved in me. We'd heard of these famous dancers though normally they seemed to perform further west in Algiers and Tangier. And then it would be a tourists' show. This, here, should be the unexpurgated version...

"Thanks, cobs." Cocky accepted gracefully, "we'll be in it."

Ten minutes later we breasted a ridge, white in the radiance of the new-risen moon, and saw below an oasis of silent palms, their leaves still, hanging like forged silver in the moonlight.

In the centre, like some fabled tower, rose the white spire of a mosque. Around, on all sides, lay the furrowed expanse of illimitable desert, shining, waiting, still. It was a picture to catch the breath. Slowly, we walked down.

Passing through the outer circle of palms we came to a courtyard

surrounded on three sides by walls of the mosque, and lit by flaming torches in sconces upon them.

Arabs in white robes crouched and squatted on the ground smoking their narghiles. Most of them hardly looked up as we entered the palms, but an old man with a long white beard saw the sheikh and nodded and smiled to us.

On a glowing fire stood a copper kettle with bubbling hot water, and an old Negro was making coffee for the Arabs. On the wall on one side of the court a cloth was hung up, of fine brocade, with golden embroidery, on a ground of red and yellow, in fantastic arabesques.

Many cushions were spread on the fine white sand. The Arabs themselves sat on closely-woven yellow mats. At a respectable distance from the men, girls stood and lounged about, lovely, youthful forms with veil-like robes and countless copper ornaments on arms and legs, which tinkled at their slightest movement. All were sipping coffee out of tiny cups. The sheikh whispered:

"When the moon passes the tower."

We were interested in neither moon nor tower. Our eyes went back to those girls, the respectable distance... I remembered something about the strict moral code of followers of the Prophet, and wondered if this might not be a bit tame after all. We had been some weeks at sea, for all practical purposes we still were, and we were not feeling moral...

Suddenly a girl appeared from the arched doorway of the tower. She walked with measured steps, draped in a white fabric that sheathed her supple body in diaphanous and mouth-drying folds, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments.

She carried her head high. She had dainty little slippers of soft hide on her feet, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of gold beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step.

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. There was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress; something of the haunting mystery of the moonlight night about her.

She came abreast of us, stood still, and faced us. I heard Cocky's breath hiss in. From her body there was borne a suggestion of perfume, essentially Eastern, strangely exciting.

The moon, like a golden slice of melon, emerged from above the parapet of stone. Her long shadow fell to our feet. A whole minute passed, and then she made a step forward. Fascinated, the Arabs and other women stared at her. Still. Absolutely still.

The girl let the thin veil of a garment she was wearing fall down to her hips. She stood immobile as a statue, her arms stretched out, the head thrown proudly back, bare, taut torso gleaming bronze in the moonlight, her eyes shining in triumph—courting admiration.

Very slowly, the girl of the desert began to dance. The delicate veil swayed and waved in ever-changing folds around her body of pure copper colour. Her dancing was wondrously graceful, it was beautiful beyond dispute. A strange scene it was, enhanced by the play of light and shadow among the palms, and the heavy, sweet smells of unknown perfumes.

We stared in wonder at the dancing of this girl, and the peerless rhythm of her movements. Faster grew the dance, the swinging and circling and posing.

Suddenly, she seized one of the torches and swung it in bright, broad circles round her head. The firelight fell with its ruddy glow on her shining hair of black-blue. The hissing torch seemed to be enveloped in the flying veil; the gauzy skirt lifted until it was a horizontal whirl. That robe was all she was wearing.

Even faster grew that mad, abandoned whirling. My brain seemed to reel with the furious tempo of the dance. She must stop...

Abruptly, after a final lightning circle of the torch, the girl stopped, her arms held high, her legs wide apart. The skirt dropped slowly. For a full minute she held that attitude, absolutely still, only her naked bosom heaving. Then, as suddenly as she'd stopped, she pitched forward on the sand, exhausted. A low growl of applause rose from among the Arabs. Cocky and I, bemused, rose up and slipped away through the silent palms, up the white slope. The boat was waiting.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SOME FAMOUS DESTROYERS

A NAVAL MAN in war knows the efficiency and battle-worthiness of every ship in the fleet as well as the form-follower knows the pedigree and performances of last year's Cup winner.

So, although you perhaps have never heard of H.M. Destroyer *Duncan,* we know she was the ship who sent five U-boats to the bottom of the Atlantic in one convoy during those three months when "Ninety U-boats, an average of one a day, were destroyed."

To close with the enemy, regardless of the odds, has always been the accepted course of action in the British Navy. And though the name *Electra* may mean nothing to you, to us it means the memory of a single British destroyer speeding to meet an overwhelming force of two Japanese cruisers and four destroyers, A-gun firing to starb'd, B-gun engaging to port.

I have a friend who served aboard *Duncan*—he is now on another destroyer attached to this fleet—who was aboard that epic trip, when no man bathed or changed his clothes for twenty-five days; it took too long to dress to man your gun in the freezing cold.

He told me of those dark, wintry nights.

The night was dark and rough. *Duncan* plunged through the murk, to starb'd a long line of dim shapes bulking against the horizon. To port, distant about ten miles, another convoy drew level on its way east to Britain.

The wind was blowing across from it, and suddenly to the ears of the muffled figures on *Duncan's* bridge came a sullen boom. Far away over the tumbling sea a tongue of flame licked up, then died. They all knew what it meant. The U-boats were striking.

Then the radio-telephone speaker on the chart table crackled. A voice broke out. It was the commodore of the convoy, talking to his escorts.

"There has just been a big flash behind me." A second or two, while the bridge officers stood waiting, then:

"That flash was the frigate *Itchen*."

So began a new phase of the U-boat war—the plan to send the escort ships down first, then slaughter the merchantmen at will.

There were no survivors from *Itchen;* the night was dark, it was too rough to lower boats, and pure madness to linger near the spot with that pack watching and waiting.

There was one consolation, dubious as it might be—those men struggling in the dark wouldn't have to wait long. The water was freezing cold, and it takes not much more than three minutes of immersion to paralyse the heart muscles.

The convoy steamed on.

Next day it was evident that the U-boats had picked up and trailed *Duncan's* convoy. The rear ship of the port wing suddenly erupted into a soaring pillar of flame and black smoke.

She was a tanker. *Duncan* at once turned to port and increased to full speed. In five minutes her asdic gear had established a firm contact with an underwater object, "length of contact three hundred feet, moving left to right, bearing dead ahead."

The destroyer nosed down her asdic beam like a bloodhound on the trail, depth charge crews ready with their tackles to swing the next pattern of three-hundred-pound canisters into position as soon as the first lot went.

And soon they did. With practised and savage skill the captain had brought his ship right above the diving submarine, caught a nod from his A/S officer, and spoke to the rating on the release levers.

The charges were set to explode above, below and on either side of the steel cylinder. Pattern after pattern went over, each multiple explosion thudding against *Duncan's* plates with the clang of a giant hammer. Then they ceased. The destroyer nosed round, seeking.

They smelled the oil even before they saw it, a pungent tang. Then the white creaminess of the sea was turned a dirty brown as it seeped up through.

But oil wasn't nearly enough. A cunning U-boat commander could release oil through a torpedo tube. *Duncan* carried a secret weapon aboard her for anti-submarine use, a terrible machine, which had not before been used against them. Now the captain decided to try it.

Still maintaining asdic contact, the ship moved down on the wounded submarine at a fast, clearing speed. There was a large splash as the thing went over the side. Seconds passed. *Duncan* thrust on, straining now to get her tender stern as far clear as possible.

They watched. They saw the sea astern, over a breadth of nearly a hundred yards, heave up. The sea fell back. It seemed to gather itself for an enormous effort. Then it geysered skyward in a rushing, thunderous roar! The ship's stern was punched bodily out of the water, then crashed down again.

Once more she steamed slowly back over the still rolling sea.

With another destroyer circling round, it was judged safe to lower a boat, to collect "evidence." The whaler pulled away, with my friend in the bows as scavenger.

The sea was littered with hundreds of pieces of woodwork, but all very small, about the size of half-a-crown. The submarine must have been shattered to pieces.

Floating also in the debris were dozens of spongy objects. These, collected in a bucket, were recognised by the ship's surgeons as lungs, torn or forced from men's bodies by the awful power of the explosion.

The surgeon, examining one pair in the waist of the ship, said with complete and clinical seriousness:

"These belonged to a man living in a confined space."

"Which," grinned my friend, "we all thought very clever of him."

When *Duncan* rejoined the convoy it was found a part of her radio gear was damaged, so arrangements were made for a spare part to be flown from base and dropped by parachute from a Sunderland.

The destroyer hauled out of line well to the northward, outside the U-boat path, and waited for her plane. The Sunderland arrived all right, with a Morse light flashing urgently from her side:

"Submarine surfaced ten miles bearing 240."

Duncan acknowledged and went up to full speed.

It was dark when she got there, but the unfailing asdic soon had him. The same method of attack—move down the beam, shower of charges from throwers and rails, both sides, then the search. This bloke managed to reach the surface and discharge his crew before settling back into the deep slime. *Duncan* came slowly up, passing through a group of swimming men, and then:

"We saw a weird sight. Half of the Jerries were dead, floating on their backs. The red lights on their life-jackets were burning, shining into their faces. Open mouths, frozen faces. It was horrible. Until we remembered *Itchen*."

Two prisoners were picked up, then the destroyer was on her way, for U-boats seldom operate in less than pairs.

One German was a petty-officer, the other a leading-stoker. The latter was quite good at making duffs, and two days after he was picked up, when feeling a bit cockier than he had been, he placed a nicely-browned apple tart on the stokers' mess table, then stood back arrogantly with his arms crossed.

On the crust of the tart, made with left-over pastry, lay a large swastika.

But the sailors laughed at him. Instead of the abuse he had hoped to surface, and braced himself to bear, he heard grunts of approval as the stokers hoed into his tart, swastika and all, demolishing it with something of the same efficiency as they'd applied to his late address.

Next day an Australian-manned Liberator swept out of a cloudbank, circled the convoy, then headed for the north on offensive patrol. A few minutes later *Duncan* received a W/T message to the effect that she was attacking a surfaced U-boat with depth bombs.

"Would like help."

Duncan turned to oblige. My friend got the story from the five Australians they picked up. The aircraft had swooped in to attack, and was met by a hail of bullets and cannon shells. These weapons were not secret, but most effective. The big plane made a target the German gunners couldn't miss, and she was badly mauled.

But she got her bombs away, and the submarine was lifted partly out of the water. The pilot had time to see her turn turtle before his own plane skidded into the sea.

Some weeks later it was announced in the newspapers that U-boats in the Atlantic were now equipped with anti-aircraft armament. Two Australian airmen paid the price for this knowledge.

The rest of the trip out was comparatively uneventful, except that one destroyer would have to remain in America some weeks. A sister ship of *Duncan's*, she sighted a U-boat surfaced near the horizon. Increasing to twenty-eight knots, she altered course towards it.

Her engines had just reached the ordered revolutions when another U-boat surfaced just ahead! The captain had time to shout "Hang on!" before the driving bow caught the submarine square amidships.

"The Jerry slid along her hull almost to the asdic dome. Then he dropped off. They gave him a couple of charges just for luck, though it wasn't needed. But it was a bit of a disappointment to see the other bastard get away," my friend told me.

Apparently, the destroyer's nose looked very much like a shark's when they got her into dock. They picked up the return convoy off the dim line of coast, formed them up, and headed back for home. Half the distance was covered before the old routine started again.

This time the oil gushed up in a swirling mess, with a clearly defined trail leading away from it. The destroyer followed leisurely, sitting right on top of him. On the bridge the captain leaned over the side of the bridge, blowing through his cupped hands and staring down at the fouled water.

"Look at the stupid clot," he said, disgustedly. "Why the hell doesn't he sneak back and lie under the big patch?"

Then, turning to the first-lieutenant, he decided:

"I think we'll have the stokers' depth charge crew up, Number One. Give 'em some practice."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The stokers got their practice, and the German got a bellyful of amatol.

The Englishman was silent for a bit, his face reflective.

"You mightn't believe this one," he said at last, "but it's true. I saw him myself. A U-boat had got through the screen and was somewhere smack in the middle of the convoy. We dashed in and out like a blue-arsed fly looking for the cheeky mongrel. I was on the bridge beside the signal yeoman, when he pulled my arm. I looked at him. His mouth was open, wide open, but he couldn't speak—only point down.

