DEFENSIVELY EQUIPPED MERCHANT SHIPS

By Royal Navy Gunners

Written by W. L. Shortland

Petty Officer Gun-layer CJX214690
Introduction

This book is dedicated to Mr Duck, a merchant navy steward who if in any of the three other services he had served in I am sure he would have been awarded the Victorian Cross posthumously. The Japs were noted for shooting up life-boats after sinking enemy ships, so Mr Duck stayed aboard his ship, firing his gun at the sub until it submerged. I read the Admiralty Fleet order, every British Ship got one, and I understand Mr Duck went down with his ship. I am proud to know, I was a gun-layer and sailed with him in 1941 and taught him a little about stripping a four-inch B.L. and firing one. We were together in November just before Pearl Harbour, near Greenland when a Wolf Pack sank the largest percentage of our convoy and made our ships, a small few left scatter and everyone was for himself. After that voyage, although I did a second trip across the Atlantic, I never saw him again. I have written to the Navy for permission to write to Mr Duck’s family, but I could not get an answer, so I wrote again to a Vice-Admiral and was informed they are trying to get me an address......

Lol Shortland
My ship, the “Birgitte” was sailing up North on the East Coast up to Methil to join a convoy bound for Canada. It was 7.30 a.m. and I was starving, I had been on watch since 4 a.m, the ship was alone, as we had only left the Tyne and Methil was not far. It had only broke daylight just about 40 minutes before when I heard this queer noise. The last time I had heard it, was in my local cinema when I had seen a film about the Bengal-Lancers. They were firing their guns at the Arabs and the bullets were ricocheting off the rocky hills.

This time, the bullets were doing the same off the sea and I was the Arab. A Nazi Plane was firing at me, but it seemed a long way off. I quickly shoved a shell in the six-pounder gun and trained onto the plane, I could see the pilot because later on, I studied Germany and Italian planes and discovered it was a Junker 88. The six-pounder had the firing mechanism on a plate; you had to slap to fire it just at the rear of the breech. My problem was to train the gun into the Gerry’s path and run back to slap the plate, but luckily I heard someone shouting and turned my head. It was one of the sailors who had done a gunnery course at the Royal Naval school. I yelled at him, “fire, fire”. I had that plane’s nose bang on the centre of my gun sight and I listened for the bang.

All I heard was “Hotfra-Lira, hotfra-lira”, which later I was told was swearing in Danish which means “God give me cholera”. The sailor did not know I had a shell up the spout and I was yelling “fire, fire”, and he was trying to load a shell and as he opened the breach, it automatically ejected the shell, and it fell on his foot. He was dancing round the gun platform in agony, while the Junkers 88 was dropping two bombs, which fell a yard or so short. The explosion sent water over the aft end of the ship. I put another shell in and looked for the Gerry to come back to have another go, but I could not see him. Why? Because the skipper had turned the ship round.

We carried two maritime gunners in the early days of the war when we went deep-sea (left the coast to go to other countries) so we had two soldiers aboard with a Lewis machine gun. I asked one of them how he had managed amidships with the plane. He said that he fired at it, but as was the case with all of the Lewis guns I have seen, it fired two bullets and jammed. We saw the plane attacking another ship sailing to Methil; the plane dropped two bombs but missed again. I think the pilot was a learner. This was early 1941, not long after that all ships had to have all gunners in DEMS man the guns at dawn and dusk. Maritime ack-ack manned the marvellous Bofors and carried five maritime gunners.

My brother, Harry, joined the DEMS from Chatham. Lord Louis Mountbatten was asking for volunteers for his destroyer HMS Kelly. I was thinking of going, a Hull bloke, who had just paid off the “Kelly” had teamed up with me, seeing that we were townies. When I said that I fancied sailing on the “Kelly” my oppo (colleague) said that no one volunteers to do that. He said the Louis goes up to the Norwegian Coast and shells any one or thing that looks German, and it is only a matter of time, before the “Kelly” was going to

Lewis Gun - as first used in WW1

HMS Kelly
come unstuck. Any way, I was sent to the Gunnery School, at Chatham to do a course to join the cruiser 
HMS Fiji. One lad from Hull, a Beaumont, was the only one of the eleven lads who I had met in Para-
gon Station en route for HMS Ganges training ship, on draft with me to the “Fiji”.

I had started the Gunnery course when my name was called out on the tanoy, so I went to the regulat-
ing office. They told me that my eldest brother had claimed me 
to join him on HMS Caroline station (a training ship (Gunnery) in 
Pollock Dock, Belfast) to train ratings for DEMS. I had never 
heard of that name in my life. The Chief P.O. said that it was a 
special service sailing on merchant navy vessels, defending them 
from enemy subs and planes and E boats, etc. I was handed a letter 
from my brother Harry. He wrote that DEMS was a lot better than 
sailing on cruisers, destroyers, etc., sleeping in hammocks. It was he 
who said that it was strictly posser 24 hours a day. I thought it all out, cabin to myself, eating in the sa-
loon, no duty watches in port. Instead of Ordinary Seaman Sod-all, I would, in a month, be Able Sea-
man Gunner W. L. Shortland. I agreed immediately to join DEMS. It did not dawn on me at that time, 
until I sailed on my first ship, that subs and planes try and sink merchant ships. Firstly, because they are 
bigger and easier to sink, than destroyers. Ten ratings left Chatham bound for Belfast. We got to Stran-
drae and boarded the ferry for Larne. We were starving and we got a big plate full of bacon and eggs 
and we set sail. We went on the deck to look at the sea. It was blowing a gale. The Civvies were 
amazed to see the ten Royal Naval Ratings spewing bacon and eggs up over the side of the ferryboat. I 
heard a couple say that we were not proper sailors. I stopped spewing for a moment to say, “You can f-
----well say that again.” We eventually reached Larne and were met by my brother and Bailey and Tom 
Bowden from the “Ganges”. We were put in private digs, mine was in Duncairn Gardens with Harry. 
The food was great. Mrs Moore, an elderly lady was a second mother to us all.

We finished our course. A Manchester bloke and I were put on guarding an ammunition dump not 
far from the dock. We had to ring up every half hour to let them know the IRA had not captured 
us. We had a rifle and a little office. I hated it. My mate was missing every night until the pubs 
chucked out. The IRA grabbed one of our lads in Falls Road; stripped and tied him to a lamppost all 
night. I was told that he died.

One night I went to see a film down Donegal Road or Street, which was like Falls Road, out of 
bounds. I came out the cinema and three civvies began to follow me. I walked faster and I saw 
this tram going my way. If I waited for it stopping they would have got me, so I began to run and so did 
they. The tram came up and was going fast, so I took a chance and tried to jump for the rail. I was 
lucky. I got it and my chasers stopped running and I waved to them, like Winston used to do, using two 
fingers.

I was told the next day that I was joining a ship and to go and get my kit ready at my digs, a motor 
was picking me up to take me to my vessel. When I got to my digs, I got a shock because my 
brother, Harry, was there with his hammock and kit bags. He asked me where I was going and I told 
him the name of the ship I was being drafted to. It was the same one he was joining. He then made me 
go back to the H.M.S. Caroline and tell them to send another gunner in my place, because we were 
brothers, and if it got sunk our mother would lose two sons, so this is what I had to do.
It wasn’t long after Harry left that I was drafted to a coaster the, S.S. Annan, belonging to Clyde Shipping of Glasgow. The weather was horrible; a gale force wind was threatening to blow this wee ship to hell and back. I met my mate who was William Sloane AB/S.G from Carrick-Fergus, two or three miles from Belfast. We had our first meal together, sat with the Captain, First and Second Officer, Chief and Second Engineer. We shoved off. Paddy and I spun up to determine the watches - I won so I set Paddy to do his stint on the bridge. We had mounted our gun right aft. It was a French Hotchkiss Machine Gun. I kept my clothes on and laid on my bunk. No one ever stripped off at sea during the war. I had just bobbed off to sleep when I heard a loud bang and the cook in the next cabin, swearing at someone - that someone was Paddy. He had on a new duffle coat and he was soaking - spew all over the front of him. He said “You’re on watch mate.” I said that he had only been up on the bridge under an hour and he replied “yes, an hour too much”. I went up wearing an oilskin coat and wellies. I stood on the weather side, which happened to be the starboard side. Old Hector from Skye, nearly seventy, was lookout A.B. on the port side and he was wide, not as green as grass like Pat and me. After an hour on watch the captain called to me “Away you go to your bed laddie, the Germans will no see you tonight”. I was never sea sick again in my life.

We sailed on the S.S. Annan from Glasgow (her home port) to Belfast and Bristol. When we went ashore in Bristol, we were shocked that the place had been bombed. As someone remarked “from ashore to breakfast time”. One German bomber flew over us we were tied up in dock, discharging our cargo. Our Hotchkiss was unloaded in our cabin. We were not allowed to engage the enemy in our ports. The plane did not drop any bombs so I surmised; he might have been taking pictures of the devastation for German propaganda.

When we arrived in Glasgow, Paddy got an idea, he wanted to go on leave, although he got home for 24 hours every time we went to Belfast, he only lived in Carrick Fergus a bus ride away, so he saw his parents very regularly. I didn’t mind because Paddy’s mum did my dobeying (washing) every trip, so I had a good idea too. I told Paddy I would go with him to the navy office at St Enough Hotel, and get his pass off him, a three days pass, and I would take it to the Navy at the time stated and pretend I was him. He’d stay at home until the ship arrived in Belfast. We went to the skipper to tap him up for permission, as what we were doing was illegal. It was a relief skipper called Lacky and one of the boys so he agreed.

Paddy gave me his pass and off he went home and I stayed in Glasgow, took his pass to St Enough and felt on top of the world. A couple of days went by and it was the night before we sailed. I was ready to stay on watch all the way to Belfast, then all hell broke loose.

That night, Glasgow suffered her biggest blitz of the war. The Jerries dropped everything. Bobby the cook and the old watchman, a retired chief officer, were the only people on board apart from myself. I was in the London Blitzes at Chatham barracks, so I was more used to it. Bobby and the mate were terrified. It lasted hours - they hit a stable opposite and men were getting the horses out and taking them to a safer place. When daylight broke it reminded me of Bristol and of all the devastation. I never got to know how many were killed that night.
The crew all arrived next morning and off we went. We were on our way when we were stopped because Gerry had dropped a load of mines. After a couple of days we were on our way. When we reached Belfast, we saw the Harland & Wolf building yards had been blitzed and were still smoking. Paddy was stood on the quay. Poor Paddy thought we had been blown up and vowed he would never pull another stroke like that again.