"I leaned over and looked. Then I yelled! Directly below, not a dozen feet from the ship's side, and travelling along with us, was that Jerry's periscope. It was trained on a big tanker abeam. Underneath you could see the conning tower plain as your hand. Pretty lines of water flowing away from it. Very pretty. Eh? Oh yeah—we let go with everything. That tanker got home that trip."

He stopped again, shaking his face along the knuckle of his finger. He grinned, lopsidedly. "D'you know the skipper of that tanker went

through his hoops because a photo of his wife and kids was smashed down from his cabin wall by the blast from our charges. Some nasty words, he said."

"Yes, but the sub.?"

"Oh, him? We claimed him as a probable. It wasn't too healthy in there, looking around for signs." The rest of the trip, "apart from the flippin' weather," was without recordable incident. Here are some extracts from captain's Standing Orders, dealing with that weather:

"All guns are to be trained, laid, and all moving parts moved through their full limits every ten minutes to prevent freezing. "The morning watch, stand-fast depth charge crews, is to be employed before breakfast in chipping ice from the upper-deck and main armament.

"No man is to remove his clothing for bathing or turning in. If hammocks are slung, men are to sleep fully dressed."

These are the clothes worn to keep out the biting cold when closed-up, perhaps for hours, at exposed gun positions, Underpants, half an inch thick, three pairs of woollen socks, then a long pair of seaboot socks, under the seaboots themselves. On the body, a heavy woollen singlet and two big jerseys, followed by the ubiquitous duffle coat.

On one patrol *Duncan* was twenty-five days at sea, out of which one day was logged "calm." Halfway through the men were on corned beef and rice, with ship's biscuits in lieu of bread.

Maybe that doesn't sound much of an ordeal, till you remember that a destroyer is only three hundred and fifty feet long, carries more than two hundred men in that length, possess no recreational facilities whatever, and in the slightest bit of a lop at speed cavorts and plunges like a stung horse.

Imagine "walking" for twenty-five days, more than three weeks, from handhold to handhold, every muscle in your body strained by the constant exercise which a lively ship enforces; no changing of clothes, no bathing in case you are caught down in the bathroom when the torpedo hits.

The other day in a pub ashore we met a fellow who insisted on interrupting our drinking by a reiterated question as to what the "Imperialists"—by whom I presume he meant England—had done

to help Australia in her hour of need, when Australia in her turn had been pouring men and supplies into the Middle East.

We'd just completed a brilliant operation with the British Battle Fleet, coursing to within a few miles of the Australian mainland. We looked at each other then picked up the long-haired nuisance and passed him outside.

In the next bar were British sailors who'd fought their guts out in *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and four from *Electra*. For his own sake we didn't want them to hear.

Electra was a later class than *Duncan*, of much the same speed and armament as us. I had her story from a man who'd fought aboard her. I first saw him while we were waiting to carry out a practice shoot at the Pattern VI target barely visible across the sea.

He was standing beside my twin guns, shading his eyes against the tropic sun. A little Englishman, with a brown seamed face, on his arm the badges of a stoker petty-officer. He stepped up to me, smiling, smacking the big steel breech with a gloved hand.

"She's a beaut, eh, china?"

"The latest." Seemed not all stokers were black-hearted bollard-heads...

"Wish we'd had a couple more like 'em aboard my last packet," he went on, looking them over. "We'd have given them slimy little bastards something to write home about!"

From that I'd gathered he'd been sunk, but as a fair percentage of the crew have blessed a carley raft at some time or other, I was more interested in the approaching target, and merely asked the conventional:

"What ship, cobs?"

"*Electra*."

"*Electra*!"

I was interested now.

So was the gunnery-officer and the director—in something on the starb'd beam. The pattern VI target was now in position.

"Look—would you like to stay here and watch the shoot?"

The little stoker petty-officer grinned companionably and nodded. He stationed himself back against the ready-use lockers, well clear of the panic and ejected cartridges. The target sailed past on its long

towline, was duly plastered, and the mounting shook with the last broadside and the smoking guns trained fore and aft.

Firing them had now become automatic; all we wanted to know now was when we would be shooting them in anger. So that throughout this practice shoot my mind had been busy on what it shouldn't have been—*Electra.*

She had been another modern Grenville and the *Revenge;* for Spaniards read Japs. We knew the facts of her fight and her end, but none of the details we could wish for. Some of my crew had not been in serious action yet. This would tell them more than all the lectures and drill-books. I hurried with the sponging-out of the barrels. It was afternoon, and though we were on-watch at B-gun, work packed up for the day in the tropics after lunch, so they were entitled to gather round.

I walked over to him.

"Like to talk about it? Or is it still a bit too close...?"

"Hell, no. Ah—you've got a pretty young crew there."

He recognised it too. But then in his own domain he had the same authority and responsibility as I had in mine. Understanding was between us. I called the sixteen men of the crew over.

In company with a squadron of cruisers and destroyers, including the Australian *Perth* and American *Houston, Electra* was ordered to intercept a large invasion force of Japanese battleships, cruisers, destroyers and troop transports headed for Java.

The British squadron proceeded to sea that hot morning and swept the seas off Java for the enemy Fleet. During the day they were subjected to continuous high-level bombing attacks. These were tactically ineffective. But the barring British force had been pinpointed, its composition, strength, course and position signalled back to the enemy. No one was surprised when, at ten minutes to four that afternoon, a line of bumps was sighted breaking up the horizon ahead. The squadron increased to full speed and cleared for action.

Electra formed one of the spearheads of the attack, and at 1600 opened fire with her 4.7's. Within five minutes of the engagement opening a sudden blasting roar to port heralded the end of a Dutch

destroyer. She went up in a great climbing column of dirty-white water and black smoke.

From the enemy line, consisting of battleships, heavy and light cruisers and sixteen destroyers, could be seen the sparkling flashes of answering guns. *Exeter,* hero of the Plate and *Graf Spee,* and *Houston* caught a heavy cruiser in a cross-fire with full broadsides. The Jap blew to pieces.

The order was passed to destroyers to make smoke and retire. This they did, the whole squadron regrouping behind its protection. Ready again, and a flickering *light from the flagship* spelt out *its terse* message:

"Squadron will attack."

This time *Electra* sped in and, heeling over to the pressure of her rudder, fired all her torpedoes. Turning at full power, she came round in time to see a salvo bore into *Exeter* amidships, then, racing past the British cruiser's stern, *Electra* disappeared into the slowly rolling smoke screen.

That was the last the squadron saw of her.

Steaming still at more than thirty knots she burst clean through the other side of the stinking smoke. They were waiting; a Jap heavy cruiser and four destroyers. Range, four thousand yards, point-black for eight-inch guns. No time to wonder how the Japs had got there. There was a little enough wonder about it—the enemy was so many that it would have been surprising if he hadn't sneaked some of his strength round to wait behind the smoke screen. Now *Electra,* one thin-sided destroyer, had found it.

The first enemy salvo caught her bridge. That bridge was protected—by copper plating so as not to affect the compasses—against wind and spray only. The Jap shells found only sufficient resistance to their entry to jar their fuses into action. The compass-platform was laid flat. Every man was killed except the captain. One shell went in a little lower, into the wheelhouse. Its fierce explosion jammed the steering gear.

This was where her months of monotonous, cursed training and drill paid off. The captain despatched an order and the engineers got to work. In a matter of minutes they had extemporised repairs. Now she was steering again, now she was under control.

Now she was also in the middle of her snarling enemies. And she was snarling back, one mounting trained to port, the other to starb'd, fighting both sides at once.

No narrative could do full justice to the intensity and the fierceness of the action that was now joined, or give full coherence to the events of the utmost violence and confusion crowding in on each other from all sides at once.

"Half-choked with cordite fumes and the stench of high explosive, slipping on hot cartridge cases, ears and minds dazed and deafened by the furious up-roar, the sweating crews strove to keep her firing.

Only guts and the will to fight, and the strength of their incomparable training, kept them there. A thumping roar from aft, another hit. This time No. 2 boiler. A few seconds later a single salvo from the cruiser exploding forrard started a fire and isolated the magazine from A and B-guns.

Drill, training, told. Ammunition was hurried along the upper-deck from aft. Also down in that inferno between decks were the first wounded, placed there previously, and now cut off completely from help.

The thin steel decks began to heat up, paint began to blister and then pop in burst balloons as the roaring fire below licked up and scorched the deck-heads. Steel began to glow, softly at first, then a bright cherry red; a novel, frightening sight.

The Japs were all around her, swarming like sharks. Pounding her, a close-range and merciless hammering. They couldn't kill her, not yet. Her red, white and blue ensign still snapped at the gaff, some of her guns still fired back into the snarling face of that appalling deluge of shells.

The third boiler blew up with a shattering roar and complementary scream of escaping steam. At almost precisely the same moment *Electra's* broadside ripped into a big Jap destroyer which had come in to within a few yards to port. Like the Dutchman before her, the Jap blew up into a mushroom of smoke.

Electra was dead in the water now, all power gone, mechanically and electrically lifeless, a sitting shot for her merciless enemies. King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, the Navy's Bible, provide for every possible contingency the Navy may encounter,

from piracy on the high seas and smuggling and mutiny to the extent of long leave and the growth of beards. There was no provision made for the form of surrender of a British ship. Electra's ensign still flew, split now into tatters, and her guns were still firing. Those of them left. A and B-guns had been blown, with their crews, clean over the side. X and Y-guns aft were still in action. The captain of Y-gun, his crew dead or wounded around him, had one ordinary-seaman left. Between them, loading, then training, then running back to lay the gun, they kept the mounting firing.

Y-gun was on the quarterdeck. A broadside plunged into the water beside the stricken hull. White-hot splinters rose in a vicious scythe and lashed the mounting. Y-gun fell silent.

Now there was X-gun, above the quiet Y-mounting. In all the ship, only X-gun. The little stoker petty-officer had come off watch in the boiler-room five minutes before the action had commenced. Now he was assisting with the ammunition supply at X-gun.

For another incredible half-hour, with the ship dead about them, those reduced few on X-gun kept the vultures off. Until a shell bursting in the after lobby directly below the mounting started a fire which cut off their ammunition supply.

Ready-use lockers. Provided for precisely this emergency. They lurched to the lockers, the stoker with them, fumbling with blistered fingers at the clips. Brains bemused, shocked, energised solely by training—and something else. The gun was whole, the ammunition was waiting, the enemy was in sight.

They clawed the locker doors open and there stood the big yellow brass cordite cartridges. Staggering, they dragged out the fresh food for the waiting gun. A heavy shell burst in the water close overside.

The blast reached up and took hold of the stoker and flung him clean across the deck, over the guard-rails and into the sea the other side. Shocked, face bloody from splinter cuts, he struggled to a carley raft adrift in the water.

Spitting out fuel oil, knowing it would sear his stomach and intestines if he swallowed, he dragged himself slowly up over the side of the empty raft. From there, eyes scummed with oil, exhausted, he watched the end.

X-gun was still in action. It was ridiculous, it was beyond all the

possibilities of all the odds, it should not be. The broken ship was the target for the concentrated and close-range fire of forty guns. Nothing should be still alive, still fighting back, on that pounded target. X-gun was still in action.

It was a scene, a feeling, an experience, seared into the stoker's memory with stark indelibility. Compounded of what the eye sees and the heart feels. Seeing the terrible courage of those gunners, slithering on the tilted deck, handling themselves back to that incredible gun, forcing with exhausted arms the next shell, the next cordite charge, up into the smoking breech: feeling nothing of his own hurts or exhaustion, feeling a fierce pride, inarticulate, choking...

A feeling close to love, man-love for man, a feeling whose pinnacle of purity of essence he would never reach again.

The bow was up, right up, clear of the water as far back as the bridge. An impossible angle. She was still in the water, no forward way on her ripped-open length. Then, slowly, she began to slide, backwards, an alien movement.

The quarter-deck disappeared, then Y-gun. A salvo burst into her bridge structure. She shuddered under the explosive impact. A shrug. Nothing could stop her now, nothing could hurt her more.

Further, slowly, inexorably, the enormous weight of water in her engine-rooms and boiler-rooms tugging her down, away from torture, down to deep rest and surcease.

X-gun was still in action.

They would not let her go. So the sea took her. The sea reached up, not malevolent, kind, and its beckoning hands moved around the base of X-mounting. Higher, moving into the open breech, quiet at last.

The sea took them too. Exhausted, unable to swim away from the suction, struggling only a little as the water, impatient, now rose swiftly and covered the gun.

Out of a total of one hundred and seventy five, fifty-four were left alive, clinging to wreckage and floats. She sank at 18:15, having been continuously in action for more than two hours.

Ten hours later, with the triumphant Japs gone off after the rest of the squadron, an American submarine surfaced fifty yards off and took them aboard. There, one of the wounded died.

The submarine, on offensive patrol, dived with her bloodied and oil-scummed load. And was almost at once attacked by destroyers. Seventeen depth-charges they sent down to her, and *Electra's* men listened to the slamming concussions and reeled in their bunks as the boat reeled.

But she dived deep, right down to her maximum depth. The sea looks after its own. The sea was pitiful, satiated. She slipped the hunting destroyers and brought her charges safely into Sourabaya. As the city was being blitzed by Jap aircraft... Thirteen badly wounded were left behind in Sourabaya. The rest of them made their painful way across the island and found an old tramp steamer. They loaded her with filched Army rations and steamed from Java, bound for Fremantle.

Four hours out from land, daring to hope, to relax, a periscope eye slithered up and laid them in its reticulated sight. Two torpedoes were fired, and both torpedoes passed ahead of her ancient bones, the phosphorescent trails plainly visible.

The Jap had no torpedoes left; he wanted what he had for better and bigger targets. He left them alone, let them pass.

Days later, weary, grimy, the forty-three survivors of a valiant ship landed in Australia.

Now, here, one of them was back for more.

I first saw H.M.A. Destroyer *Arunta* on the slips at a Sydney dockyard. The next I heard of her was when Australia's newest and most powerful Tribal-class destroyer sneaked a detachment of commandos away from Jap-occupied Timor under the eye of enemy reconnaissance and land-based aircraft.

But the censored news despatch said nothing of how this dicey operation had been accomplished.

Arunta had been on convoy work round the coast of New Guinea and adjacent islands, mainly between Moresby and Milne Bay. She came into Moresby one bright morning and let go anchor off the white-painted headquarters of the naval officer in charge.

Signalmen on her bridge watched anxiously for a flickering light to give them her next sailing orders. The buzz—originating in the heads, or the galley, or some suchlike unlikely place—had got around

to the effect that if their orders came by light from NOIC, it would be Sydney and a spot of easy-to-take long leave. She had been up here for six months, and could do with a rest.

But the signal tower obstinately remained mute, and when a fast motor-boat came creaming round the end of the jetty they knew the Sydney buzz had had the snorker.

The boat slid alongside and a brown sealed envelope, marked *Hand message. Secret and Confidential,* was passed inboard. Only important orders came that way.

Half an hour later she eased her length out through the gap in the reef, increased speed and turned her sharp nose westward for Darwin. She had one more job before Sydney.

About four o'clock of a sultry afternoon the destroyer threaded her careful way up Darwin harbour between the wrecks and secured alongside the bomb-twisted remnants of what had been a jetty.

Shortly, watched by many curious eyes, a dark, sunburned Merchant Navy officer came aboard. He had spent most of his seafaring life coasting Timor and the Indies, and knew them like the mirrored reflection of his own competent face.

Eight collapsible landing barges were waiting on the pier, and these also came aboard.

For the rest of that afternoon specially-selected crews, of which my old go-ashore oppo Keith McCormick was a member, trained in handling the rafts, swinging them outboard, lowering, then recovering them until the evolution was completed in a few seconds.

The rafts were flat-bottomed, propelled by four oars and steered by a sweep over the stern, all-same surf life saving boat. The sailors soon mastered their awkward gyrations, and by nightfall felt confident enough of handling them efficiently in the dark.

Unfortunately, there is no surf at Darwin, and lack of practice in those conditions was later to jeopardise the whole expedition.

She left Darwin next morning at 11 o'clock, heading from Timor at a fast clip of thirty knots.

The commandos were in wireless touch with military headquarters in Darwin, and this plan had been evolved and agreed upon.

The beach selected for the evacuation was a good three days' march from command headquarters, but the soldiers undertook to

accomplish the journey in time, carrying all the equipment they possibly could.

The Navy would arrive at midnight, and three small fires were to be lit on the jungle-fringed beach dead on that time, first one to starb'd, one to port, and the last one in the centre. The destroyer would steer for the third fire.

The importance of the correct fire-lighting sequence was stressed, as it would be somewhat awkward if she used for a leading mark the fire of a Japanese encampment.

Night found the destroyer speeding through a rising sea, with still a hundred miles to go. Shortly after dark a tropical downpour deluged her, reducing visibility to five hundred yards.

Faulty navigation in these island-cluttered waters meant disaster at her speed, but her navigator had taken her through closer waters than these, and she rushed on through the wet murk at undiminished speed.

A quarter of an hour before midnight the rain cleared, and five minutes later the bridge lookout reported a blur of land fine on the starb'd bow. The landfall was perfect.

Slowly then she crept up to the dully-shining line of beach, guns manned and ready, crews standing tautly round the open breeches, high-explosive shells in their arms.

As the controlling director above the bridge searched the strip of sand, the four forrard guns followed, long grey barrels open-mouthed, menacing. But nothing stirred.

Closer she crept, a dark shadow in the night, until the line of jungle could be dimly seen ahead and on either side. The time was midnight.

Suddenly, off the starb'd bow, a flicker of light showed in the blackness. The light grew swiftly into a fire. Almost at once another sprang into winking being some fifty yards to the left. And as the third fire flickered and waxed, the captain swung his bow until the centre fire bore dead ahead. The commandos were there.

Then came a pin-point of light from the beach, stuttering in dots and dashes. A carefully guarded blue light from the warship's bridge answered it. The light had said:

"Fairly strong surf running."

Now that the work had started and the tenseness relaxed, you could hear it if you listened, a dull, pounding, ceaseless roar.

Swiftly the rafts were slung out and lowered, together with the ship's two fast motor-boats. Two lines were passed and the tow headed inshore. The night was still very dark and the boats were soon lost to view. The destroyer lay there, quiet, darkened, waiting. Almost two hours passed before the first rafts returned. Their crews were soaked through. The flat-bottomed craft had proved almost unmanageable in the surf, and all had capsized. Nervous hands soon had them righted, and dragged up on the beach.

As they drew near the ship on the return trip, the sailors waiting on board to help the commandos over the side heard to their surprise a chatter of excited feminine voices. Then, above the admonitory "ssshs" which followed, the hungry wail of a child!

Three commandoes only were in that first load, the rest being Portuguese women and children who, from the village headquarters of the commandos miles inland through the mountains and jungle, had done the three-day march beside the toughened soldiers.

It was hard, and it was vitally necessary.

The captain ordered: "No more civilians to be embarked,"

There were two hundred and fifty soldiers waiting on that beach, with their equipment, and in two precious hours the boats had brought off three. The boats' crews told later how the soldiers had given up their own places in the rafts to carry out women and children.

But the Portuguese if caught there in daylight would suffer nothing. The destroyer would not be so understandingly treated.

After that the troops were embarked more rapidly. Yet still not quickly enough. The handling of the unwieldy craft in the surf was found to be so difficult that the commandos were forced to abandon their precious equipment and swim out past the line of breakers, where they were dragged in over the side.

Back on the destroyer a continuous line of men was scrambling inboard up nets and ropes. They were stark naked except for money belts round their waists. Suddenly someone remembered the women on board, and as quickly forgot them. Most of them had gone below anyway, and those that were still on deck were in no mood or inclination for salacious sight-seeing.

The soldiers' bare feet hitting the hot iron deck above the engine-room lifted a string of fervent and unbroken curses into the night air, all the more vehement because of the necessity of smothering them.

One brown body from Melbourne stubbed its toe on a ring-bolt. He sat down to rub his foot, then leaped like a hopped-up Dervish as his bare bottom made intimate contact with the steel plates.

At 6.15 the last boat came alongside. Swiftly it was emptied, then holes were smashed in sides and bottom. There was no time for hoisting. The motor-boats were already at the davit-heads, and a faint clang rose up from the engine-room.

In answer, the long hull shook a little. A smother of lively phosphorescence grew under her counter, then her bow was swinging seaward on the run out.

The only consideration now was to get clear before the rapidly approaching dawn light should disclose them to curious Jap aircraft. At top speed she plunged through, bows spuming, the arches of white rushing aft to be merged and lost in the tossing wake astern.

The soldiers were bedded down as comfortably as possible between decks. But, what with the hot soup they'd been given, on stomachs long used to rice and wild pig, and the plunging and rearing of the speeding ship, they were not as happy as they should have been.

Up above on deck, the anxious seamen round guns and depth charges watched the sun break through a rift in the clouds. For a few seconds she was bathed in a revealing glow. Then the blessed rain poured down, shedding curtains of opacity around her. It is on record that this is the first time Australian matloes have grinned in the rain...

The trip back was as incident-free as the outward voyage—as regards the Jap. But the trade winds blew, the destroyer responded over her corrugated element and some of the commandos wished themselves back on solid Timor. This tight band round the forehead, the awful remonstrance of your stomach, the swaying, always swaying deckheads and walls, the sweating, infallible prelude to heaving—these were worse than any physical discomfort you put up with on Timor.

And, worst of all, the grinning matloes went about their normal jobs as if this sort of thing were... normal.

But there was always that incredibly sweet thought, recurring even during the over-the-guardrail spasms, of what was ahead. The bucking ship might be a torture chamber, but she was tremendously fast. It could not last for ever. It didn't.

Soon after seven o'clock that night the destroyer slid in through the longest anti-submarine boom in the world and steamed more sedately up to her berth in Darwin harbour.

They lined-up on her upper-deck there, abreast the gangway; a ragged crowd dressed in anything the sailors could spare them. Haggard, emaciated, diseased, most stricken with dysentery and malaria, ineradicable lines carved in young-old faces, they stood there.

An order cracked out. Disease, exhaustion? As one man the ragged lines snapped to attention, heads up, a light in their eyes. Soldiers.

The officer strode aft and saluted the captain.

"Carry on, sir?"

"Carry on, please."

Only when he was walking back, after the effort, was his limp evident. He gave another order and his soldiers filed over the gangway. A lean, grey-haired quartermaster sergeant spoke to the coxswain at the gangway. Looking after the file of men he said, slowly:

"My only regret is we couldn't have marched ashore with our gear, as a company, and not as a crowd of bloody scarecrows."

He shrugged.

"Well, cobber, so long—and thanks for the ride."

We're in Darwin harbour; let's stay there for a few more lines.

The little English stoker petty-officer isn't the only one who owns a memory. Mine is of a somewhat identical situation, but the ship was American.

For me the anniversary of Darwin's first air-raid will always bring to mind the epic fight put up by U.S. destroyer *Peary*. From our sloop nearby I watched her ordeal from beginning to end, what time we weren't fighting, for *Peary* was caught anchored in mid-harbour, and we zigzagged past her several times at full speed to confuse the Japs' aim.

She was subjected to the general medium-level attacks; then four dive-bombers singled her out for their own.

The first howled down and washed her upper-deck with his bomb splash; the next caught her foc's'le and its desperately firing guns in a vicious flash that razed the lot; the third missed short; and the last released his load at mast-height.

The bomb had barely time to right itself before it buried its armour-capped nose deep in the little ship's vitals and blew her apart. An airlock must have formed in the after part and kept her quarterdeck afloat after the rest of her had seemingly dissolved in smoke and fuel-driven fire.

On that quarterdeck high out of the water, cocked at a sharp angle with the weight of submerged wreckage trying to drag it under, its crew barely able to stand on the slippery deck, *Peary's* last gun was still firing.

The bombers were coming in again in a strafing run to finish her off, but as these sailors still had their gun intact it hadn't occurred to them that they were finished. In six years of war there will live in my mind one picture that is glorious—the background of smoke streaked with leaping red, four demons snarling down on a broken ship three parts under, and, its crew's unadorned guts the highlight of it all, a fighting gun that belched its last shot as Darwin's oily harbour closed over its muzzle.