We went to Bristol, then Paddy and I went to our favourite church for the last time and we both got confirmed because we were being taken off the Annan and were being sent to the HMS Flying Fox, a training ship at Avonmouth, and we both were sent home on leave.

When we returned we were sent to London to joint HMS President Third and lived aboard the training ship astern, HMS Chrysanthemum, to do a course for A.B. Gun layers and get the Crossed-Guns badge on our Arm. I met some old mates there and enjoyed my stay on board. I was drafted to a small ship called the S.S. Birgitte. The “Birgitte” was a Danish ship that carried butter and bacon to my hometown of Hull. She had escaped from her own port of Copenhagen. The captain called Christiansen was a gentleman and so were his crew. Every morning when you went on deck, everyone took his hat off to you. I still do it today to the females, always have done.

The ship was deep-sea; so called that because, in the merchant navy, ships that only went to coastal ports were called coasters while ships that left the country and sailed anywhere in the world were called deep-sea vessels. I would like to tell you a story I once heard of the difference between the two. They say that when a coaster skipper loses sight of the land, he shits himself. When a deep-sea skipper sees some land, he too shits himself.

Every morning on the “Birgitte”, the Chief mate and a sailor hosed the wooden deck down and scrubbed it with a big broom. All the Danish sailors had served on a training ship to do so many years before going to serve at sea. They were first class seamen. There were no ordinary seamen on board the “Birgitte”.

We were told that we were sailing but no one knew where until the ship was at sea. Then we got to know it was to join a convoy at Methil (near Fife). We joined a convoy at Methil and set off for Lock Ewe, which was on the north west coast of Scotland and the last place thousands of sailors ever saw again, because you had to cross the dreaded western ocean where the Atlantic U Boats ruled the roost. You could not see them; only something like a stick sticking up out of the sea, practically invisible, but by hell they could see you. Captain Christian called me up on the bridge when we dropped the hook (anchor) at Lock Ewe. One of the sailors had been taken ashore ill. I was asked to take his place, by taking the wheel to Canada, so I agreed. I got my seamanship manual out to study the compass. The merchant navy steer by points, a quarter point - a half point - three-quarter points. The Royal Navy steer by degrees so you have to look for a number, 1 to 360. I soon got used to it. On the binacle was an ashtray, and you could smoke as much as you wished even if the skipper had taken over the watch, but if you had a pilot take over you could not smoke then.
The voyage was uneventful, good weather and we were heading for Nelson down the river St Lawrence. Nelson was a small town called Newcastle. The skipper always came on the bridge at 7 a.m. and the Chief Officer used to go and scrub and hose the deck down. The skipper would make a cup of tea with me, which the steward always brought up then the skipper would send me down to his cabin for a tot out of a small, pint size, barrel with a small tot size jug hooked on it. It was a liqueur brandy I think, but it was great. My watches on the wheel were the same all the trip, to free the sailors for day work 12 midnight to 8 morning 10 p.m. to 1700 pm. We arrived at the St Lawrence about mid-day; salmon were jumping out of the water. There were dozens of them - guess what we had for dinner? I had only eaten salmon out of a tin, but this was the best.

We loaded timber but I was scared when they loaded it on the deck as well. The gunners’ quarters were down the fore-hold - a mess room with three bunks either side of the dining table, a small toilet, shower and washbasin. The timber was seven to nine feet about us so, if anything hit us, we would never have been able to get out. I was uneasy every time I climbed down that timber to my quarters. The Dockers finished loading and we set sail for Cape Breton to join a convoy for home.

We got to Cape Breton and the skipper and I had to go ashore for a convoy meeting. The reason I had to go was because I was classed as the Chief Gunner. They sent us a launch because our ship only had lifeboats. We had to climb down a Jacob’s ladder, i.e. made of two ropes with narrow pieces of wood. It was very hard if the sea was rough which it was that day. I was worried for the skipper because he was getting on in years, white headed but he managed alright. After the meeting the launch returned us to our ship. The wind had freshened and the sea was a lot rougher. We got alongside but getting a grip on the Jacob’s ladder was a real problem. We tried to get a bit nearer and this time I grabbed it but the boat was pushed away from the ship’s side. I was horizontal to the sea with both hands gripping one side of the ladder and my feet in the launch, but the men in the boat held on to my legs. My pay book slipped out of my inside pocket and went into the sea and sunk like a stone. We got up the ladder at last and the skipper gave the order in Danish to shove off, so we met the convoy and sailed for home. I told the skipper I would get seven days when we got to England, as I was Royal Navy and I had lost my pay book. It should have been tied round my neck, not in the breast pocket of my uniform. We reached London and then we were going to South Shields to load so I decided to wait and report my loss there, as the skipper was going ashore with me to see the Commander R N to try and get me off. We went to the trawler base where the navy base was. We saw the Commander and my skipper nearly prayed to him to let me go back to the “Birgitte”, but to no avail. I was a navy rating and he gave me seven days No 11, but he asked me if I was married. I told him I was engaged only. If I had been married, I would have got seven days leave, and done my punishment on my return. The commander made me his messenger for the seven days. I began my number eleven’s. Every morning I was woken up at 5 a.m. on the floor (deck) they chalked No 11. I went to the Jonty (Master at Arms). I would wait outside his office until about 5.30 then I would go and get shaved, then to the Galley and fill kettles, scrub pans, wash the floors, peel spuds until 9.00 a.m. then go next door to see the commander. I would sit outside his office run his errands, make tea or coffee and march defaulters in, mostly men who had overstayed their leave. At lunch I would go and have my dinner in the galley, help the cooks until 2 pm then go back to the office while 5.00 pm. Then outside the Jonty’s office. He would send me to the galley again, supper at 7.00 another hot meal, the grub was very good, see the Jonty at 8.00, then 9, then 10, then bed while 5 a.m. next day. My last day the commander thanked me for my services, wished me
luck and I went back to my Jonty and the galley while 8 p.m. I reported to the Jonty. He told me I would get my leave and pay next morning and to get going for two hours in the pub a couple of yards away. I told him that I had no money so he gave me two half-crowns. I said that I would pay him back when I got paid next morning, but he would not hear of it. I thanked him and shot off to that pub as fast as I could.

Next morning I joined HMS Satellite across on the ferry to North Shields, and went home on leave for 7 days. I saw the second officer who was on the “Birgitte” with me. He was skipper on the S.S. Friccar - the “Birgitte” had been torpedoed with all hands.

I was on the “Satellite” about a couple of weeks when I was sent to a ship, an old tramp, which I hated. I am not saying her name, as I was Gun-layer on her for a full year. The Chief Steward a Mr Duck, became a pal of mine. He was gun mad. He used to go to all the gunnery schools, run by the Navy ashore, in most ports every chance he had. On this ship we had a 4 inch breech-loading low angle gun for subs. We only had three naval gunners aboard after we left Loch Ewe. Our additional two maritime Royal Artillery left and two Maritime lads came with us because Germany planes could attack us up to Iceland. I, as Gun-layer had to form a gun-crew from anyone on the ship. I had been trained by the Navy to do this. Mr. Duck was first class, a very good student. I taught him how to strip a breech down in port because he was so persistent. When he stripped it down, he would turn round while I mixed all the parts round. He became an expert. I also taught him how to fill a recoil cylinder with distilled water and glycerine to save it from freezing up in arctic weather and causing the gun to blow up. The gun barrel had to be pulled back using very large spanners until two filling screws, one to put the liquid in, the other for air and excessive liquid to escape, and then to put the barrel back.

The ship was very old. It was November 1941 and we shipped tons of water. The mainmast came right through the Alleyway outside our accommodation and water was nearly a foot high in our mess. We had to put on our sea boots on when we got out of our bunks to go on watch or eat our meals. Life was a misery. We used to play solo. I had smothered the breech with Cooper’s grease, when I knew it was going to start shipping green ones. The weather had eased. The Captain, Captain Turnbull, was from the same city (Hull) as myself. He was a gentleman, a blunt man, who always spoke his mind, a John Blunt.

I was on watch, it was half way during the eight to twelve watch, the clocks had to go back five hours whenever we crossed the Atlantic to be at the same time as the Countries we were going to so we shared that hour, between the three watches, i.e. 8 - 10 pm, 10 - 4.00 am and 4 - 8.00 am, and coming back home, the clocks went forward twenty minutes. It was dark but I could see the convoy my ship was in the second column, half way down on the right hand side of the convoy. On the outer side of us, was a huge freighter from Glasgow. With being a lighter ship like the rest of us, because we had nothing to export in the U.K. except maybe once we carried trainer planes to Canada for the C.R.A.F. (America was still neutral) nearly all our ships carried stones bricks, any ballast and just before we reached yon side we tipped our ballast over the side as it was too expensive over there to discharge.

I was walking up and down looking one side then the other, then all hell broke loose, and our night of terror began. I heard a loud explosion and looked to my right, and where the large freighter had been, there was a big cloud of smoke, which cleared in seconds, and then there was nothing - just the sea.
The ship had disappeared; I could not believe my eyes, the ship and all those men had been wiped off the face off the earth in seconds. I felt numb but I soon came back to reality, men were running up to me, bells were ringing the alarm, action stations. We loaded the four-inch gun and everyone on the gun-deck was looking for periscopes. We couldn’t see anything, but we could hear explosions everywhere. A Wolf pack had got the convoy. We heard over twenty explosions and I thought, “this convoy ain’t going to make it; am I going to make it?” I reckon all my shipmates were thinking the same as me, “are we next”. I then did the only thing I had left, I prayed to God. I prayed “please Lord save us from this horror, please God take us safely out of this nightmare.” The explosions were still happening. It seemed like hours ago when I heard the first one. It suddenly stopped. I said to the men at the gun that they must have run out of torpedoes. Someone said “I fucking hope so.” No one mentioned going below for a cup of tea. No wonder. Who would go down below because, if they started again and you were trapped there, no chance.

After a couple of hours we assumed it was all over. We did not have to wait long for daylight. All this time I had not seen any escort, I think it must have been sunk. Daylight broke and we looked round at what was left of our convoy; well over half had been sunk. The Commodore always leads the convoy on a merchant ship. I made a trip on one once. When he sends a message it’s always in daylight very rarely at night, using an Aldus lamp. He uses flags for letters and pennants for numbers. I knew one flag and one pennant; number 6 was black and white - Black & White whisky was six pence (6d) a bottle. The Commodore hoisted his pennant and flag for the last time. If I can remember it I will try my best.

Scatter everyone for himself. Good luck, God Bless you all.

Nearly all of the convoy’s ships went different ways. We headed for Greenland. W steamed around southern Greenland then towards Newfoundland. We were running out of food. We had left in November and it was now Xmas Day. We had corned beef for dinner but Mr Duck the steward, had made us an Xmas Pudding so it would great. Captain Turnbull poured us a tot of whiskey and he had one with us as well. They told me that the last man to have his tot had to lay on the deck and toast the old man, because that’s where he always finished up. A Canadian corvette came to us off the Newfoundland coast and asked us if we had seen a convoy numbered ..., I cannot remember the number but it was ours. The skipper yelled back to him and pointed down to the sea, “It’s down there.”

In December 1941, 50,000 tons of Merchant ships were sunk. A few years ago, I was watching TV one afternoon and a German film was on. It was a true film, which was taken in 1941 by a U Boat commander (possibly Otto Kretschmer on the U-99). He was sailing in the Atlantic when he spotted a British convoy. He radioed to the west coast of France. Admiral Doneitz took over and made him keep out of sight, but followed well astern and waited for orders. A Wolf Pack was organised and at the
right time the Wolf Pack surrounded the convoy which was the one I was in, and set the torpedoes off, practically altogether until they ran out of missiles, enabling us to scatter. The film showed the U Boat Commander being decorated by Doneitz.

I could not video that film because I didn’t have a video recorder. I wrote to the Sunday Post and they tried to get me a video but I am afraid it was no good. I think it was on BBC because I cannot remember seeing any advertisements.

The skipper of the “Corvette” looked deeply shocked. He followed us for a while. We went down the Canadian Coast to Cape Cod and on to Florida, to a place called Jacksonville, to load high explosives. We were shocked to hear Japan had bombed Pearl Harbour and America were allies again as in 1917. I was asked by the Red Cross to do a few appearances at their charity, radio and hotels to collect money for people, nurses, etc. Coloured dockers their footwear well wrapped up in hessian sacking, loaded our ship with high explosives. Armed coastguards were all round the dock. No smoking notices were everywhere.

I got on a tram one morning to go to town for gear to take home. It was raining and people at the back end, sat there getting wet. I thought it must be full inside so I sat with them. A coloured old lady sat next to me, said that there was room for me inside, as I was a white person. I felt ashamed and told her so. I had to explain to her that my mam, dad, family and me lived next door to a coloured family and they ran all my mother’s messages. Years later after the war, I used to laugh loudly when I watched Sammy Davis Junior and hear him say “Back of the bus indeed!”

We finished loading and we began to head out of the dock when a motor boat chased after us, and someone shouted up to us “is Chief Gunner Shortland there.” I affirmed and he gave us some cartons and a letter from the Red Cross. I still have that letter dated 15 January 1942. (See next page).

We were on our way home, sailing down the east coast. It was very dark. I was on watch when all of a sudden, just off our starboard bow, everything lit up. An oil tanker had been torpedoed. How the U Boat had not seen us and sunk us I will never ever know. Someone up there must love me.

The sea all round the tanker was on fire, the flames were high and all of the sea for thirty to forty yards was a massive wall of fire. Men were diving and jumping off the ship into the sea and swimming under water to come up past the fired sea; but I am afraid I did not see anyone make it. The tears ran down by face.

I went to Captain Turnbull and volunteered to take a boat with a couple of my mates to try and save anyone. The skipper said to me “We are loaded to the plimsoll with explosives. If the Jerries see a boat, they will not rest until they find the ship it comes from, and
Thomas Davidson
1010 Sorrento Road,
Jacksonville

Fwd Gunner Shortland
Elizabeth Linton (Lenson)
Municipal Docks,
Talleyrad Avenue,
Jacksonville
Florida.

Dear Mate,

This Package is for the captain and the five members of your Gun Crew as a little cheer to warm your hearts on a cold night’s watch or to take it into England to your families where it’s badly needed. I know you will not abuse its use and get me Dutch with Captain Turnbull, whom I did not have the pleasure of meeting, whilst in Port. I hope to send the original photographs that were taken by the Journal. Cheerio to the Captain and to every member of your gun crew and God bless you and a safe voyage back to Jacksonville sometime or other.

Cheerio mate

Thomas Davidson.

Enclosed 6 pints whisky and 6 x 50 cartons cigars (Winston Churchill’s).
we will be blown sky high. This is war and my job is to take my ship and my crew home, without taking chances of losing either.” We were going full speed hugging the coast heading home, and the tanker and her crew heading for a watery grave. All I could still hear was “This is war.” I cursed that word ‘war’ and I still do today.

We joined a convoy and had a stormy voyage home. The skipper explained our Whisky and Cigars to the Customs and they let us take them home, but I was very lucky with the Customs. I always bought a pound of leaf tobacco before I sailed for home and I stripped the thick strands out and sprinkled every leaf with rum, wrapped it in Hessian bagging after I had rolled it into a plug or prick (Navy name). I took some seizing wire, put one end on a hook and the other end pulled it tight and fastened about four feet of the wire round the plug and put it in my drawer, for my wife’s granddad, a Scott called Jocker Finlay.

I had forgot all about it, owing to all the pressure I had been under, and the Customs Officer marvelled at the plug after I uncoiled all the wire and Hessian from it. He smelt it and examined it, then said that Granddad Jocker would love it and gave it to me. It cost me one shilling and six pence an ounce in 1941, from the Navy shops, and you could get a pound of leaf tobacco anywhere in Canada for the same amount of cash. I tried to take Jocker a pound of plug nearly every leave I got, but my last leave, took me away for two years, and Jocker was dead and buried when I came home. When he was alive he was a docker and when he was turned seventy. He used to go on dock every month and barrow bundles of bacon from the ship into the shed, he got paid ten shillings and sixpence (that is 52 and a half pence in the money today). He would return home and give Grandma (his wife) the two and half pence. Sometimes when on leave, I would take him to the pub for a pint of beer and the barman, Mick, would give him his beer in a glass with a handle on it. He could not hold any other kind of a pint glass. When he was nearing the bottom of his pint, he would pull a bit of chalk out of his waistcoat pocket and draw a white line from the bar to the wall. Mick the barman would shout to me and point to the white line, and I would quickly take Jocker home, because in his younger days, the white line meant that he would fight anyone on his side of the line.

Lil, the girl I was engaged to, (we went to school together) thought we should get married and she could get a house near her parents, and have it furnished by the time the war was finished, so we got married by special license, a day’s notice. I got three days extension. When I went back off leave, I was still on that horrible ship, and we set sailed to Canada. To make matters worse, the navy said that I had over drawn my navy pay and had only been allowed four shillings a week (20p) for soap, razor blades, etc.

I took my pay-book to the Navy and showed the Paymaster. He agreed with me; I was not overdrawn, but he could not help me, but he promised he would write to HMS President III Bristol and get it sorted but I was on my way to Canada the next day.
I got two new A B Seaman Gunners, the other two had been taken off, one of them, Steve a first triper lived in Manchester and as we were sailing the next day, could he go home to say goodbye to his wife. Shore leave was only to midnight so I told him. He said that he would be back by then and, like a mug, I said okay. He had not returned at seven next morning, I had the Chief Officer after me, it was tide and the crew were getting ready to single up when Steve rolled up. The mate gave him a blast, but Steve told him that I had given him permission to go home. Then I took the can back. Steve taught me a lesson, which I have never forgot. Never forget when you get any kind of rank, use it, and keep an eye out for any more Stevens.

We went to Loch Ewe. Stan Rowe came with us as a maritime ack-ack gunner. He lived near me in Hull, went in the same pub as me, and played fives and threes with my sister’s husband Frank and me. The Captain, a new one as Capt. Turnbull had paid off, was ill with tooth-ache. Half way across the Atlantic the mate signalled to the Corvette about the old man (skipper) and his toothache. The Corvette skipper would not help at all, just shouted, “Give him a bottle of whisky.”

Eventually, we got to Halifax Nova Scotia. The mate asked me if I would go night watchman. As I was skint on only four bob a week, I agreed. A boat came alongside about 2 am. We were still at Anchor in Halifax Harbour. Some men came aboard and went into the skipper’s cabin. After a while they came out with the skipper who I had not seen since we left Liverpool. The skipper was in a straight jacket. I couldn’t believe my eyes, who is going to be in his place?

Next day we went to St John New Brunswick, I am the night watchman, and it has one of the highest if not the highest rise and fall tides in the world at just over thirty feet. When the crew went ashore they just stepped off the ship onto land. When they returned they had to climb down an ordinary ladder over 30 feet high. I had a Canadian watchman on nights working with me every night during our stay. Good job too, because we were tending to the mooring ropes and a wire spring forward and one aft. To make my job worse, there was prohibition in Canada. No pubs only bootleggers.

The Chief Officer, now the Captain, and the Chief Engineer liked their beer, so sent me ashore looking for bootleggers for a case of beer. I did not like it at all. Our ship was the other wide of the bridge in St Johns British Columbia and there were six or seven Mounties on the bridge. If I was caught, besides their punishment, I would also get 7 days cells. With him giving me the watchman’s job, I felt I owed him, so off I went with some dollars for the booze. I soon found a place that sold beer. They put some bottles in a carton that had contained tins of food and took me to the bridge and left me. I waited until some English Merchant Sea-men came carrying cartons of foodstuffs to take home. Everyone from home took tea, sugar, hams, etc. home, besides make up, silk stockings and stuff like that. I joined them and got over the bridge. The skipper and Chief got drinking. They never offered me one.
had to start the fire going in the gallery every morning and take the skipper a mug of tea, also the sailors a gallon to the forecastle. I would have my breakfast and get into my bunk. Every night the Canadian, who was old, and myself wrestled all night with the mooring ropes. I went every night across the bridge to get the beer and one night I met two lads whom I had been brought up with, Irvin George and young Wrigley. We had a yarn and went for the beer; one of the Mounties was watching me. He must have seen me carrying a carton across every night and maybe he was getting suspicious. I told the skipper when I returned. He just laughed at me. Next night, I refused to go for his beer. He went mad, so I said to him “You come with me, I will get your beer, but when we get to the bridge you carry it over then he refused so I refused too. I knew I would suffer and I did later on. I got seven days. But that was when we got home.

I went to the navy to get my pay. The paymaster looked at my book and said that he could only pay me five dollars - five weeks and four shillings per week. A dollar equalled four shillings at that time. He then read through my pay book and said that no way was I in debt or overdrawn. I explained to him that the HMS President III was the DEMS pay office in Bristol. He told me that he would write to them and put them on the right track. He was proved right in the end but to go ten weeks on the poverty line was horrible for me.