There were a lot of Boy Cornwalls in that war.

CHAPTER EIGHT
PRELUDE TO A STRIKE

WE ARE STILL based on Trincomalee, we are still with the British Eastern Battle Fleet, and we are still exercising.

We older hands knew the value and the necessity of this unremitting drill and training; this was a newly-formed Fleet, and though its component units were battle-seasoned enough, as a corporate whole it was still awkward, not yet possessed of that automatic appreciation and understanding and execution of orders which was an absolute must if we were to come back alive from our first engagement with an enemy who had had years to do what we were striving to achieve in months.

We had an American carrier, *Saratoga;* a French battleship, *Richelieu;* a Dutch cruiser, *Tromp;* two Dutch destroyers, three American destroyers. A heterogeneous lot. The object and orders of the commander-in-chief were to strike savagely at the Japs in the East Indies; to destroy his ships and aircraft and bases from our western end, to draw off his strength from the south-west Pacific. We hadn't struck yet, but when we did it had to be good.

So we drilled. And the younger hands, those not yet blooded in action, and so unaware of its sometimes hideous toll, chafed at the loading rammers and the breeches and the tubes and the depth charges.

What the hell is this all about? they thought, and sometimes said. There's a great ruddy Fleet in there; all we do is go out on peacetime manoeuvres and practise against friendly submarines and aircraft. And drill.

In the meantime we petty-officers and leading-seamen and gunners' mates did what we could to prepare them for *Der Tag*—and drilled 'em.

But there was time for other less spectacular things to be done. Although the best scientific brains of England and America had contributed much to life-saving devices at sea, there is still truth in the old maxim, "Nothing teaches like experience."

The experts had provided us with rafts and floats and nets. But we blokes who stood the best chance of using them have concocted all sorts of novel, and effective, little gadgets of our own.

On Australian warships we use mostly carley rafts, smaller balsa rafts, and flotanets. The first are divided into sixteen different and water-tight compartments so that a machine-gun bullet or shell won't cause the whole float to fill.

These rafts will support twenty men, standing inside on the wooden grating slung beneath, or hanging outside on to the lifelines. The balsa raft is smaller. It holds ten more, though their degree of comfort is more limited.

The flotanet is a large square affair, like a fishing-net supported by plenty of cork floats, and the survivor hangs on to the edge. The object in all three helpers is just to hang on till a rescue craft heaves in sight.

These methods of lifesaving are more or less effective, depending on circumstances, but what the sailor fighting in enemy waters bears always in the fore-front of his mind is the fact that he may have to live under these difficult conditions for days, even weeks.

And here is where his natural inventiveness starts working. We periodically held grim little conventions to try and think up better ways of staying alive.

The danger of attack from gas at sea is so remote as to be just about negligible. Yet my gun-crew would sooner leave their strides behind than their gas-respirators when closing-up for action. Most of us have seen the scum of thick fuel-oil waiting on the surface...

In Darwin, when a merchantman collected a stick of bombs in the guts, I saw man after man drowned, his nose, eyes and ears clogged by a viscous mess of oil. A gas-mask worn on the face, with the air pipe wrenched from the carbon container, and held up clear of the water, will enable a man to breathe comparatively freely, as well as saving his eyes.

Men hanging on to rafts, with their lower parts submerged, are warned pretty well almost weekly to hold themselves as far out of the water as possible; the forceful concussion of depth-charges exploding as a ship goes down will penetrate in through the passage and rupture a man's intestines to shreds. The force of the explosion is transmitted only through the water.

Once, not long after the *Barracuda* went in, we watched another aircraft trying to land on its carrier. It missed, and skidded straight

over the side. The crew was not hurt, and hurriedly clambered into their little inflatable dinghy.

And none too soon. As the sinking plane carried its depth-bombs down with it, the mounting pressure of water operated the firing mechanism, and a maelstrom of water boiled suddenly round the dinghy. It was only of rubber, it was only small, but it kept them completely untouched from the explosive effects. We watched them climb up the side of the crash destroyer. Lesson learned...

There have been many reasons advanced as to why sailors wear bellbottomed trousers. As far as we're concerned, without delving into hoary naval lore, their looseness and peculiar form of buttoning up in front are designed solely for ease of slipping when water-logged clothes could drag a weakened man down. So that was another thing we taught while waiting for the commander-in-chief to issue his Fleet Battle Orders—once in, slip off your strides! Considerable attention has been made to the fitting-out of our carley rafts, every suggestion from the lowest to the highest being weighed and judged.

In a yellow-painted kerosene tin, the lid soldered down, half a dozen fishing lines are coiled down. Instead of using precious food for bait, a piece of red flag-bunting has been found quite effective.

Signalling equipment varies from a water-tight torch to a ten inch multi-coloured red flag, whose markings are specially designed to stand out against the blue of a tropic sea. This can also be used for a covering for burned or wounded men.

In addition, A-gun crew devised a canvas awning, with broom-sticks as stanchions, lashed at either end of the raft. Not at all an extempore affair, it can be altered in a minute to a workable sail. One side is vari-coloured, the other camouflaged. In the middle they sewed a little drain-pipe to run off any rain into a barricoe.

It was a problem at first to find a durable drinking measure that would not rust. Then the layer of one of the oerlikons hit on the idea of a used shell from his gun—a brass cylinder about six inches long and half an inch wide. Thus we have a utensil strong enough to resist the propelling power of a charge of cordite, and as salt-resisting as best naval brass can make it.

Water is carried in the usual wooden barricoe, or small cask,

and also in a container of several compartments to prevent complete leakage through a bullet hole.

It has been found most difficult for men, themselves . weakened, to drag a half-drowned mate out of the water and in over the side of a float. So the hands in the bosun's store devised a little Jacob's ladder, which, with a rope side and two treads, hangs a foot or so under water.

Men are taught to jump into burning oil feet first, which will in most cases keep them immune from serious burns, and then swim underwater as far as possible before surfacing.

Once, when *Prince of Wales* was heeling with the tonnage of water inside her off Singapore, a young rating jumped from the bridge over the side. In his inexperience and understandable confusion he chose the side higher out of the water. And crashed to his death against her exposed bilges.

Now we taught that all men were to jump from bow or stern, though still from the high side, as the danger of being struck by sliding gear, or by the ship turning over on top of you, is very real.

We attach the greatest importance to our life-saving equipment. Once, after refit in an Australian dockyard a ship was sunk: its lifeboats had been found to have been rifled of chocolate slabs and tins of condensed milk. We went into dock once, and the captain broadcast over the loud-speakers:

"Any man tampering with or removing any gear from lifeboats or rafts is guilty of the worst kind of sabotage and will be dealt with accordingly."

The ship's company was behind him to a man.

We went to sea from Trincomalee and we exercised with the Fleet and we returned to Trincomalee and we waited.

There was little enough to do ashore, so we spent a good portion of our harbour-time afloat—not in the ship, but in the harbour.

I remember once commenting to a swaddie that I couldn't understand why so many men joined the Army—soldiers have to lump their gear and their personal possessions on their own backs; we have a great floating palace to do that for us, and we eat hot food and we enjoy fresh-water showers and we go to sleep in warm, dry beds. Whereas the men in the Desert and on the Kokoda Trail...

"Quite right," conceded my soldier drinking-mate, "You enjoy all those things. There's one other considerable difference between life in the Army and in the Navy. If *we* get into strife, we can walk home...!"

M'mm... We couldn't walk home, so we learned to paddle. If a ship is sunk in a fleet action—and that is how we'd go, if our luck ran out—there is rather too much for your consorts to do to bother about you. If we were sunk, we could expect that boats and possibly rafts would be splintered to uselessness. We'd be on our own, us against the sea. And probably for hours. So we learned to paddle.

It was slightly funny at first, our exercises in the warm water of Trincomalee harbour. But the connotations of our employment were just a bit too grim to sustain humour. By the second day we were deadly serious.

We waited just long enough for our dinners to have been digested sufficiently to obviate cramp. Then over we'd go. Work packed up for the day at noon in the burning heat, and at any time of the afternoon you'd see scores of men over the side. You'd also see men climb back on board and jump again, from the whaler, from the top of the guard-rails, from underneath the guard-rails, from the edge of the bridge. Each man chose his exit point from near the spot where he could expect to be at action stations, and he practised until he could jump as far clear of the ship's side as he could.

And we weren't in swimming trunks. It was no Bondi frolic. We were clothed in battle dress, for that was how we'd expect to go. And, at first for a few minutes, and then for a quarter of an hour, and finally for hours at a time, we'd just stay in the water near the ship, floating, paddling quietly, the sole object to condition our muscles and our breathing to stay afloat for as long as we could.

We'd have our life-jackets blown up, we'd have sun helmets on to protect against the fierce sun, we'd practise at slipping our trousers under water. But all the time we tried to make as few exhausting movements as possible—all the time we were conscious of Time, of the necessity to stay afloat until a ship could be sent back to do something about us.

We were not ordered into the water. No captain or first-lieutenant organised our extra-curricular instruction. One man started it one

day, and offered his reason. The next day he had a score of cobbers in with him. But the real reason for our deliberate soaking was the feeling that the Fleet had now grown to full strength, and that any day now we'd go to sea, and we wouldn't come back that day, or the next. We wouldn't come back until the Fleet had delivered a fair portion of its magazines at some Jap-held base.

You didn't need to be a senior staff-officer to get the message. The Fleet was obviously as large as ever it would get, considering the global commitments of the Royal Navy.

Crammed into Trincomalee Harbour, safe behind the great anti-submarine net strung right across its throat, were three battleships—*Queen Elizabeth, Valiant, Richelieu*. The first two had risen Phoenix-like, if not from the ashes, then from the bottom of Alexandria Harbour, upon whose muddy expanse they had been sat by the explosive warheads of Italian two-man torpedoes three years before. Now *Queen Elizabeth*, as she had been then, was the flagship, wearing the flag of the commander-in-chief, Admiral Sir James Somerville.

Backing that little lot was the full-loaded 37,000 tons and six fifteen-inch guns of battle-cruiser *Renown*, weighty sister to *Hood*, of the *Bismarck* business. Between them, the heavy units mounted thirty fifteen-inch guns, as well as batteries of six-inch. The Frenchman carried his punch in enormous quadruple turrets on the foc's'le, four barrels thicker than a man to each turret.

There were two Fleet carriers, big boys, *Illustrious* and the American *Saratoga*. Six cruisers, most of them six-inch ships, with the eight-inch *London* and the Dutchman *Tromp*.

And close on a score of destroyers, all modern and fast, the Down Under outfit represented by *Nizam, Napier, Quiberon, Quickmatch* and ourselves. There were three Yank destroyers, who'd come over with their carrier, and a couple of Dutch boats.

British, American, French, Dutch, Australian. An international brigade based in India, about to attack Japanese forces in or about the Netherlands East Indies. And, we reckoned, now more than ready.

The admiral could not have been aware of our expert assessment of the situation. Every day we expected sailing orders, and every day we lay there, or went to sea and drilled, and came back through the boom.

There were many more ships than those mentioned north of here. There were minesweepers and corvettes and Fairmiles, harbour-defence launches and a submarine depot-ship and submarines; fleet oilers, several of them, fleet tenders, scores of them, a few sloops, an old six-inch cruiser whose armour and guns and speed kept her out of Somerville's compact and hard-hitting fleet.

Hundreds of ships, with not one carrying the same name. Thwarted from getting at the Jap—and knowing that once we did I'd wish myself back home in Trinco—I wondered at the naming of the multitude of ships in the great Royal Navy. And filled the time of waiting with some non-gunnery research.

Our problem in the R.A.N. is not so great, but in the war-expanded Royal Navy there are so many craft of such a diverse nature that a Standing Ships' Names Committee had to be formed.

As far as possible, names were selected which indicate the class of ship and the work she does, both for psychological and aesthetic reasons. Hence, *Colossus* would hardly do for a minesweeper, nor *Ladybird* for a battleship.

The R.A.N. seems prosaic in its bestowing of a sea-fighter's name—*Brisbane, Melbourne, Diamantine, Norman*... In the Royal Navy imagination is not stifled. What better names than *Scourge* for a destroyer, whose main object in life is to seek out and beat the life from a skulking submarine? Or *Voracious*, a submarine, with shark-like nose and waiting torpedo tubes?