We were on the way home and nearly up to Greenland. I had come off my watch at 8 a.m., had my breakfast and cleaned and oiled the guns. I had my lunch and was going to have a nap as I had been up since 4 am when someone came below and told me that the skipper wanted me on deck. I went up and the skipper told me that he wanted a kite putting up. I said that we did not put up a kite on other ships until we got nearer Iceland. Besides there was a gale blowing and as the wire holding it up was only piano wire, we would lose it within one hour. The skipper pulled rank and nearly exploded. He said “Get that kite up, I am going to make an adverse report about you when we reach port.” I got the box kite out and we rigged it up and smacked it to the wire. It was a ratchet. I let it go up so far then asked the skipper to stop me, when it was high enough for him. He eventually called “stop, that is high enough.” I put the brake on, and asked him “anything else sir?” He just grunted so I went below at 3.30 p.m. One of my gunners came down to call the 4.00 - 8.00 watch in case anyone was sleeping. “Your box kite snapped the wire, after less than an hour, the gale wind blew it out of sight in seconds.” I said that my seven days are a racing certainty now.

We eventually got home safely. I thank the gales we had all the way home; the U boats didn’t like big waves I reckoned. We arrived in Liverpool and a navy LT came aboard. He told me about the kite but told him it was not the kite it was because I refused to go to the bootleggers that I had been reported.

I went on leave and the pay WREN told me my brother had the same initial W as me but he was William and I was Walter. My number was CJX214690 and his was CJX214691. We had both volunteered together and went to the training ship HMS Ganges. He had overdrawn his pay and I had got the blame for it. I went on leave and came back to do my seven days disciplinary course. I did not
do anything but march about and rigid gunnery. The food was very bad. We got one sausage and bread for breakfast, a small dinner, mostly veggies, and for tea - potted meat, slice of bread, a small bun and a cup of tea.

I finished my week’s punishment. The warrant office in charge sent for me to go to his office. I duly went and he said that I had taken a very good week’s hard slog, with a smile and a light every day, and he had told his superiors to make me a ‘Killick’, that’s a leading seaman. I whooped for joy, if it had not been punished for that skipper reporting me I maybe would not have been made up.

I was sent relieving Gun-layers in Liverpool, while they were on leave. The first one was a marine on one of the Hungry Harrison boats, why they called them hungry I will never know. The crew and cooks were all black and they never stopped smiling and laughing, and would have stayed with them till the end of the war. The grub was delicious. Anyway I came off that lovely ship the “Tactician” and they sent me to the “Andes” a 27,000 tons passenger ship sailing to Australia. When I was 70 years old, my daughter gave me a newspaper dated on the day I was born, 7 July 1920. When I read it, I looked at it for shipping news and the “Andes” had docked that day.

I received a letter from home. The Jerrys had dropped land mines near my wife’s house. My mother and brother William Henry had been bombed out; William’s House raised to the ground Mother’s house roof had gone and mother had gone to live in a bungalow with William’s family at Cayton Bay near Scarborough.

I got a compassionate draft to Hull and I joined the S.S. Broughty, Dundee Perth and London Ltd. We sailed to Kirkcaldy, Dundee and Hull. There had been some attacks by E Boats on the East Coast but I never saw any action. My gunner a Scott from Arbroath lost his pay book and went to the HMS Satellite to report his book, and they took me off too at South Shields. Duncan Taylor had to do seven days for losing his book. I joined the Empire Capulet, a brand new ship belonging to the Blue Funnel Line. I was not in charge, Petty Officer Reg Robinson was. I have never forgotten his name, he was from Coventry, and was a runner, a good one too. We had a four-inch high and low angle gun, a Bofors gun with four maritime gunners including a sergeant. We had four seaman gunners and a Chinese crew, Shanghai men, on deck with Cantonese cooks, firemen, engine room staff and 2 midshipmen (youths). Blue Funnel were the only cadets to have the honour to be called midshipmen. Why? I am afraid I have forgotten. One of the Cantonese used to come every day and sit in our mess room. He was a fireman or a stoker, and the ship was a coallbunker, so he sweated a lot, stoking fires up. He would sit and eat handfuls of salt. We had to hide our salt in the end. He also changed all his money, wages etc into Yankee dollars. It was a Chinese dream to go to the United States jump the ship and get ashore and settle down in China Town. A Yank guard in New York told me that
the Chinese crew of a ship in Cunard White Star Shed stampeded en-block and fled. Most of them were caught or shot. A few escaped, but not many. Chinese were not allowed off the ship in the U.S. I found out while talking to a G.I. that their Yankee dollars were issued to them had a yellow seal on them, and could not spend them after leaving foreign lands. It was military money. The true American dollar was exactly the same except the seal was blue. I believe it cut the black market out. Poor Cantonese stoker. His dollars were useless.

The ship had begun to get ready for a cold climate. The portholes were also altered to seventeen inches. That was the best news. Plenty of men were drowned, trying to get through the small portholes when their doors had jammed, and could not escape, after their ship was sinking. We were going to Russia we were told. It was depressing news. Not many ships got there, not many got back. We were about to sail for Iceland when three pocket battleships escaped through the Dover Channel into the North Sea and were on the way to stop Russian Convoys. We went to Halifax, with trainer planes to train Canadians, etc. I was pleased actually. We had a good trip across the Western. We had anti-sub nets that torpedoes bounced off and degaussing, which made magnetic mines explode. Things were looking up for merchant ships.

We had a nice voyage home and I had seven days leave. The ship was in Liverpool, so I took my lady wife back with me. Reg had also taken his wife back with him, so we joined them in digs at Birkenhead. We had a great time together. I had to borrow a fiver off the third officer. We said our goodbyes. I did not know it would be for two years. Two years of wasted life all through a mad Germany bastard called Adolph Hitler.

We sailed that night and were told we were on our way to the Meddy (Mediterranean). Just before we left Liverpool we received an A.F.O. (Admiralty Fleet Order), which was very distressing. It said that the American high bombsight had fallen into the enemy’s hands. A plane must have crashed, but the sight must have remained intact. We were sailing off the coast of neutral Spain, when a great number of Focke-Wolfes’ appeared. We began firing our 4ins high angle shells, as did all the ships in our convoy, not one shell could reach them, we have a cruiser with us and even she could not reach any of the Aircraft. The bombs were being dropped and scoring at direct hit on our ships every time. It was mid-day and the weather sunny and no wind. I noticed ships very near to us, when being bombed lost their life-boats. They just hung by one end down only, to the davit. What was left of the crew, not many, were jumping over the side into the sea. I prayed the rescue ship, which always sails at the rear of the convoy, would pick up the survivors. Our PO, Reg, stopped firing our gun; the Bofor was no good at that altitude. I got a shell key and turned the fuses all the way to the end, hoping I might reach one of the enemy planes, but Reg knew it was useless, like I did. I showed Reg all the Chinese with their best suits on and their cases, stood on the boat deck, I said “They look as though they are going home on leave”. The two quarter-masters are supposed to be our ammo-men. Reg took notice of me, and we began to fire our gun again. Reg was laying the gun and I was training it. Our shooting was fantastic. Our shell exploded on the nose of every plane we fired at. If they had
not had the bombsight we would have had a field day. We lost quite a good few ships and men. We ar-

rived at Gibraltar next morning. All ships flags were at half mast for those who had lost their lives off

the coast of neutral Spain. I hope some Spaniards read this book sand remember our lost ones.

W e had another problem at Gibraltar, Italians were swimming out to the ships at anchor, during

the night, and fixing explosives to the blade of the propeller so when the ship started her engines next morning the

propeller went round only to the explosive and naturally would not pass through so it would blow the propeller off. Maybe,

depending on the explosives size, also blowing a hole in the ship’s stern. The Italians also had two men subs. We were on

watch day and night used to walk each side of our vessel looking for ripples and bubbles. We had small hand detonators and if we suspected anything, we would drop one into the sea. They believed the small explosion could kill a person.

W e set off for Port Said next day. We had two hours to kill, because we had to pass Crete and we

had to sail past in the dark. The Germans had dropped paratroopers on it and captured it. May

Shelling, the ex-champion heavy weight of the word, had parachuted into Crete. Later on, two ships I

nearly sailed on, the “Kelly” and the “Fiji” were both sunk at Crete. There, but for the grace of God, go I. We passed Crete and arrived

at Port Said. We saw the statue of Ferdinand Delesseps who built the Suez Canal, and the famous Simon Artz shop. I had some trou-

ble with my wristwatch. The winder had come out, so I took it into Simon Matz. An assistant in the watch dept put the winder back in,

smiled at me and said “No charge Sir”. We loaded the eighth army machinery and soldiers, and sailed for Sicily. We enjoyed the com-

pany of the Desert Rats. They slept on deck and so did we. It was too hot below decks. We got the

news Italy had capitulated, good news, but the Germanys still had plenty of armies in Italy and the war

ending seemed a long way off. We finished our trip taking our Dessert Rats to Taranto in Italy. A de-

stroyer had been mined in the Harbour. They made the Eyeties re-

cover the bodies of our men out of the harbour. Our soldiers gave the Eyeties a big tin of corned beef and

some biscuits like our ship’s bis-

cuits. I went ashore and bought a lot of picture post cards of Taranto.

We were not allowed, when writing home, to mention the places you were in, or where you were going. I

took a chance and posted all my Taranto cards to most people at home. They all received them.
We left Toronto and returned to Egypt, this time Alexandria; the Italian navy fleet sailed in to surrender. I will treasure that memory for the rest of my days, all the British ships and their crews lined their decks just grimly watching. No one jeered or shouted to the Eyeties. It was very quiet. Reg, our PO, left us and we got another PO. Our skipper asked the navy to make me PO but the Navy told him I had to pass an exam and course first, ashore. We carried on regardless. We went to Algiers, Oran, Sicily and Naples. Vesuvius erupted; lava came down.

We were taken to Pompeii for a day and saw people who got covered in Lava all those years ago. Very small people in those days, also directions in those days to the brothels, the signs were men’s penis’ and there was a big cupboard affair with a man inside from years ago, weighing his huge penis on a weighing scale, the other side of the scale was filled with gold. I think it meant something was worth its weight in gold. The church in Pompeii was the best I have ever seen. The alter was gold from top to bottom. I was told that Hitler wanted to take the gold, but the Italians resisted him. We had lunch with men playing their violins. I forgot all about the war.

We went to Algiers again. We went to Syracuse in Sicily. A boat came out to us, and asked if I was on board. He told me that our ship was going to Alexandria and that I should pay off the ship and go for my exams for Petty Officer. I had been on the “Empire Capulet” for twelve months and it was the best ship I had been on. The lads made it a very happy ship and I loved every one of them.

After I arrived at Alexandria, I went to the third officer and gave him the five pounds I borrowed from him in Birkenhead. He gave me the money back. Wished me good lunch and I left the “Capulet” like leaving home. Very sad, but I was heading for a new life actually, I hoped. A boat came and took me ashore with two kit bags, a hammock, suit-case, etc.

I was taken to the Navy Depot in Alexandria called HMS Canopus. They told me I was going by train, at 4pm, to Port Said to do my PO’s course. They gave me sandwiches, one large lump of currant bread, some cheese, and a water bottle. I got on the train with all my gear after a while I felt sleepy. I had my steaming bag (a small kit bag) and even though I was the only one in my carriage, two rows of about ten seats each side, I used my bag with my grub and water as a pillow and went to sleep. I woke up around midnight feeling very hungry and opened my bag, the water bottle and all my grub had vanished. My head had been laid on that bag all the time, but the clifty-waller (thief) had got it.

I arrived at Port Said at 2 pm. next day at starving. I was taken to the barracks but an AB Seaman Gunner told me I should have gone to the D.K.W. offices first and began to argue with me, when I asked for some big eats. I went looking for the galley and found the cook called Stormy who gave me a dish full of beef pie. It was great. I then went to the offices on the front.

Nearby were a few launches. I was told that I had to wait for a class of ten members, all for POs exams, to arrive in a week’s time, so I was put in charge of the mess-deck, where the ratings had their meals, in the ‘Killicks’, mess. I did not enjoy this job.
We went to a sandy place called Fuad and lived two to a tent. We had an oil lamp and sand. Everything was sand. Every morning we had to go for a wash and shave. Cold water taps, no basins - just a long wooden table. When you turned the tap, the water just ran onto the board, then on to you, so you could not wear anything unless you wanted it washing too. The Chief PO in charge lived in a big tent and had a microphone, so you could hear him half way down the Suez Canal. He also had loads of chickens outside his tent. When I used to go for my wash, a big rooster used to attack me, every morning so I put a pair of leather shoes on one morning, and when it came for me, I kicked it a dozen yards away. It never stopped squawking. The Chief woke up and yelled through his mike “Wakey, wakey, wakey, and leave my fucking chickens alone.” He called divisions every morning; there were only ten of us. His pants were falling down, he tried to pull them up with one hand, put the white ensign up with his other hand and blow on his whistle - all at the same time.

My rent mate was called Chris. He, like myself, was eager to pass his exam, so every night we practised by ourselves on the book and field drill. Our drill instructor was Sgt Woods, a Marine, and he told us one of the officers who examined us on field drill had a pet exam. He would throw an empty cig-packet a few years to his left or right and point to a member of the platoon and say, “March your men away to the far end, bring them back and then halt them, so that that man there has to be stood on the packet, and you have to stay with me.” He would then point to a man in the troop somewhere third or fourth. Chris and I used to do this every night until we were perfect. We would examine our books till we knew them off by heart. Our other mates went ashore every night and, we’re told, they all failed.

After we finished our course, we had to go to the office singly to see Captain Sellers. He shook my hand and congratulated me and called me PO Shortland. I had to go and see the paymaster. The Navy put up my wife’s pay up. The Navy stipulated the same pay for wives, and it was navy law. I never saw Chris again. They sent him to sea. I was boatswain on the canal.

Reg Robinson came to go to gunnery school. I took the “Fala” and went to his ship and picked him up to take him to my PO’s mess for the night. We had a good night; the bar was open. We enjoyed ourselves, fixed him up with a bed for the night for his gunners, and with cigs, chocolates, etc. The NAAFI PO had next bed to me, so I gave him the list. He had it all ready after we had our breakfast next morning. He had packed it all in cartons. I took the “Fala” next morning to take Reg back to his ship. I never saw him again.

I was told to take two WRENs for a ride round the bay from the canal to the basins. One of them was WREN Cotton, sister of the famous Henry Cotton, Champion Golfer. She was like Henry but prettier. There was a ship being bungered (being loaded with coal). The Arabs were running up a wide plank with a bag of coal on their heads, and emptying it down a hatch on the ship and running down another plank to get another full bag. The two WRENs were deeply engaged watching this caper, so I looked up at the ship and I felt embarrassed for none of the Arabs had anything on over their privates. I turned to the WRENs and said, “Shall we press on then ladies, we have some way to travel yet?” They replied that they were not ready yet, so we stayed put.
I got a little fed up being ashore, so I put a request in the office for a ship and I got one. A passenger BI ship with three funnels, called the “Takwiller”. I joined her the next day. She had thirty gunners, two leading seamen, five maritime Bofors crew, a hospital, a ship’s doctor a medical staff and an army staff. When the ship was not at sea, I received sixpence an hour sabotage watch. Any gunner doing a watch four hours got six pence an hour, so they did eight hours a day and got four shillings. I only put volunteers on sabotage watch.

The sergeant and I had a shared cabin with an Indian servant who ran our bath in the corridor every morning and evening before dinner at 5 p.m. We had all our meals in the first class dining room. When troops embarked, the officers dined with us. We sailed from Bizerta to Naples, which took 23 hours. In Naples a naval officer always came abroad to inspect our armament, his name was LT Commander Wilson. We became good friends. We did a lot of these same trips and the swimming at Bizerta was great. A sunken barge was nearby and everyone used it for a diving platform. Not one building was left intact in Bizerta. Very rarely the yanks put on a film show in a street and we all used to go and see it except two sabotage men, and a Red Cap (Army policeman). One film was Bing Crosby in “Going My Way”. When I wrote home to my wife about it, she told me that it had not been shown yet.

We used to take yanks to Naples, and once we had a couple share our room with us for the trip to Naples, which the yanks controlled. One of them gave be his father’s business card - he was a tailor in New York - and asked that if I ever hit new York, would I visit him and tell him I had met his son on board the “Takliwa”. At that moment I never dreamed that I would meet his dad in New York.

When we returned to Bizerta, two of my gunners were having a stroll ashore one night and heard cries for help, they ran to the Water’s edge and saw a man struggling for his life in the sea, unable to swim. My gunners both dived in and saved his life. The man saved was an American soldier who we put in our ship’s hospital. My two gunners, Micky and Jock, become heroes risking their lives to save the Yank.

We sailed back to Naples next morning. Where we docked there was a gate opposite our ship guarded by an American G.I. Our ship’s crew were not allowed to use this gate, but had to use the next one, a quarter of a mile away. Why I did not know. That night, at nearly midnight, I got a message from the Provost Marshall to taken an escort to pick up two of my gunners, under arrest. When I
arrived there, my two gunners turned out to be Micky and Jock. They had been savagely beaten up. We had to carry one and half-carry the other one back to our ship. It transpired they had had a drink ashore and returned to the wrong gate. They had pointed out to the G.I. our ship a few yards away, but were told to get hiking to the next gate. Being Scots, this seemed absurd to them, so they tried to walk past the G.I. The next thing they remembered was waking up. Six or seven G.I.s beat them up with sticks.

Next day I had to get a jeep and take Micky and Jock, with their bags and hammocks, to the Provost Marshall for sentence. I took a letter from the skipper and also explained how they had risked their lives to save a G.I. from drowning. I never heard how my lads came out of this.

Whenever we went to Alexandria, we used to get a barrage balloon and our Captain had an obsession with one which had a small propeller at the rear end. They would take it ashore fill it with gas and return it. This trip they came and told us that they had run out of gas and would not get any more until after we sailed; but they had brought up an ordinary one, with no propeller. I told the Captain and he did his nut. He then told me to put the gas out of the ordinary one into his favourite one. I said “But that’s impossible Sir.” He then said, “Nothing is impossible, get it done now.” It was one of those times when I wished I was dead, I ran below and I yelled to my men, “All hands on deck.”

Thirty men arrived and I told them we were going to put the gas out of one balloon into the other one. One man replied, “Bloody impossible.”, so I turned to him and said, “Nothing is impossible.” We got going but it was hard work. When we got half the gas in dozen men had to jump, and I mean dive, on top to get the gas out. When we had emptied the new one, it was not really inflated, but I was very lucky. I found a gas bottle with a bit of gas in it, and the skipper had his bloody balloon. When we raised it blowing in the wind, I saw the skipper smiling away, up on the bridge.

We continued to go to Naples then, we had a change and sailed to Algiers and I got some confidential news off the purser who was a good pal of mine. He said that the ship was going to Rangoon. I knew I would never see home for ages if I finished out East, so I put in request for a transfer to another ship. They took me off my ship and went into the Petty Officer’s mess in Algiers. I had the job of bringing defaulters in for the commander to try. This entailed sailing in a launch, or going in a jeep, to wherever the culprits happened to be. It was a job I did not like. One day it was going in the navy barracks for my dinner when I saw a relative, Ernie, outside the sick bay. I asked my chief PO if I could invite him to dinner with me, so I got plenty of news from home.

I was drafted to Naples on the French trooper “Vil Deran”. When I embarked, I heard my name on the tannoy, so I went up topside to see a naval Commander. He put me, the only PO on board, to take charge of all the R.N. ratings, the Marines, and my first job was to store all their luggage, kit bags, etc. down a hold. There were also 40 or 50 WRENs aboard. I chose about 25 ratings and I had to stow the gear in lots so I knew whose gear would come out first. Then I had to detail cooks to the galley to bring
the grub. I took so many pay books off my ratings so they would not float off and leave all the plates to me. The marines did not need me; they all mucked in the next morning. They washed their mess deck. I had to take the Navy’s pay books off them again and watch them. We eventually reached Naples and had a rough time sorting out all the luggage, etc. The WREN officer in charge promised me a bottle of gin if I went to her barrack for it. I never went for it because I liked rum.

I arrived at the P.O.’s mess at 10 p.m. - 2200 hours, black as the ace of spades. All my whites were dirty. Across the mess I was living in, was a tenement block with Italian people living in them. One lady waved to me, and shouted “Goeges Manyanan Goerges Manyana.” I asked one of the lads if he could speak Italian. He came to the window and spoke to the lady. He said, “She says that King George is coming in morning.” My mate went to see our Chief if it was true. I decided to wash my whites just in case. My mate came back from Chief and said that lady is full of bull, but I still ironed my whites and blancoed my shoes just in case. Next morning, after breakfast, the King arrived. We were all on parade. The King walked down by column, and stopped in front of me and looked at me. I then made by blob, instead of looking straight ahead of me, which I was trained to do, I looked at him and eye-balled him. He never spoke to me; he just walked away and I don’t blame him. I only know I blew it.