When the escort carriers were introduced with their broods of deadly anti-submarine aircraft in the Battle of the Atlantic, they were titled appropriate—*Battler, Biter, Attacker, Striker, Stalker.* Perhaps the most graceful of war craft, next to the rakish destroyers, are the almost as fast six-inch cruisers. Here the names committee drew heavily on classical mythology with H.M. Ships *Achilles, Arethusa, Ajax, Ariadne*, and *Hermione.*

In the Mediterranean the six-inch monitor *Terror* used her cognomen to appropriate purpose on the flanks of Rommel's army.

With the advent of war and vast numbers of newly-launched ships it was obvious that a great deal of care would have to be taken if the Fleet was not to become a muddle of unsuitably-named ships. The

committee's policy was to revive old names wherever possible, and to do its best to keep names more or less within the classes of ships wherein they had been borne previously.

But it does not necessarily follow that a ship's forebears were of a similar class, H.M.S. *Tiger* is a good case in point: the second-last ship to bear the name was a battle-cruiser, but the previous *Tiger* was a destroyer, an ancient skin and bones midget. The present *Tiger* of the Royal Navy loads guided missiles... Generally speaking, however, names can be usually sorted out into their various classes.

It will be realised that one of the greatest difficulties in selecting names for an expanding fleet is to ensure that there will not be ships bearing names which will be confused in signals or the clash of action, such as *Battler* and *Rattler.*

This is more difficult than you might imagine, for it sometimes happens that these similarities are not appreciated until the ships are in commission, and there is trouble over mail and stores. I remember when a couple of hundred fifteen-inch battleship's shells were delivered to a somewhat bewildered sloop. Another snag has been the confusion which has sometimes arisen between our ships and those of Allied Navies, particularly the American. Naming a cruiser *Canberra* was a nice gesture, but it effectively prohibits another Australian ship bearing that name.

During war, it is customary as soon as a ship is lost to lay down the keel of another bearing the same name. One example comes to mind. When the first *Gurkha* was lost, the Gurkha regiments were so distressed that they subscribed a day's pay for each man in order to help build a new ship of the same name. The submarine service has been an exception to this rule: names of boats lost have not been revived.

A particular instance of the nice judgment exercised in the choice of names was evidenced during the Pluto pipe-laying operation across the Channel.

Code names were used, and Disney's dog having once got his nose in, it was natural to bring in some of his friends. Thus Bambi was the British terminal and Dumbo the French.

With the two big merchant-ships used however, a difficulty presented itself. One merchantman's name, *Empire Ridley,* was too

much like the destroyer *Ripley*. History at once suggested *Latimer* as the complement of *Ridley,* and that famous martyr bishop's last words at the stake to his fellow sufferer—"Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out"—were a clarion to the men of Force Pluto.

So H.M.S. *Latimer* carried these historic words engraved on an oak plaque throughout the operation as she laid the cross-Channel pipeline.

If ever you are lucky enough to witness the launching of a warship, and see the formal bottle of wine broken on the bow—swung by the admiral's pretty daughter, or a princess, who may have remembered that she was the "descendant" of a long line of priestesses who had once named Phoenician ships by bathing them in the red blood of human sacrifice, for that is what the christening ceremony means—you will remember, perhaps, that the name *Valiant,* in foot-high brass letters on her stern, signifies, not only appreciation of her qualities, but a designed offering of men who once, maybe, sailed in her predecessor.

Standing on the foc's'le this afternoon, gazing at the packed and ranked mass of steely grey, I was impressed by the penchant for retaining long-gone names.

Those British battleships were all descendants in name of ships that long ago defeated the Great Armada. I felt suddenly, unashamedly, proud. It was a strong, highly-disciplined force, and it had such a glorious tradition of victory.

CHAPTER NINE
THE FLEET STRIKES

SOMETHING WAS UP. We knew that. But then it always was. The big blokes had furled their awnings, had hoisted their boats, had tested their turret guns. They had been doing that for more months than any of us cared to look back on, and always they came back to harbour and spread their awnings and lowered their boats and trained their guns fore and aft.

But this time... Nobody knew a ruddy thing, not even the captain's messenger, whose pronouncements of the admiral's intentions were invariably listened to with rapt attention, even though they invariably proved wrong. Yet there was a feeling about...

It would be difficult to analyse it. The feeling, or premonition, was compounded of many things. Of seeing big shells being hoisted inboard on the battlers—topping-up; of seeing our own oil-bunkers being filled to capacity, and the gunner, under orders, checking carefully our ammunition state; of hope and wishful thinking, of—more concrete—seeing the admiral's captains repair on board the flagship for what might have been a cocktail party, and for what Spike Reardon assured us was in actuality to receive their last-minute combat orders.

But most of all we guessed something was up because even the bathroom sweeper knew that the Fleet was working smoothly as a unit, and that we couldn't hang around here for ever. Even Tokio knew about us... One day Tokio Radio vouchsafed the information that the Allies were building up a strong force of battleships, cruisers and carriers in the Indian Ocean. Listening, I remember wondering if they knew just how precisely right they were...?

Then, yesterday, Commodore (Destroyers) had come aboard. He was a big man, brother of a famous actor, and he stood before we assembled and potential killers on the after torpedo tubes and he spoke vehemently for ten minutes. He ended with a raised clenched fist and:

"The order is drill, drill, drill to kill—kill the Jap!"

He may have wondered at our unresponsive silence. His brother was the brilliant actor... And we'd been at war, most of us, for five

years, and that sort of overdone guff doesn't go down well, not at all. Still, he was a fine destroyer driver, and that's all that really counted.

So all these things added up. Added up to the feeling that this was it, *Der Tag* has arrived. The next bosun's pipe was routine, but you could feel the restless and subdued excitement it surfaced:

"Secure ship for sea."

One thing grows on another. Okay, that's no original growth of phrase. But I especially remember this hot, tropical morning in Trincomalee Harbour, if only for the fact that though my crowd were well-trained (my three leading-seamen are included in the self-eulogy) on this morning they worked as if they'd just been promised three weeks' long leave in Sydney.

And they worked like that because of the excitement pervading the whole ship, because one man's excitement spread to another, and his snappy work round the cutter's falls spread to the bloke testing the guardrail pins, and his...

So it grew, until we were like a crowd of Girl Guides who've been allowed to wear nylon stockings. And then, climax to all our hopes and beliefs, came the first-lieutenant's voice through the speakers:

"The captain will speak to the ship's company in five minutes' time."

Now this was a revolutionary departure. There was only one thing Dad would be talking about—our destination and purpose. And it was an inflexible rule that these things were revealed only when the Fleet or ship was at sea. Tokio radio knew what was building up, and the Japs didn't get that information from reconnaissance aircraft—they would have been shot to pieces by the Fleet's Air Arm. So, patently, there were enemy agents ashore; and so we were told of our commitments when the island was well astern.

But, for all practical purposes, we were at sea now. Every man was on board, and there would be no further contact with the shore until we came back. Dad would be safe in talking. He also knew that we wanted to know what was up this time.

I've been mixed up in some crash runs to sea, sometimes when a submarine has been detected outside the boom. We got ready fast

then, but I've never seen a ship prepared so quickly as *Nepal* was in that next five minutes.

Boats hauled up, booms swung in, falls were reeled up, awnings came down and were stowed away quicker than at admiral's inspection. And by the time the speakers cleared their throats the ship was secured and ready in all respects for sea. And for whatever Dad had to tell us.

I was in the petty-officers' mess when it happened, had been for some minutes. There were about six of us—the leading-hands had the weight—and the only operation not mentioned as probable during this sweep was a trip home to Cockatoo for a refit. There were limits even to our sanguinity...

Through the open portholes you could see the three battleships, and beyond them the lofty sides of the two carriers. The bows of every ship had been hauled round until they pointed straight through the gate in the boom.

Dad wasted no time. His voice, casual as usual, came through:

"Pay attention, everybody. The Eastern Fleet is going out on a strike. We (the destroyers) are escorting the Battle Fleet and Carrier Force to a Japanese island base in the East Indies. We shall approach to within one hundred miles of enemy territory. We have information that there is a fairly heavy concentration of shipping in the harbour. If the Japanese Fleet comes out, we will engage 'em and sink 'em. That's all."

The laconic voice clipped off. We looked at each other. Every man in that mess had been in action more times than he'd had hot dinners, but this time it was different. We'd never had to wait so long, nor work so hard, for a strike. The wireless bloke summed it all up.

"You bloody little hum-twicer!" he grinned.

Talk surged out. I went to the porthole, watching the battleships. It had been a long time. We had men on board who'd watched *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* go down, and men who'd seen from carley rafts their little destroyer *Vampire* shatter to pieces under the pitiless onslaught of forty Jap dive-bombers in these very waters. I myself had been in Darwin during that first smashing raid on the nineteenth—it would be on the morning of the nineteenth when our planes this time would reach their targets.

Later, when fully out, we learned that the objective of the strike was to be Sabang, the big Jap base on the northern tip of Sumatra. There were oil-tanks there, there were aerodromes, and there were ships. How many ships, and if they were warships, we did not know.

All we knew now, all we wanted to know after those unrelieved months of monotonous training, was that at last those prefacing words, "for exercise only," were to be deleted from our firing orders.

As usual, the destroyers got out first. But the big fellows were already beginning to shift their bulk as we slipped past them. We nosed through the boom and in a few minutes had taken up our screening arrowhead formation. A couple of boats had been sent ahead, sniffing around for anything subsurface that might be tempted to take a look or a shot at what was lumbering through the boom.

It was something to look at! The flagship came first, her spreading beam just clearing the boom-gate, her huge armoured snout forcing a toppling mound of white before it, signal halliards a mass of brightly-coloured flags.

We'd all, every one of us, tested through communications and guns as soon as we'd got out. Now the flagship was doing the same. But where our pea-shooters whipped round under the pulse of the training pumps, those great armour-plated turrets back there moved slowly, the guns sticking from the steel looking in their camouflage paint like rigid pythons; turrets training slowly from left to right, ponderous, powerful, the twin guns lifting till they stuck up at their maximum elevation, huge menacing fingers more than two feet across at their muzzles, and much thicker than that where they disappeared into the gunhouses.

Each of those guns weighed more than *ninety-seven tons,* without the breech mechanisms. The barrels were a bit over fifty feet long; they would reach across the average suburban block of land.

They came out, one behind the other, three leviathans. Three floating islands of machinery and guns and armour and men.

The flagship was typical. She displaced thirty thousand six hundred tons. At the waterline she was covered with specially-tempered steel thirteen inches thick, an armadillo overlay protecting her great guts. On the gunhouses, which houses the gun-breeches and the loading mechanism and the men manning them, she carried eleven inches of armour-plate.

She carried also three thousand four hundred tons of fuel oil. This capacity gave her a radius of action of four thousand four hundred miles. She was driven by four propellers, and her Admiralty-type boilers transmitted eighty thousand horsepower to those giant clover-leaves of phosphor bronze. Thirty-thousand tons of steel driven through the resistant water at thirty miles an hour.

To fight her, to man her multitude of smaller guns and control-towers, her grant boilers and four engines, there were in her just under twelve hundred officers and men.

There were three of these monsters, and now behind them came the aircraft-carriers, harshly ugly in their flat-topped practicality, flight-decks massed with fighter and torpedo-bomber aircraft.

We watched, having seen all this before, but now worked upon by the alchemy of final purpose. Silent we watched, our feelings in our silence. The fuse-setter on the left gun became our spokesman. His voice was low, subdued, wondering.

"Jeez," he said.

Another ten minutes and Trincomalee harbour was strangely empty. Another half-hour and the whole island was a dark blur well astern. The Fleet made a splendid picture, steaming through a sea as mute as a dream, in close, compact battle formation, destroyers thrown out ahead in their screening V, then inside the cruisers, fast, held down to twenty knots, themselves screening the solid metal core of battleships and carriers. Far ahead, weaving back and across a blue sky, a Catalina cleared the way.

The second day out we dropped our guard-rails down. This simple operation gave a peculiar look of speed, and efficiency, and readiness to the ship: that nervy look of "cleared for action."