I got a job going for the bad boys and taking them in for Captain’s report. Lt Cdr Wilson was my boss. He used to inspect my ship, the “Tequila” when I was in charge on her, and he had a lot of respect for me. One day he sent for me and asked me if I would sign on a trouble ship he was taking the PO off because he had no discipline over his men. The ship was Dutch, the Captain a part owner of the Netherlands shipping company. Another thing, something was brewing as a lot of my PO mates were going on draft to Malta also. Why had the King arrived in Naples? I had not heard any news but I could smell something. I told Lt Cdr Wilson I would go, but he had to back me up with the ship’s officers if need be. I’d had my share of them.

I was taken by boat to the S.S. Jan Lievens. No one was on deck, which was unusual. Two gunners had to patrol the ship twenty-four hours a day on sabotage-watch. My gear and kit were still in the boat. I went down to the gunner’s quarters and all the ratings were drinking tea and playing cards. I asked if the sabotage watch was among them. Two men admitted they were. I told them to get in the rig of the day and get on deck until their four hours were up or they would be put ashore for punishment, and anyone else who committed the same offence.

I detailed some hands to get my gear out the boat and put in my room. I examined the armaments and found a four-inch high and low angle gun, a Bofors, a twelve-pounder on the forecastle and two Oerlikons each side, port and starboard, four altogether. I signed the defect book and P O left the ship.

I went amidships to meet the captain. I saw the officer drinking spirits in the steward’s room. I asked the steward, “Can I have my tot of rum please?” All those in the room laughed at me, one of them said, “You don’t get tots on here gunner.” I asked where the Captain’s room was. They pointed upstairs.
I knocked at the door and a voice called, “Come in.” and I met him, the skipper. He seemed to me a very large man, weighing around 17 or 18 stone. “I am your new PO Gun-layer Sir, and I am going to make this ship, if left alone, I hope, a very happy one.” He shook hands with me, and I could tell that he liked me. As I was leaving, I turned back showed him my pay book, 3 pence a day grog. “Could you let the steward know, Sir, that I have a tot of rum every morning at 11 a.m.” The skipper picked up his phone and spoke I think to the steward. I enjoyed my tot and I saw no one laughing.

That evening we sat at the mess table for our evening meal. Just before the end, someone asked, “Who’s washing dishes tonight, whose turn is it?” One of the lads went to the list, looked at it, turned and said, “It’s the POs turn.” I said that POs do not wash pots, the PO tells his serfs to do it. The two men who should have been on watch that afternoon were sat there. I said to them, “You two are peggies, you go for the grub, you make the clean kits back to the galley, you scrub the bathroom and toilets out, you bring the pot of coffee down at stand easy. I will put men on every morning to scrub the mess room decks and clean the guns, etc and if you fail, I will put you ashore and Lt Cr Wilson will put you on a dirty Greek ship, with sheep living on the deck, and you will live on mutton.”

Next morning, I was having breakfast when a ship’s officer came into the mess. He said, “I am the second officer gunnery officer, pleased to meet you”. He shook hands with me and then said, “Here is your working party list for your gunners.” I was still eating my bacon and eggs, but I stopped for a few seconds and tore his list up. I said, “That’s the second list I have ripped up. I am the PO Gun Layer aboard this ship. I am in charge. I give orders to the men, not write to them - the officer in charge of me is Lt Cdr Wilson. If you don’t like the way I do my duties, like I was trained to do, see him not me. You are not my gunnery officer, he is.”

After that we settled down to an easy, quiet life. We had, beside our own gunners, two Merchant Navy Dutch owners called John Viser and Bert Quelch. We went round the Mediterranean and to Alexandria a lot. The Navy barrage balloons people used to invite me to their mess for a few points of beer and gave me a white puppy I called Daisy. With our ship being a coal burner she was always black and used to go under the shower with me every day.

One day in Naples we had a launch arrive and a dozen naval ratings came aboard schooner rigged (one of everything). The last time I heard of that was when they sent destroyers to Malta. The Navy men just took one set of gear on those voyages. One of my best pals went on one Malta run and was sunk three times. He had nervous disability for the rest of his life. He has died since.

The gunners came aboard and we had plenty of bunks on our quarters and sheets and pillows from the steward. There was a Killick (leading seaman) with them so I put him in charge of the twelve-pounder with a crew of his own. I showed him the ammunition and showed his team how we had to use speed to send up shells as far as possible. They began to drill and I was very happy with them. Lt Cdr Wilson had done me a favour sending me them. I put the extra men with my Oerlikon gunners, to lift the shell magazines on and off; they are heavy and with someone helping loading was twice as fast. I had my own guns crew on the four inch high or low angle gun, so I was ready for all the Germans in the universe. The Bofors gun was also a great anti-aircraft gun and was manned by a maritime ack-ack crew of artillery gunners, second to none.
We still had no idea where we were bound. I guess we were invading somewhere, maybe the coast of France. Next day we had a load of Yanks board us with a load of DUCKWs - landing craft to ride on water and on land. Captain Bell was their commander and he never left us. He played solo with us all the time. We used some of the Yankee provisions, with his permission. Bacon, in long tins, and tomatoes. He, Capt Bell, loved bacon and toms for his supper. Our cook gave my peggies a galley key, a big pan and a couple of kits, and we enjoyed our supper every night.

Next day we sailed. The captain and myself had been given an envelope, each heavily sealed, not to be opened until a certain time. I arranged with our captain to see him and open our letters together when the time came. We opened them. We were to pass Corsica at dark and go to some place just before Marseilles, drop the yanks off with their DUCKWs and come back to Naples, alone. We also had a list of Aircraft, we should see, all British, no Yanks or German on the list. There was a brick fort on the beach with some Germans manning it. A French battleship outside flattened it, and also the enemy. We were on our way to Naples.

We were steaming back, when we were all on dusk watch. Everyone in DEMS, at Sea, had to stand by their guns at dawn and dusk because the enemy always those times to attach shipping. The sun had not gone down, but it was a little higher than usual. When a plane flew past us on our starboard side, I spoke “that is a Junkers 88, he will turn and go to the sun, then with the sun behind him, will try and dive bomb us. When you all hear me fire the four-inch, give him hell very rapid.” I waited just long enough for him to turn start his dive and I fired. The barrage, that followed, was murderous. All my gunners had been taught by the Royal Navy and the maritime acc-acc Bofors gun crew, for hours and hours, in how to shoot at an enemy attacking from every angle in the frame, so they were the best before I had ever seen them.

Next day, we went to work cleaning and oiling every weapon on board. I wrote out my action report and gave it to Lt Cdr Wilson to send to London. He then told me he and his staff were joining our ship to take over the DEMS office at Marseilles. He used to examine the guns every morning to see I was doing my job right and he had a gadget which had a small mirror fixed to it. When slipped into the breech, it would show all of the inside of the barrel. He presented me with one of these. I though I would also like to see what a barrel would look like dirty after having been fired for a spell, so I put a drum on an Oerlikon, and I fired quite a few rounds. I put my gadget in the breech and looked in the mirror. The inside was spotless and I was speechless. I put a clean pull-through in and pulled it all the way through. The rag I had used was as black as the Hobbs of Hell. I put another drum on, and fired
another few rounds and told the gunner not to clean it until I told him. I wanted Lt Cdr Wilson to examine it the next day. The Lt Cdr was waiting early next morning to examine the guns and we soon got to the dirty Oerlikon. He popped his gadget into the breech and said, “Fine, fine as usual.” I never said anything to him, as would be getting shut of him next day. I picked my gadget and tossed it into the sea.

We went from Marseilles to Oran. We heard we were going to New York so I thought I would be getting home to see my wife and family. I was over the moon things had altered in the Atlantic; the U-Boats had been getting sunk right left and centre by our navy and things were now a lot safer. We did not see any action the whole crossing and landed at New York. I still had my permit from 1941 in Florida, so I was able to go ashore. I took my dog Daisy with me to a bar on 14th Street. The manager of the bar also owned the cafe next door, so you could have a beer and a feed as well. The boss and his family went nuts about Daisy and she loved the kids too, so I left her with them. I went to Jack Dempsey’s bar, he used to have his photo taken with service men and autograph it. My luck had run out, Dempsey had gone to Florida on naval business. He was a big shot in the U.S. Navy.

I found the photo and card the G.I. on the Takliwa gave me. His father had a tailor’s shop in New York. I went next day, by underground, and found the shop. His father was delighted to meet me. He told me to go round his shop and try a couple of suits on and, if they did not fit, he would make them fit. These suits belonged to businessmen who stayed at a large hotel. They left a suit to be cleaned and, maybe, were called away on business during the night; so the tailor bought them and sold them. They had been dried cleaned and looked like new. I found two suits which only needed a little alteration. The tailor gave me a dollar and sent me to a bar opposite his shop across the road and told me to, “Drink beer until your dollar has been spent, come back and your two suits will be ready to wear.” One suit was grey, the other a nice blue. The tailor told me to send my mates, and he would take care of them. When my mates saw my gear they went en-block to the shop and some of them even bought overcoats as well.

I had to go to the DEMS office to get some gear and order stores to be sent to the ship. I walked into the office and it was full of typists; young lovely ladies, all busy, and an old ugly chief PO, who began shouting at me, showing off in front of his young audience. I shouted back. He did not like me wearing a white cap and I told him “I am a Petty Officer Gun-layer and you try to bollock me in front of civilians belonging to another country. I have been serving in the Middle East in every theatre of war for the past two years. I invaded the South of France with the Yanks, before I came here, and I’ll be going back to the fighting zone when I leave here. You won’t. I have been to your shops and they have no black caps. Next time Chief, rollock me in private”. The DEMS lieutenant came out of his office shouting, “Leave my chief alone, stop your shouting at him”. I said that he had started it and I was just finishing it. He took me into his office and I gave him a list of all my needs plus a black cap, size 6 7/8.

I returned to the ship and a gunner was waiting for me to see if I could help him. He had gone into a place called a taxi-dance. People buy tickets; give one to any girl and she dances with you until the music stops. Then you can dance again if you want or get another partner. Each dance a new ticket. This gunner was not a naval gunner, but a single young man. He had stayed with her all evening, took her for a nice meal and given her a lot of dollars to go to bed with her. On the way to her home, she needed something from a drug store so she would not get pregnant. She evidently knew the store. The
taxi pulled up outside. She got out the car and went inside. John sat there waiting for her to come out but the store had two exits and two entrances. She had gone, ripping John off. He knew the taxi-dance place, so after evening meal, I said, “Let’s go and get your money back.” We went to this dance place and the bouncer on the door would not let us in to see the boss. I said, “Okay, you stop here John, I’ll be back with the police and I will get this place closed down.” The doorman soon told us to go up the stairs. The boss listened to me when I asked him for the money John had given her, the taxi money and table money. The meal and the dances were on John. The boss had tickets to see some fights at Madison in New York. He said that what his dancers did when they left the dance hall was nothing to do with him. I noticed all the taxi dancers coming in to begin their work. I got John to pick his ex girl out and took her into the office in front of the boss, who still pleaded innocent. She cried and said she had spent the money. I told the boss I was going with John and coming back with the British Consulate and the police to do my best to close his clip joint down. He asked John how many dollars she had charged him, and also the taxi fare to the drug store. He paid up and told the girl that he would stop the money out of her wages.

John asked me where I would like to go when we left the clip joint. I told him that I had been listening to the radio whilst having my evening meal, and that Louis Armstrong was performing with a band at a nightclub called “The Zanzibar”. We went and John paid. The club charged two dollars cover charge, which meant it covered entry and also a free two course meal, salad and a chicken dinner, while watching the show; and what a show! First there was The Peter Sisters then Bill Robinson, the tap dancer who was dancing in a film with Shirley Temple a couple of years or so later in “The Good Ship Lollipop”. There were also two more favourites of mine; the Nickolus Brothers, who danced in the Eddie Cantor films. Maurice Rocco also played jazz and rock and roll, on a piano, all round the club. I once saw him doing the same act in a film with Mae West. Louis came on played his trumpet sang, in those lovely gravel tones, a lot of his favourite songs which I have always enjoyed. The best night I have had in over two years. We finished our night in Dempsey’s bar.

The people wanted to keep Daisy as she had become one of their family. If I had taken her home, she would have had to do six months in quarantine, so goodbye Daisy. We loaded up, even the boat decks, mostly with armaments for fighting the Germans, but what country? What port? I had to dream and wished it was Blight (Britain) so I could see my wife and family. At long last, we had a quiet voyage across the Atlantic in a convoy. The subs had been beaten but these were still a few skulking about. We reached England and anchored in the channel staring at the white cliffs of Dover, but no Vera Lynne. We got the bad news then. We had to go through a narrow channel and discharge all our cargo in Belgium. On each side of us, as we steamed down, were dozen of masts sticking up out of the water as a grim reminder of the invasion that took place on D Day. We tied up at Antwerp, in the middle of the town it seemed to me. Nearly opposite across the road was a fort and, during the day, we could hear the sound of rifles being fired. We asked the Dockers working the ships what was going on in
They told us that the collaborators and the quislings where being tried and if found guilty, were facing a firing squad. Even women were being shot for living and fraternising with Germans.

We head some bad news, we were sailing for New York again as soon as we were bunkered with coal. There was no navy in Antwerp only us. After a couple of hours or so, we got the bad news from the skipper - no coal - we had to go to Barry Docks in South Wales for coal. We jumped for joy, and set sail for Barry. We arrived at Barry at night, nearly midnight. We all began to get our hammocks and kit bags ready to get off the ship as soon as possible, because it did not take long to coal a ship. Next day, Easter Sunday, I went to the DEMS office to get us all, maritime gunners, relieved. The office was shut and locked up. I walked to the nearest house and knocked on the door. An old lady answered the door, and I asked her if anyone was opening the office that day. She told me no one worked on a Sunday in Wales, but the Naval officer in charge always visited the club on Sundays and she showed me where the club was. I ran all the way. I asked at the club door for the naval officer, and he came out. I explained to him that our ship was sailing the next day and we all wanted replacements next morning. He scratched his head and told me, “I can replace all the gunners, but not you. I do not have a Petty Officer available.” I then told him, “All my gear and hammock will be in the quay at 8 am in the morning. I have just served two years in the Middle East and the ship is going across the Western, there are subs still out there. I would sooner have cells than subs, so I will be on the quay; sorry Sir.”

Next morning a lorry pulled up at the ship and I could not see a PO among them. The maritime driver jumped out followed by a PO. I turned the defect book and armament over the PO, shook hands with him and the crew and left.

I was on a train and on my way home. I reached Hull and walked down my street to see my house for the first time. An old chap, a neighbour of mine, was the first person I saw as I was nearing home, and he shouted across the street to me. “Are you home again? Our Len (his son) has not been home for over four months.”

All good things come to an end. I was on a train heading back to Barry. What a long miserable journey it was. Nearly midnight and I was ready for bed when I arrived. A rating told me to lay on a form as I was joining a ship at five hundred hours that morning. I could have strangled him.

Next morning, I jointed the “Cape Howe”. The PO I was relieving was the one and only Paddy Sloan from Carrickfergus. Paddy told me a terrible story. He was very unlucky to join a ship sail-
sailing on the dreaded Russian run. The first day a gunner was cleaning a Marlin machine gun, one gun nobody liked. When unloading one there was always on bullet left up the spout (left in the breach) the gunner tried it accidentally and poor Paddy coped for it through his hand, right through, so he had an hole in it. To make it worse, he was also sunk again for the third time. I asked my old mate, “Did you stop selling lucky charms after that Paddy?” The ship did not sail that day, so Paddy and I went ashore for a beer and, after that, I never saw him again.

We set sail on the way to the States. Before we arrived there, the war with Germany was over - and I was three thousand miles from home, but if I had one of those glass balls the gypsy fortune teller has, and I’d been able to look in one, I would have seen not three but twenty-eight thousand miles, as my skipper captain Sinclair told me. Three thousand miles longer than the world is round. We landed in Baltimore and took off all of the gunners but two, and myself. I had a maritime ack-ack gunner to look after the Bofors, Jack Quelch, a Londoner who, as I got to know him, was both a gentleman and a very clever brainy man too. The other man was a naval rating called Cecil Harver, this ship was the only one he had been on so he had been there a long time. The skipper, Captain Sinclair had lost a lot of his silvery hair and no wonder he was in Bari, Italy, when the thousand British seamen perished and my ship was trying to dock there, but a ship was blocking the entrance, after Jerry had sunk it just inside the boom gates. Another mate was bombed at Bari, he lived near me in Hull and was in the maritime R.A. and had been one of my gunners during the early days of the war. His name was Stanley Rowe.

After loading we set sail to Port Said and we lost Jack Quelch, as he was going home to be demobilled. I missed him; he used to tell us stories about his home life in London. We got to Port Said. I went ashore to see my old mates, but being pensioners and instructors (and the war nearly over except for Japan) they were being demobilled. I was in a queue going to see a show in the fleet club, when a young fruit seller saw me and gave me some fruit. When I was in charge of the launches round the Canal I let him come with me every day and sell his fruit to the men going from their ships to the gunners refreshers courses and he did a roaring trade because in the hot sun oranges were a God send.

I got a bug and I had dysentery, so the Captain got in touch with the medical staff ashore and they promised to send an ambulance boat to take me to hospital. No one came for me, I lay in my bunk as the ship sailed through the Suez Canal during the hottest July for fifty years. I had diarrhoea and had to wash the deck down crawling on my belly. I would not let my mate Harvey do it as I felt ashamed to.

The Renown passed us in the Canal. The Japs had atom bombs dropped on them at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, so had surrendered. I had received an A.M. (Admiralty Fleet Order) naming Mr. Duck. He was serving on a British ship that had been torpedoed by a Jap sub, which then surfaced to shoot the survivors in their lifeboat. Mr. Duck stayed on the sinking ship and kept on firing the four inch-gun at the sub until it submerged, saving the crew’s lives. He was still firing until he sunk with his ship. I think if I had been there with him, I would have stayed with him, I swear to God and I know God believes me.
We reached Calcutta and when we were moored up a Naval Officer came aboard. He was a doctor and had come to inject the crew for the black plague. Here we go again, I thought. I sat on a hatch watching everyone getting the jab until I was the only one left. He looked at his list, and shouted, “Where is the Petty Officer Gun-layer?” I said that it was I and I was not going to have the jab. He was really upset and I tried to explain to him that I had read the Readers Digest warning people in the armed forces not to have inoculations, because it may cause misery and harm maybe years after, and maybe you would be very sorry. The doctor replied, “Baloney”. I told him that the author in the Digest was, “The most cleverest Scientist Professor in the U.S.A.”. I said that I had refused the jab in Port Said and had been home on leave and received a letter from home, from my wife Lily, telling me that she was pregnant. I also told him I was happy. I did not think any harm would befall my wife and baby. He snarled at me and said, “I am sending an ambulance and putting you in hospital until your ship sales.” I replied, “Yes Sir”. I went ashore and had my dinner in the fleet club. An ambulance never came. Years after I wondered if those two naval doctors thought of me when these poorthalidomide children were born.

A naval officer came aboard to see me and asked me if I would go ashore to become the regulating petty officer. I showed him my pay book, which had the two years out East I had just completed and refused as my wife, Lily, was having our baby and I wanted to be with her when she had it. No one mentioned the black plague in Calcutta I noticed. The naval officer was upset and said that my ship was going from here to Colombo and the DEMS officer would not ask me to go regulating PO but would yank me off the ship and that would be that. We sailed for Columbia and I felt miserable, but God took a hand again. The skipper bless him, told me that our ship had been diverted to Durban. We arrived next morning and were told to go the YMCA for two days. The law on arriving in Durban was for every ship to be fumigated for rats. So we closed our port holes and went ashore. I visited the DEMS office and the officer told me that he had been to a funeral. It seemed that a naval seaman gunner had returned to his ship during the night while his ship was being fumigated and went to sleep in his bunk, thinking maybe everything was okay. He was found dead next morning. I was told he was a Scot and had ginger hair, I then told the officer his name and that I had sailed with him. When in New York, he and another seaman gunner had asked me to transfer them, as the war was coming to a close, so they wanted to see more of the world. I argued and pleaded with Ginger to stay, as we were going to Belgium and then maybe home, but he wanted to go. He wrote to his parents nearly daily at sea then posted all his letters at the next port. Ginger also sailed with my brother Harry, so when I finally got home and told my brother, I gave him some photos of Ginger and, as he had Ginger’s address, was going to write to his parents in Scotland. I was happy.
We loaded in Durban and then made ready to sail for Buenos Airies. I had orders to dump all ammunitions into the sea on our way to BA. I asked the crew if any one wanted any empty brass shell cases; four-inch, twelve-pounder, Oerlikon, etc. We fired the guns for the empty cases, they wanted. We made a rig at the after end of the ship because the magazine was right at the after end. We slid all the cases on a ramp and pushed them over board. It took us all day. The carpenter saved quite a few cases because they were made of mahogany. He made us a polished bookcase, which was in parts to get it home, so it was easy for me to assemble. I used it for years.