Then the captain passed on through the speakers a message from the commander-in-chief:

"Our objective is the harbour of Sabang, an island base just off the northern tip of Sumatra. The Jap has large concentrations of shipping there, oiling wharves, and aerodromes. Our bombers and fighters will take off at 0500 tomorrow morning, and we hope to catch 'em with their kimonos up. so far we are undetected."

That night, tuning for the B.B.C. news, we picked up Japanese music.

When the news came through, we heard an announcement to the effect that Lord Louis Mountbatten, Commander-in-Chief South-East Asia, had established his headquarters in Ceylon, "for the purpose of directing powerful blows against the enemy."

While the announcer's, cultivated tones flowed smoothly on, Mountbatten's Fleet, darkened, purposeful, in all its organised perfectness, slid steadily on towards the harbour of Sabang.

It was a lovely night, the eighteenth.

There was little cloud in the sky, and above the masthead the stars hung countless in a thin cloud of luminous dust. Our blackout of course was perfect, and not a slit of light showed in the shadow of the quiet night that lay upon the ship.

We closed-up for our normal watches at guns and tubes, and there was no need now for petty-officers and leading-hands to walk round their mountings ensuring that no man slept.

Talk was sporadic, quiet. It might be a bloodless operation for this great Fleet, it might all devolve on the aircraft. It might also be a desperate action, if those ships the admiral had spoken of decided to come out and have a go.

The older hands knew this. The younger ones sensed it, and they knew what they would be in for—hadn't we instructors done our level best over the past months to put them in the picture?

The night wore on. No sound from the dim mass of ships behind us, no sound but the sigh of the wind in the hilliards and rigging, and the soft hiss of the water sliding wetly down her sides, and the distant throb of the screws beating round at reduced speed.

Everyone on board had been getting ready for the coming dawn.

They wore an odd assortment of clothes, from greys and long khaki trousers to clean overalls, but all covering arms and legs from the green hot flashes from guns, shells, and bombs. We steamed on.

Watches drew to their close, gun-crews and lookouts and signalmen were relieved. Then, at 4.30 in the morning, the ship closed quickly and quietly up at action stations.

We stood there round our guns, waiting for the dawn. From my gun I could see the long black barrels of the oerlikons and pom-pom pointing at the sky, a shadow moving restlessly behind the armoured shields as the layers shifted position.

Now and again the twin barrels of A-gun below us swept round with a grind of machinery as the trainer eased the strain on the hydraulic pump. B-mounting did the same.

Then it was light, and the shapes of the consort ships gradually formed from the dimness of the sea; the rakish beauty of the destroyers and the harsh ugliness of the battleships and carriers.

We were not detailed as crash destroyer for the carriers this time, but the Fleet was in such compact formation that we could see plainly enough.

When exercising, the carriers had always reminded me of fussy old hens with their brood of chickens. But now as they turned into the wind, their attendant destroyers racing close by off the quarter, they seemed dark and menacing, not fussy, but steelily menacing.

Every fifteen seconds a roaring black shape spat from their decks, to circle round once, then, high in the lightening sky, forming up and winging away on their mission like a swarm of angry hornets.

With protecting fighters orbiting overhead the Battle Fleet hauled off to seaward, for manoeuvring room should the Jap be stung into engaging by sea.

Time moved on. Watchful, waiting time. We had breakfast at the guns, and we knew that by now the bombers would be over the target. The morning passed, the sun climbed higher up the cobalt vault and we felt its fierce heat, sweating under the anti-flash helmets and long gloves.

Then large formations of aircraft were sighted approaching from the east, which was the land.

They were ours. With long-drilled ease the great ships gathered in their satiated broods, then the Fleet formed-up in battle formation, our bow swung round, and we were heading out on the run home. We hadn't fired a shot. I had thought that the admiral, once the evolution had been completed and the instruments of it back, would retire at full speed towards his base.

Nothing of the sort. At a steady sixteen knots, when we could have raised twenty-four, the Fleet steamed leisurely away from burning Sabang. One gathered the impression that Somerville knew the strength of his own forces, and was giving the enemy every opportunity to share his knowledge.

I wasn't sure if I were relieved or disappointed. A man's experience and commonsense told him he was a fool not to be thankful that everything had gone so well—and at such long-range. But we'd been training for such a hell of a long time... A man never knows when he's well off!

Soon, however, the first messengers of a hurt and disturbed enemy began to appear.

Two torpedo-bombers were reported by our patrolling fighters fifty miles astern, coming towards. The order was passed to close-up in the first degree of readiness, which meant actually closed-up at positions at the guns. Then:

"On anti-flash gear."

This looked like it. Torpedo-bombers would certainly go for the battleships. To get at them they'd have to fly over us. And our 4.7-inch quickfirers might have been specially designed for low-flying, approaching torpedo-bombers. But two of them...

As we waited there, seeing nothing astern of the reported enemy, I remember there was apparent in the attitude of the gun-crew a quiet, steady confidence.

You didn't need to be a Freud to understand why. The battleships and lean cruisers on either side, with their A.A. guns skyraking at all angles, engendered a distinct feeling of comfort. Apart, of course, from our own armament. And now, slipping in close astern, another British destroyer paired with us.

We could see nothing, but the captain had electronic ears as well as eyes. As the reports came into the bridge he correlated them and passed on the information through the sound reproduction equipment.

"Those two torpedo-bombers reported astern were intercepted by our fighters. They were 'Kate' class, single-engined—oh, by the way, they were shot into the sea—with their main distinguishing feature, the long glassed cockpit, somewhat modified."

In the midst of life, in the midst of death, the ruddy training goes on!

"It has apparently been—what's that, Number One? Yes, I see it now. Hello, ship's company. That black smoke on the horizon astern is another torpedo-bomber. "

Looking aft I saw a pillor of dense black smoke stretching languidly in to the clear sky. Jap number three.

My Number Three, the rammer number, started:

"What's up with them bastards? Don't they think we wanna play too?" And, as a trio of fighters streaked with obvious and malignant intent towards a black dot on the horizon, pointing to an innocent seagull flapping over the foc's'le:

"It's a wonder they let that bloody bird come in!"

We had forgotten the Fleet fighters. We had never been in action before with such a pleasant superiority in airborne assistants. But now we began to think that the fly-boys were earning the dough, and that the Fleet would be unlucky if anything got to within fifty miles of it on this bright blue day. We steamed on, guns unblooded, and reaction set in. Then the first reports of the party ashore began to come in, and we felt a little better.

Here is what a newspaper correspondent aboard the American carrier thought of their share:

"The whole action was under the personal direction of Admiral Sir James Somerville, but the air-attack, suggested by Captain John H. Cassidy, followed out a pattern which proved successful at Rabaul, Buka, Conis, Nauru, the Gilberts and Marshall Islands.

"At 0530 Commander Caldwell started to launch our striking force. We were sailing over a calm sea, but the engineer pushed the ship up to thirty knots, and in quick time our planes were in the air. A sister carrier, Royal Navy, launched a full quota of Barracudas and F4Us.

"The first run on the airfields was made when the Jap admiral was awakened from his slumbers. Admiral Somerville has expressed the hope that we might catch the Japs with their kimonos up. We did. Fifteen planes, consisting of Zekes, Kates, and large transport types, were destroyed on the field before the Japs could get a plane in the air. Meanwhile another group of eight planes visited the L'honga airfield to work over the Betty's on the ground there. A total of twenty-four Jap planes was the day's record.

"The bomber and torpedo planes had a field day. One two-thousand-pound bomb hit on each of the two five-thousand-ton cargo ships in the harbour. There were two Jap destroyer-escort vessels, both of which were thoroughly strafed and left on fire. A direct hit with a thousand-pound bomb was made on the fuel tanks and smoke

rose to a height of three thousand feet. Twelve five-hundred-pound bomb hits were scored in the dockyard and wharf area, left in a mass of flames. Jap barracks received due attention. Four five-hundred-pound bomb hits and one two-thousand-pound bomb hits were registered there.

"Then the fighters followed up with strafing. The radio station was smashed with four more bomb hits, and three one-thousand-pounders did their work in the dispersal area in the south-east corner of the Sabang airfield. Three more half-ton bombs crashed into the hangar workshops.

"Meanwhile, the Japs got the word that something was amiss, and their anti-aircraft guns swung into action. There was intense light A.A. fire, but only a few heavy guns.

"Most serious of the hits made by the Jap gunners was that which left the plane of Lieutenant Dale (Klondike) Klahn, of Laramie, Wyoming, in flames. Commander Clifton anxiously followed his former wingman until Klahn's plane nosed over the sea. His parachute opened just in time to break his fall, and he was soon paddling about in the water, just two miles north-east of the airfield, within range of the Jap guns.

"Then one of the most dramatic rescues attempted in this war was executed successfully by a British submarine. It received a distress signal and rushed twelve miles to the rescue, picking up Lieutenant Klahn amid a salvo of heavy guns, then doing a crash dive. Captain Cassidy sent the following despatch to the C.-in-C. of our forces about this rescue:

> 'We take hats off to submarine who proceeded twelve miles on surface to a point two miles north-east of airfield to rescue our pilot. Rescue was made while under fire from shore batteries which could not be kept silenced due to exhaustion of ammunition in our fighters.'

"Meanwhile a Jap destroyer spotted the submarine and started towards it, but was stopped dead in its tracks by our planes. Despite the heroism of the rescue, it was found that international complications might result from it. 'Klondike' is the champion eater of Air Group Twelve (and that takes in a lot of territory), and it is not expected that either the quality or the quantity of British supplies

will meet with his approval.

"Meanwhile, life on board was extremely interesting. One general quarters alarm came about 0745, but the bogies turned out to be friendly planes from the British carrier. Then, from some point, the Japs headed a numbers of planes at us.

"Lieutenant Charles S. Motz, aided by the expert directions of our fighter director, swooped down on one Jap torpedo plane fifty miles from the ship, and sent it crashing into the sea. Another soon followed, riddled by bullets from the plane of Lieutenant W. Fisher.

"All this was going on beyond the range of vision of the taxpayers on board, who hoped to get in on this show. They were not disappointed. Two fighters closed in on another Jap torpedo-plane and sent it into the sea about twenty miles from our ship. The explosion and smoke were visible from the flight-deck. The gunnery department is sending an official protest, because as usual it stood eagerly at triggers, which have not yet been turned on Jap planes.

"Just how much damage was done by the raid and the general effect on Jap strategy is not known. No doubt the Japs thought they were having bad dreams when they saw the U.S. insignia on the attacking planes. They now know that just as they have been hit from the north and south and east, they can expect to be hit from the west time and time again—until the Rising Sun emblem can no longer be seen anywhere in this area.

"It is expected, of course, that the Japs will attempt a face-saving raid on our base. Flyers who did not get a chance in yesterday's raid are hoping that such will be the case. And the strong fleet which accompanied us on this strike guarantees that Jap ships, except submarines, will not venture far into the Bay of Bengal again.

"The only disappointment in the whole action is that we did not get a chance to 'enebdize' the Jap port. But it might be rude to have disturbed the Jap admiral in his afternoon siesta, too."

Things were completely quiet now, the only aircraft in the sky our escorting fighters orbiting round us in a fast, wide circle.

The Fleet steamed on across a sea like blue enamel, the clouds' reflections trembling in the unbroken ripples of our wake.

All that calm day we were unmolested. We remained closed-up at action throughout, feeling pretty certain that with darkness he would

have a crack with torpedo-bombers. At our cruising speed we would not be much more than two hundred and fifty miles from land, easy range for his torpedo-carrying aircraft.

During the day, though closed-up, we had been relaxed, gun-crews handy about the mountings, while not actually manning them. The strain of manning a gun position, staring at director pointers or waiting with shells, can tire a man more than a couple of hours loading-drill. So we waited, relaxed.

At 6.30, just as dusk was drawing in over the sea, we closed-up again in the first degree of readiness. This was the favourite time, and, like dawn, it always meant general quarters.

No sooner had night fallen completely than contact was established, "raid coming in far astern."

We had no fighters up—the Fleet would handle this with its own traditional weapons. And with the amount of muck soon to be in the air it was just as well the Corsairs and Avengers and Barracudas were snugged down for the night.

B-gun was trained round right aft, as far as she'd go, cordite cylinders lying in the loading trays, breeches open, waiting, each fuse-setter with a long, yellow high-explosive shell on the table before him, ready.

The barrels of the port oerlikons just behind us moved restlessly down the dark sky.

Then came the radar report:

"Raid four miles astern!"

Simultaneous with this electric announcement came an eager and appreciative yell from one of my loading-numbers:

"Boys, they're into it!"

They certainly were! The volume of fire was enormous, but it was not that which makes that night stick forcibly in my memory. I had seen the normal amount of action during five years at war at sea, and in the south-west Pacific was to see a good deal more in a cruiser: but this was the first time I was really scared.

Dive-bombing attacks, torpedo-bomber raids, submarine depth-charging, a torpedo which just missed my corvette's bows, all the usual hazards of life at sea: and this was different. It was something in its massed volume of fire I had never seen before—and it was aimed directly at us now.

We had dropped back with nightfall, so that we were steaming abreast the battle-line. Three battleships, a narrow width of water, we destroyers—and, boring in over the destroyers, the Jap torpedo-bombers heading for the battleships.

To engage the aircraft, the battleships had to fire towards *us.*

From the great ships there burst suddenly into being the greatest firework display I had ever seen, coloured lights thrusting vehemently against the sky in a confused and fiery pattern.

Lines of tracer from multiple pom-pom and oerlikon stitched across the sea towards us, red-hot meteors streaking out. They crossed the sky in thousands, like sparks blown from scores of chimneys on fire.

Then came solid sheets of flame stabbing from the ships' sides and we knew their four-inch had opened. The shells burst viciously just above water, the splash of splinters plain to see in the flash of the following explosions. Burst above the water between us and the battleships...

The roar of the tremendous barrage was loud and continuous, above the rattling cacophony of short-range weapons the duller, louder crack of the four-inch.

I learned later I was not alone in my fright... We knew, of course, that the battleships would be in barrage-firing, which meant that their shells were set to explode at a predetermined distance from the guns; thus making the attacking planes fly through the wall of explosions. But it needed only a few fuse-setters in all that tumult to put the wrong setting on, and those shells would smash into us.

It was not nice to be on the delivery end... But the fuse-setters did not set the wrong range on their shells. And that was the real lesson of that short and fierce night action—the never-to-be-forgotten training and steadiness of those British gunners.

As abruptly as it started the firing ceased. For several seconds afterwards, the tracer already in the sky continued its curved flight, the shells winking out one by one as the phosphorous burnt out.

We were not in the slightest surprised when the captain broadcast that the Japs had turned away! Oddly enough, I felt a strange kinship with those torpedo-bomber pilots... And later, back in base talking to a battleship gunnery-control man, I learned that the Japs had broken

away before all the guns had really got going!

But the Jap was game. After the first one, attack followed attack, first a run to starb'd, then to port. It was estimated that there were at least ten torpedo-bombers making the runs, but not one of them came anywhere near dropping range for his torpedoes.

Silence again. No sound in the quiet night but the familiar overtones of wind and hissing sea. No sound or lights from those hulking great shapes to port, nothing from the dark outlines of the cruisers or carriers.

No sound—but a smell. There was little wind, and the stench of burnt cordite was heavy and acrid in the air. It caught at your throat, bitingly. It was the invisible and palpable evidence of the violence of the past few minutes.

We'd beaten them off. We couldn't see a thing in the blackness, but by now they would be winging their thwarted way back to Sabang. We were still excited, still nervy With tension after what we'd seen. And we hadn't fired a shot.

Then, so abruptly that we acted wholly by instinct and training, we were into it.

We could not see, but radar could. The orders snapped out, the director swung, the mounting followed with a rasp of straining machinery. Right round to the starb'd beam, the barrels depressing until they were almost horizontal. We didn't need the information from the transmitting-station—only torpedo-bombers came in that low.

The phone-number yelled:

"Barrage low, low, low!"

The loading trays clanged over, the power-rammers streaked forward and withdrew, breeches slammed shut, then with a crashing roar we'd opened. Pom-poms and oerlikons went into action in a snarling crackle of sound.

For more than a minute we poured out everything we had at the approaching bomber. That meant over two hundred big projectiles, and thousands of pom-pom and oerlikon shells.

The bomber sheered off. The guns fell reluctantly silent.

That was the last we saw of them. Still in precise formation, still completely untouched, the Fleet continued its course. There were no further enemy contacts.

But the Fleet's immunity was not the significant thing about that short and vicious night attack. Not to me. As captain of a mounting, I suppose I must have conducted hundreds of firings, from an old worn-out gun in a corvette to the eight-inch monster in a cruiser's turret. But nothing in the past gave me as much repressed exultation as that night shoot west of Sabang.

The quick-firing guns had been new to me; how must they have seemed to youngsters who'd never been in action? We'd drilled, yes, but firing at drill bears about the same relationship to firing under attack as ice-cream does to boiling oil. They'd manned their guns like veterans, they'd not missed a round. And they'd done this in a pitch-black night against an invisible target.

They were talking now, joking and laughing, letting the tension drain out; not so much the tension of fear but the tautness of wondering how they would go in their first action.

It was hard, and they probably hated my guts for it—but one must maintain the gun-captainly image, and one never knew if there were more Jap aircraft lining us up for another run. My voice cut into the undisciplined chatters, even though I was feeling more exultant than they:

"Pack up that row! Anyone'd think we'd crashed the whole bloody Jap air-force! Get those empties cleared away!"

The noise ceased. A careful mutter here and there. But they got rid of the empty cordite cylinders. Their average age was nineteen.

Two days later all ships steamed in turn slowly through the torpedo net boom and secured to the berths from which, five days previously, they'd slipped on Mount batten's first strike against the eastern enemy. The operation was completely successful. We had effected heavy damage to one of the enemy's best harbours, without loss to ourselves. We had vindicated the constant and gruelling training of months past. But, most important of all to us, the operation had made us, once again, a contented ship.

Followed a period of intensive—exercises!

God help those little yellow men if ever this Fleet catches up with 'em! And then, almost a month after Sabang, there spread round the Fleet the universal buzz that something was up.

Those buzzes were becoming almost reliable... That afternoon the watch was piped to muster in the dog-watches, to get inboard tons of stores.

Meat, potatoes, boxes of butter, tinned fruit, case after case came in and was stowed tightly in the store-rooms until they were chock-a-block. Then they were stacked in the passages outside.

The oil lighter came alongside and pumped ton after ton into us, till every available cubic inch of bunker space was filled. After storing was completed the awnings were furled, and those boats not essential hoisted and secured snugly for sea. There was indeed something up.

Next morning we knew definitely we were going to sea.

But nothing was released of what was to come with us. Was it the whole gubbins, or was this just some independent mission, some long-range convoy perhaps, for whose dull routine we had been selected?

No! The whole flotilla slipped first, the four ships of our trot leaving their buoys at precisely the same moment, easing out through the boom and forming up in close order line-ahead, fifty yards apart.

As we slid down-harbour, past the battleships and carriers, we found what we were looking and hoping for.

Outwardly they seemed the same. But to an experienced eye their altered appearance spoke much. None of the big ships had their boats down; their lower booms were lashed to the ships' sides; on the nearest battler the hands were completing the furling of the quarter-deck awning, an acreage of white canvas; the squat, spreading turrets were training round from side to side as the crews tested mechanism; and, most conclusive evidence, each ship's bridle of heavy cable to the buoy had been replaced with a slip wire.

We knew then. This was to be another strike, with everything out.

When well out, with the Battle Fleet formed up in battle formation astern, the captain read us a signal from the commander-in-chief. We gathered round the S.R.E. speaker in the mess to listen.

"The object of the present sortie by the Fleet is to distract and occupy the attention of the enemy whilst important operations are taking place in the Pacific. Should the situation remain favourable, it is intended to carry out an offensive operation against the enemy in his naval base of Sourabaya.

"During our last operation we achieved complete surprise, and I hope we will be equally successful this time.

"It is important that all officers and men should rest as much as possible when off duty in order that they shall be alert and vigilant when on watch."

Sourabaya. That looked interesting, for most of us had been there, and knew its crucial importance as a naval base. It was from there that cruiser Perth had sailed on her last glorious mission against a swarming enemy. It would be nice to send some Made-in-Britain messengers back there.

It also seemed a safe bet to hope that the Jap Fleet was there or thereabouts. Everybody knew, of course, that the material damage a hundred planes from carriers could do was a secondary consideration in these sweeps: particularly when Sabang could easily be covered by Fortresses from Burma, and Sourabaya from Darwin.

What we were after was a decisive engagement with the Japanese Fleet. And as we steamed on across that calm blue sea, ever closer to his naval base, it seemed he must be stung into action this time.

The procedure was almost the same as before—a devious approach right down and into the West Australian coast to refuel and to avoid his reconnaissance; constant, exacting alertness to spot his aircraft first and deal with them before giving the alarm, then the final quick rush through that last night.

At dawn the bombers and fighters took off.

Closed up at the guns we watched them, circling round the carriers, black specks pregnant with menace. We were in the line of flight, and shortly the bunches of bombers came steaming overhead towards the coast of Java, the massed thunder of their engines a roar that set your blood on fire.

As they passed over and away, the sun thrust an arc of lurid light above the horizon. Straight into the tropic sunrise they flew. Watching, my Number Four (Mickey Rooney—no relation) observed:

"Looks like clouds over the Rising Sun today."

The Fleet edged closer into the land, tensed and ready, like a heavyweight boxer, waiting for him to come out. It seemed impossible that those aircraft could fly right across Java undetected. As the commander-in-chief had mentioned, the Jap must still be sore from Sabang, and would do his utmost to hit back this time.

It did not occur to us he wouldn't, or couldn't. The Navy will never forget *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*—shattered by the "puny" little yellow men.

So we waited. Soon they came back, the bombers and the fighters, and once again the great ships gathered them in.

We turned and withdrew. One plane alone was left behind. And we were as disappointed as all hell.

Only a man who has never been in action, or who is a bit wet, is eager to risk having his guts ripped out. But we'd trained hard, we'd been keyed up like piano wires for days, we'd hoped for a showdown with his Fleet so as to chop off as much of this bloody war as we could in one go. And we knew now that *Nepal* with her new crew was a competent fighting unit.

And there were those empty blue skies, the smiling blue sea, clear to the rim of the encircling horizon—and no Jap. Savage, contemptuous, but still thwarted, the Battle Fleet steamed back towards its base.

That afternoon the commander-in-chief passed round to all ships a detailed accounting of the damage done.

"Attack on Sourabaya appears to have been completely successful. Hits were scored on ten ships in harbour totalling some thirty five thousand tons, including a small tanker and possibly a destroyer.

"Two floating docks were badly damaged by five thousand pounds of bombs.

"The oil refinery at Wonokron was completely destroyed. Direct hits demolished the power house, storage tanks and stills were set on fire, smoke rising to five thousand feet.

"Direct hits caused considerable damage to naval installations. The important Braats naval engineering works were completely destroyed by seven tons of bombs.

"Two enemy aircraft were shot down; fifteen were destroyed on the ground and many others damaged. All our aircraft returned to the carriers except one.

"It is to be assumed that the Fleet has not, repetition *not*, been sighted by the enemy."

Later on, after nightfall, Liberators from Darwin stoked up the fires.

When Trincomalee, our base, was raided in 1941, when the carrier *Hermes* and the Australian destroyer *Vampire* were sunk by Jap carrier-based bombers, the approaching enemy force had been detected and reported when five hundred miles east of its objective.

We had steamed the same distance, across an area cluttered with enemy naval and air bases, to within a few miles of his territory, and the first he knew of it was the blast and roar of British bombs on one of his most important harbours.

One doesn't underestimate the enemy, of course, especially this one, but it surely seems the Jap had had his time. If only we'd had this Battle Fleet here in '41...

In due course, exercising en route, absolutely unmolested, the Fleet returned to base.

CHAPTER TEN

WE STILL EXERCISED, but we always did that anyway. But the tempo seemed to be quickening.

Almost exactly two months after our first acquaintance with Sabang, I was idly gazing at the boom-vessel dragging its gate open, and musing on past history.

Last year a Jap squadron of cruisers penetrated west from the Andaman Islands, right across the Bay of Bengal, and steaming savagely into the busy shipping route outside Madras harbour, sank eighteen ships in almost as many minutes. The enemy squadron withdrew scathless.

Later in the year *Hermes* and *Vampire* went down fighting under a hail of bombs and cannon-fire not far off Trincomalee. Again the enemy force suffered negligible loss.