It was a long trip to B.A. but the skipper gave Cecil Harvey, my gunnery mate, and myself a lot of work, paying us two shillings an hour (ten pence) today’s money. We painted and then we started work in the engine room. We had loads of emery paper and polished all the gratings and oily ragged them. After we had finished using the armament we gave every gun a good clean, and I had plenty of Coopers grease, which I used plenty of, and put all the covers on, which would last for a couple of weeks or so.

We arrived at Buenos Aires and moored our ship in Porto Nova Dock (which in English means New Port). We all had to have our photos taken and our finger prints too. We were given a paper each, with photo prints, size, colour of hair, skin and any scars or tattoos. There was a pub on the dock. The cook went for a beer, and he stayed in there for a week until his money ran out. The second cook took over, and he was very good. We were able to wear our uniforms. There wasn’t any navy in B.A.

A very large man came aboard. He was without doubt the biggest man I had ever seen. His name was Gorges Mendoza, and then it rung a bell. He was one time heavy-weight boxing champion of South America. I saw him on film fight Joe Louis a few years ago, Joe knocked him out in the first round, so it shows how good Joe Louis was. Mendoza ran the wrestling and boxing in B.A. One of the sailors on our ship had a go in the ring and won.

Every day we went ashore we noticed the name Peron was painted on most buildings and hoardings. ‘Free Peron’, ‘Long Live Peron’. Evita, his wife was also working hard to get him out of jail. One Sunday Cecil and I decided to go to the main street, to window shop. Just before we turned left to enter the main street, we were amazed to see dozens of armed cops hiding in shop doorways. We were wearing our naval uniforms. We turned into Main Street and coming to meet us about 60 yards away, were thousands of men who were chanting in Spanish, but we could only understand one word, and that was ‘Peron’. There was no chance whatsoever of Cecil and I getting past, or through, the multitude, so I told my mate to turn round and casually “Abandon ship.”, as those waiting cops could be trigger happy and shoot us, if we ran. We just strolled passed them and made ourselves scarce - like a Scotsman on a flag day.
We had a place where we could buy a beer. It was like a Britannia Club, only British soldiers used it, and people used to get on the stage and sing. There was also a Catholic place which sold beer and played music records. Some British girls used to come in and dance with us. Money was very scarce. No one aboard the ship had any. The captain could not get any off the agents. We headed down the river to a port called Rosario, to load grain for home. Just the evening before, in the Catholic club, an old shipmate of mine, Lofty, walked in. We were on the Danish ship the “Birgitte” together. He had been sailing round there for two years. He could speak Spanish fluently and was courting one of the English girls in the club. I bet he never came home. He looked to me as though he had settled down in South America.

Before we reached Rosario a plague of locusts covered our vessel. They were everywhere. All doors and portholes were closed. The locusts were large and made a funny noise, a whirring sound. It was a very hot day; the sweat was running off us. With the ports and doors closed, it was worse. I went along the deck to the cook’s cabin and it was full of sweaty men playing cards. I had four locusts in my hand, hidden behind my back. I shut the door and stood in front of it, so no one could escape, and tossed my locusts amongst the sweaty bodies. Hell broke loose as every one tried to get out that cabin.

I never went ashore in Rosario. We soon filled the S.S. “Cape Howe” with grain and were on our way home. Maybe Lil had had our baby by the time I got home. I had not received any mail in B.A. so I was unaware of anything at home. “No noose is good news” as the man waiting to be hung once said. We had a boring voyage home. No convoys now; sailing with lights, no closing ports or seeing to darkening the ship every night. I wondered if Evita had got her husband out of jail yet. We called into one of the islands for water but did not see much. A boat came out to us and filled our tanks up. We were heading for London, Bellamy’s Wharf. I had been there before I got a few letters. Nothing must have happened, in all those months I had been away. I had, of course, missed VE and VJ days. I had forgotten what a pint tasted like. I was taken off the Tate & Lyle ship, shook hands with all my shipmates and my skipper Scotch-man Captain Sinclair. God Bless him, I loved that bloke. He was like a father to me. I landed back on the embankment on HMS “Chrysanthemum” again and I met some of my old mates, who were seamen gunners with me.

I was sent home on leave and I told Lt Kendal RN that Lily, my wife, was expecting our baby so I could send him a telegram, requesting extra leave and ration tickets, but he would not wear that. He said, “No telegram, too dear, just send me a letter.” I got a train from Kings Cross station and laid back to enjoy my journey home. I got to Paragon Station, Hull and it was dark, all the victory parties had been over for months. My father in law met me, and told me that an army lorry had killed my dad, crossing Anlaby Road. He had just left work. He also told me my brother Victor who was in the Royal
Scots was in Beverley Base hospital. He was at Dunkirk and had got home. He was in the Normandy landings and his pals who had been with him since 1939 were crossing a river at Flushing. Someone had been across, came back and reported it was safe, so they crossed with their rifles held over their heads to keep them dry. Halfway there, the Germans opened up with everything. Vic had most of his fingers shot off and also one side of his body took a couple of slugs. All his comrades were killed, except one, who was in Edinburgh, wounded. Vic asked me to write a letter for him and post it to his mate. Vic naturally was unable to write. A few days later, our letter came back with a black border round it. Nine or ten years later, Vic went to the Fish Shop for a fish for his moggy, a stray he had found on dock, a taxi hit Vic, the stopping distance was 135 feet. The driver was charged with manslaughter at York Assizes but got off.

My wife, Lily, began to have our baby at five in the evening. I called the midwife who was a young one. The midwife, who had looked after Lily during her pregnancy, had retired at Christmas. Incidentally, she was the first person to reach my father on Anlaby Road, when he was killed. My wife was having a tough time in her mother’s front room, and I was a little scared. The time was getting on and no sign of a birth. The midwife came to me and Rose, my wife’s sister, and told me that she had been informed the baby’s heart could not be heard and thought the baby was dead and we should get her doctor. We had no phone, it was five am, and so we had to go to the all night taxi place on Hessle Road. The snow was coming down very fast. I rang our Doctor and he refused to come. I looked in the directory and began to ring doctors up. They all refused until the eleventh one who was called Dr Mix. I stood in the Street waiting for the Doctor - he drove down the Street hitting piles of snow. He went into the front room and I began to make a fire; Rose had let it out while I had been getting a doctor. I went into the passageway to hear anything and heard the midwife say “my God” and saw blood seeping into the passage and felt very scared. Next thing I heard was our baby crying. I had been told earlier she had died. God had not forsaken us. Dr Mix came into the kitchen and said that we had a baby daughter. I went into the front room to see Lily. She looked very ill and my daughter had a misshapen head. Dr Mix had used forceps. The fire had started burning brighter and Lil was very cold. The birth had taken 12 hours. Lil’s mother came into the room, picking our baby up, nursed and cuddled her, then took her to Lil and made her put her breast into the baby’s mouth. Lil had pneumonia. Doctor Mix arrived with some tablets and told me that Lil had to start eating or he would put her in hospital. I lightly toasted a thick slice of bread and poached two eggs. Lil left a small amount. To get her to take the tablets, I peeled an orange each time and it worked.

I had written to Lt Kendal for an extension, and I thought I would get a reply on Monday, the following day. I stayed up all night with Lil to make sure she took her tablets. On the Monday morning, I went to the barbers for my hair had gotten a deal longer. The barber, a Jew called Sammy Wolff, was a life-long pal of mine. He had just finished cutting my hair when two Naval PO’s walked in; they had gaiters on so I guessed they were Naval-Police. They asked me if I was PO Shortland, as I was wearing civy gear. I admitted I was, so, they said that I was “under arrest for being adrift” (absent without leave). I denied this. They took me to my mother-in-law’s house, so I could put my uniform on, then on to Hedon Road to the Navy base. I told the officer in charge about my arrangement with Lt Kendal HMS President III. The time was 9am. I was held there until 4.30 p.m. without a drink or anything to eat. The officer then told me that Lt Kendal was in hospital with flu and my letter was put in his drawer on the ship. The Hull Officer had rung Dr Mix and he had confirmed that my wife Lilly was very ill.
They took me home and my wife was worried, so I had to start again, making her eat. Eventually she got better. I went back to London to the ship on the embankment next to the HMS President III, HMS Chrysanthemum. I put in a request to see the Captain for a transfer to Hull. The Master at Arms marched me into the Captain’s cabin, he shouted, “Halt, off cap!” and when the captain raised his head he looked at me and said ‘Hello Shortland, how are you?’ and shook my hand. The Master at Arms was gob smacked. I told Captain Marsden all my worries and about being arrested. He told his WREN secretary to find out the time for my train from Kings Cross to Hull. He then told the Jonty (MA) to get me and my kit on the train. The Jonty asked me outside how me and the Captain were such good mates, I did not tell him I was running his launches on the Suez, I just said, “The Captain was an old ship mate”. I got back home and got demobbed at York. I read the papers about Eva getting her husband Peron out of Jail and that made me happy.

I went rigging for Ellerman Wilson Shipping. Then, whilst in their employ, I went to Spurn (E. Yorkshire) when their ship “Vasco” was sunk on a sand bank just a couple of days before Xmas. We went home for two days then went back. There were a couple of us, divers mates, turning a wheel round to give them air. We could only get on the ship for one hour at each low tide. I was on the tug “Pinky” then the “Rifleman”. Three weeks later we towed her off the sand bank pumped all the water out of her and took her into Immingham. She was soon back on her regular runs again.

Things got bad again, no work, shipping got slack, so I went fishing for a couple of years, for T White Lock Ships; White Sea, Bear Island and Iceland, then after a scare when my trawler was ten days overdue, I went back to Ellerman Wilson, got a Dockers’s book, and finished up a Tally Clerk. But that’s another story . . . . .

Lol Shortland passed away, after a long illness, in the Hull Royal Infirmary on 14th October 2000. He was survived by his wife Lil (nee Lilly Easter Hatfield), daughter Pat and grandchildren Matthew and Louise. He is pictured here on his 80th birthday with grandson Mathew helping him to light his present, a very special hand-made Meerschaum pipe. Lol always enjoyed a pipe and had a drawer full of old-fashioned white clay pipes which he used all of the time. He left everyone who met him much happier for the experience, he was an exceptionally fair and gentle man and is greatly missed by all.