Well, that was last year. Things have changed a bit since then. And as I watched the Allied Eastern Battle Fleet, stronger still now, steaming in line ahead out past the little boom vessel into the rising sun, I couldn't help but believe that things—especially on the Jap-held island of Sabang—were due for another change.

This time a violent one. For Sabang was again our target, and now we knew for certain why the previous fortnight had been almost wholly taken up with bombardment practice.

Various parts of the coast of Ceylon had erupted skyward in a flung mass of sand, earth and coconut trees, and in a day or two the familiar sight looked like being repeated; with, we hoped, a mixture of concrete fortifications thrown in.

It was a powerful force. One by one the heavy cruisers slid through the boom, their gunned turrets looking like giant pin-cushions as the barrels weaved about the sky, testing mechanism.

Then following the battleships, light grey sides looming large against the green of the jungle behind them.

It took some time for this Fleet to get sea-borne, and all through the destroyer flotilla sped up and down outside, like hungry otters in a pool of fish, searching, probing with their asdic pulses for any skulking hull waiting below.

By the time the sun is high the harbour looked oddly empty, and the ships have been swallowed up "somewhere in the Indian Ocean."

All that day the Fleet steamed in battle formation towards Sabang. Thrown out well ahead in a spear-shaped V, each ship's asdic beam-arc just overlapping the one abeam, the destroyers led the way.

Astern, and well within their protective anti-submarine screen, steamed the cruisers, in two lines on each side of the single line of massive battleships and carriers.

The formation was fast, highly drilled, compact and dreadfully purposeful. Two score ships welded together into a precisely disciplined fighting unit of proved efficiency.

The sunset was beautiful and the sea smooth. The Fleet moved calmly and steadily on into the night—the descendants of ships that long ago met and defeated the Great Armada, some bearing the same names.

Suddenly you felt very much easier about this operation, about the whole war. It is such a colossal force and its tradition of fighting and victory is rock-firm. And it has dealt with much bigger and more experienced foes in its centuries of history than this one snarling at it today.

The procedure was again the same, with the difference that on those other times, as soon as the aircraft had gone off, the Fleet had turned and headed slowly back towards base while it waited.

But now no alteration of course was passed. This time we were going in.

Then a signal was hoisted at Commodore (Destroyers) masthead; such a signal as we'd hoped for since those blasted exercises had started so many months before. It read:

"On completion of battleship bombardment, cruiser *K4* and destroyers G42, G44 will close the harbour mouth and carry out independent bombardment. Targets optional."

We were G44.

It took us an hour to raise the land, but even before the green hills behind Sabang harbour rose up over the far rim of blue, we could see through the gun telescopes long, tapering columns of smoke twisting up into the sky. It seemed the bombers had arrived. We hoped they'd left us something worthwhile.

As the land, then harbour mouth, then buildings, then docks became visible right ahead, the cruisers altered course to seaward,

all ships strung out in a long curved line that presented an impassable barrier to enemy naval craft from seaward. The big boys were to be given uninterrupted time at their work.

All the ships and destroyers, that is, except us three. With our cruiser leader handy in case we met something we couldn't handle, we hung ready off the stern quarter of the last battleship, in a position to see everything perfectly.

The signals were hauling up on the flagship now—speed, position, line of attack.

The battleships were thrusting through at full speed, their mighty bows dipping now and then to meet the swell, when a great smother of white exploded over the foc's'le, running aft to trail over the side in cascades of watery lace.

A tossing maelstorm of foam marked the churning screws. The destroyers, with steam for thirty-six knots in their boilers, curbed themselves down to twenty-two.

Then I saw a movement above the nearest battleship's bridge. It was the main gunnery director. A second, then the four huge turrets with their reaching barrels swung from the fore and aft bearing, came back and steadied. Now the eight guns on each ship pointed directly at the harbour, an awful menace in their silent immobility. The range was about four miles, point-blank for guns used to ranges of fourteen.

I had a moment to think of those Japs watching from shore through their glasses. And of many things, from Singapore to Bataan and the Kokoda Trail. But most of all my memory seemed to fasten on little *Vampire,* one of our own, fighting alone after her carrier had been smashed under, a destroyer like us who had been sent to her lonely death by planes from carriers which in all probability had steamed from this harbour now under those British guns.

Then I forgot *Vampire.* A deep roar smacked against our ears. The flagship had opened up with a single ranging shot.

We waited. Smack in the centre of the harbour, placed so that its effect would be most marked, a single column of water rose high in the air, hesitated a moment of perfect, beautiful symmetry, then cascaded back in a shower of spray.

Dead level with that omninous water spout, right a little, were the docks and garrison barracks. Watching through glasses, you could

see the nearest ship's turrets train smoothly right a degree or two.

We waited there beside our own guns, hands tight over our ears, for not all the cotton wool in the world would help us now.

Then a flash of orange flame belched along the whole line, great long stabs of fire that showed fiery red against the clouds of smoke that followed.

The battleship heeled over to port under the recoil; each ship, thirty thousand tons of steel, displaced by the colossal punch in more than two tons of cordite.

The water immediately beneath the belching muzzles was flattened by the cosmic blast. Our ears were battered by a stunning roar. Again and again the guns flashed, not the indeterminate mumble of haphazard firing, but the timed crash of controlled broadsides.

Sabang harbour erupted into a mane of bursting flame and smoke.

For half an hour it went on. The ships halfway to the horizon, cruising slowly up and down, up and down, ready and hopeful, but destined not to fire a round, we four smaller craft close inshore, also ready and hopeful, and in the middle those awful juggernauts, steaming a mile one way, a mile back again, roaring, heeling with the force of their ejections, and pounding the Japanese harbour systematically to a tortured, twisted ruin.

Three hundred tons of fifteen inch shells were fired in that half-hour. When they finally ceased firing you couldn't hear a thing for minutes afterwards. Then, as our battered eardrums got back to work, we heard something all right—the sharp insistent ringing of our fire-bell. That meant "Follow director." It was our turn.

From B-deck just below the bridge we heard the captain's order:

"Starb'd twenty. Full speed ahead together!"

She leaned, the whole long length of her throbbing and shuddering. We were in line ahead, so close to the ship in front that we coughed with the acrid stench of her funnel.

From the time of opening fire shortly afterwards, at a range of little more than a mile, our attention was concentratedly claimed by our twin guns, six of them, and for a full five minutes, firing eight rounds a minute per gun, getting rid of two hundred and fifty shells in that time, we punched them out on the run in.

It was not until the ship heeled on the turn out that we could see what was happening elsewhere.

The destroyer ahead was engaging a shore battery which had lobbed a five inch shell in her steward's mess aft.

The warship's fire was faster and much more accurate than the Jap's. She was using a fire-control table which allowed for enemy speed, own speed, wind across the line of fire, alterations of course, even barometric pressure. Now she was firing at a stationary target.

She covered that camouflaged fort right of the harbour with salvo after salvo of bursting high-explosive, the flashes of the shells ugly and wicked-looking against the lush green of the jungle. The battery fired one more round, which lobbed well over, then went silent. In the meantime the third ship had spotted a fairly large supply ship in line with the harbour mouth, apparently undamaged by the battleships' fire. Her captain conceived the novel idea of a torpedo attack. Target stationary inside, destroyer lining-up outside.

Steaming back towards the main line, he drew off, turned, and at high speed headed for the harbour mouth. She made a glorious picture, stern dragged down, spawning an ever-renewed mound of white, bows carving uplifting arches of white from the blue.

She turned, a sharp firing turn that listed her well over. I saw the mouth of a torpedo tube flame redly, a long gleaming shape shoot out and dive into the water.

Towards the supply ship a line of smooth water stretched, a tell-tale ribbon of disaster, across the sea. Then a wall of dirty water spewed up alongside, higher than her masthead, and a deep roar reached us from the hills.

A light flickered from the flagship's bridge and a string of flags fluttered from her peak.

"Reform station and retire."

The aircraft had been gathered in and we quickly regained station. Then, as before, the Fleet headed straight out to sea. We had still plenty of time, we had still tons of ammunition, but in all burning Sabang there was nothing on which to waste either.

Without further incident the Fleet returned to base.

As I write, I can see them there; the Australian destroyers astern of us, their crews horsing and splashing over the side, a breeze heavy with the scent of tropical flowers wafting from shore; over to port, the battleships, their awnings white against the drab grey of their

looming sides; beyond them again, the carriers, flight decks empty, quiet. Motor-boats and launches are scuttling everywhere. Alongside the starb'd gangway of the Flagship, the gangway used only by captains, and above, a sleek shining launch glides in.

There is a swirl of white as she goes astern, pipes shrill, then a white-clad figure leaps nimbly out and walks up the ladder. It is the commander-in-chief. He's come from ashore—perhaps Lord Louis Mountbatten. Whatever it is, we'll know soon enough.

But more important things are happening a little closer.

A dirty old native tub pulls alongside our port ladder. The bosun's mate stares into it a moment, unbelievingly. Then he runs forrard, shouting:

"Duty watch lay aft! In mail!"

Duty watch! That means at least forty bags of the blessed stuff. The watch scurries aft, the lines go over, the canvas bags haul up. Half an hour later *Nepal* lies wrapped in a beatific silence, the only sound the rumple and crackle of envelope and writing paper.

And thus we'll leave her.

EPILOGUE

I left her to join cruiser *Hobart* in the Pacific. For a few months she stayed over there with the Eastern Battle Fleet, and one day she and destroyer *Napier* went in close to bombard the Burma coast in support of troop movements ashore. She was always pretty good at bombardment...

Then came a drastic change of venue. With her old flotilla mates *Quiberon, Quickmatch, Norman* and *Nizam,* she sailed very close to the heart of things—covering the landing on the Ryuku Islands in Nansei Shoto, almost midway between Formosa and Japan.

And, at last, she got in on the real object of all her training and experience—screening the British Pacific Fleet in its air-strikes, not against Dutch-owned, Jap-occupied territory, but against the islands of Japan itself.

That was on July 17, 1945. A little less than a month later she was steaming towards Tokio Bay. The Japanese had surrendered.

So she was in at the bitter end. And so was *Townsville* the corvette I had left to join her in Sydney. That spunky little craft was present at the surrender of the Japs in Rabaul.

But I saw nothing of the actual surrender, the finish of six years of war. With N.D., I was down in Flinders Naval Depot, halfway through a gunnery course for commissioned gunner.

But he and I, who loved that Fleet destroyer, repaired to the mess bar to drink to her safe arrival and her ultimate triumph off Tokio Bay. We pressed in through the surge, and found we couldn't get to the bar. There, crowding round it, one fellow even on top of it singing *Hearts of Oak,* were scores of tiffies, engine-room artificers who had joined a few weeks back, had not even left Flinders. Celebrating. And N.D. had been sunk in destroyer *Waterhen* in the Mediterranean. For us it was a mainly dry surrender. Ah well...

Where is *Nepal* now? I could not find out. Some dusty archive at Navy Office or the Admiralty holds the key to her end. But her flotilla-sister *Quickmatch* is still in service, and at time of writing the gutsy little *Peary,* of Darwin memory, is being raised by a *Japanese* salvage firm. The senseless irony of it all!

A reputable Sydney journal was kind in its review of the first

edition of *Fleet Destroyer.*

> "The book has a directness which Bacon himself might have envied. The author has a knack of exploiting technical details and making them vivid without sacrificing brevity. He has noted, and has obviously been impressed by, the rapid welding of raw recruits into a fighting team. He has caught something of the drama of it, but" (ah! there is always a 'but' with kind reviewers) "he has kept it to himself: mentioning the facts, but not tracing the growth of the metamorphosis. This theme, and the play and clash of characters, would make a story worthy of Conrad."

I suppose it would. Except that while there was plenty of "play", there was an absolute absence of "clash" amongst us characters. We had joined a new ship, a man of war whose guns we did not know how to fire. The single over-riding object of every man on board was to fit himself to fight the ship, and so protect himself and his mates.

Clash of characters? If any man had broken out of the circle, if he had interfered with that objective of drill and more drill, if he had "clashed"—he would have been quietly dumped over the side.

Later on, when we had fitted ourselves to fight the ship competently, we found more than enough conflict against the Jap to save us from clashing among ourselves.

THE END

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