

'YESTERYEAR'

Capt C. J. Harris*

During the course of a recent visit to Simonstown I parked my car on the heights of Jubilee Square from which vantage point I could gaze down upon the naval dockyard and the buildings which today form only a portion of the vast naval complex which spreads its tentacles from one end of Simonstown to the other, and even beyond.

The change in the dockyard basin itself, which has virtually been doubled in recent years; the endless rush-hour procession of cars and buses transporting both Service and civilian personnel to and from this formerly sleepy little town; and the sense of permanency that was so lacking in earlier years when Simonstown had been a mere transitory port for the ships and men of the Royal Navy who bided their two years or so on the 'Cape Station', and then moved off elsewhere upon their lawful occasions, caused me to reflect on the changes that had been wrought, not only in the town and dockyard, but in the navy itself in the 40 years since I had been commissioned as a Temporary Sub Lieutenant into a fledgling service that has grown into a proud giant.

Since I participated in some of the early birth-pangs, permit me to invite you to share some of those early impressions and reminiscences with me.

When war clouds gathered over Europe in 1939 I had already completed six and a half years at sea and was serving as Third Officer in a passenger liner plying her trade between the United Kingdom, South Africa, Mozambique and Mauritius. It was during a voyage to these shores in the early months of 1940 that I first heard of the birth and tentative tottering steps of a new South African Navy. True, it was not called a Navy in those days, but had been christened with the unimaginative name of Seaward Defence Force, quickly transposed by its detractors — and there were many — into Sea weed Defence Force. But, as the man said, 'What in a name?' The fact remained that here, from the ashes of the former South African Naval Service that had fallen victim to the Great Depression, was arising a Phoenix, urged on by the demands of war and with all the promise of great things to come.

Arriving in Durban on our return from Mauritius I visited Tribune House in West Street which was then headquarters for both the Royal Navy and its new little sister, the Seaward Defence Force. There I was interviewed by a Lieut Commander Scott-Stokes, an ex-Royal Naval officer whom I remembered from voyaging with him as a Sea Scout in the old minesweeping trawler, *H.M.S.A.S. Sonneblom* in 1932. This fact had no bearing on the outcome of the interview for, not only did he fail to recognise or remember me, but in the event the final decisions on appointments were made in Cape Town. Accordingly, on arrival at that port, and clad in all the glory of a uniform rig seldom, if ever, seen today — blue jacket and white duck trousers — I hid myself off the Naval H.Q. where I was sympathetically received by yet another ex-Royal Navy and ex-minesweeper commanding officer, Lieut Commander Scott Napier D.S.O. This gentleman seemed concerned over the fact that if I joined the SDF. I would forfeit the necessary seetime so essential to any merchant navy officer in the acquisition of his certificates of competency. I was prepared to accept this risk for, in wartime, who knew what the future held, but all to no avail for it transpired that at that particular stage there were no immediate vacancies. Nothing for it then but to return to my ship which was loading for London.

With the bulky mail delivered onboard upon reaching our destination was a cable addressed to me. I have it yet and it read, 'Vacancy for Sub Lieutenant Seaward Defence Force now exists. Reply if you accept. Appointment dates from date of assuming duty.' That was in mid-May 1940.

Now here was a pretty kettle of fish as anyone who ever tried to get a passage to South Africa during the war years will readily appreciate. In addition, my employers were reluctant to dispense with my services, promotion was in the offing and besides which every man was required right there in the front line and not, so they declared, in remote and far-off South Africa. I had already cabled my acceptance and now arose the problem of not only obtaining a passage to South Africa but likewise obtaining release from the bonds of the Merchant Navy.

However, determination and long argument won the day even to the extent of my persuading my employers to grant me a free passage in one of their ships. This they did, and appointed me in the lowly rank of Fifth Officer at a token payment of 10 cents per month. I duly joined this ship which, after a month or so of dilly-dallying on the part of the naval authorities, ended up by being scuttled as a blockship at the entrance to Folkestone harbour. South Africa was still a long way away.

All this was at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation and the last predictable thing in the world at that unfortunate period in time were shipping movements. I was however, given a second chance and in due course joined yet another of the Company's vessels in which, after awaiting our lifeboats which had been commandeered for the evacuation, I finally set off on the long irksome wartime zig-zag passage to Cape Town. This outward voyage is a story in itself but has no place in this narrative.

At long last, on Friday 9th August 1940, three months after receiving my cable of appointment, the ship berthed in Cape Town where I lost no time in reporting to Scott Napier, endured the medical examination at the old Castle, and was duly accepted as a Sub Lieutenant. As a matter of passing interest, my commissioning parchment officially recognising this fact did not reach me until 12 years later in East Africa by which time I had severed all connection with the Navy. Strange indeed are the ways of bureaucracy. What did intrigue me at my acceptance interview however, was to learn that there was a shortage of commanding officers for anti-submarine patrol vessels and it was indicated that this would be my future destiny. Returning to my late ship to collect my belongings and 'sign-off', I informed the captain of my expected appointment. That worthy sized me up from head to foot. 'Good God!', he said. Perhaps he had a point for I had just turned 23 and he had waited longer than that for his first command. That same ship, incidentally, was torpedoed not long after I left her and out of her entire complement only two survived to tell the tale.

Having installed myself with friends at Sea Point, the next step was to have the straight ring on my uniform jackets converted to the curl of the navy, and also replace my cap badge with the Royal Naval pattern. Another addition to the uniform was the so-called 'orange flash' indicating willingness to serve outside South Africa. At that stage there was some doubt as to just where this flash was to

be positioned and its placing seemed to be a matter of personal preference. In the event it ended up above the curl of the stripe, and on shoulder-straps covered the triangular point where the strap buttoned on to shirt or tunic. Later in the war this same flash was to cause much speculation in officers clubs around the world, and particularly in New York where we were all taken for doctors of some sort, a surgeon's stripes in the navy being edged with red. By lunchtime the following day I had, to all intents and purposes, been transformed into a naval officer. Tailors worked hard and fast in those demanding days, and coined money hand over fist in their efforts.

There followed a free weekend in which to 'sling my hammock' as the saying goes. My salary, incidentally, was £24 per month, a little more than I had been earning in the Merchant Service, even with the addition of a war bonus, and rose to £30 on attaining marital status!

Bright and early on the morning of Monday 12th August 1940 I reported to Commander Dalgleish, well-known in hydrographical survey circles and at that time Number Two in the SDF hierarchy, which was headed by Rear Admiral Halifax, RN (Ret'd). The latter was killed in an air crash on 28th March 1941 whereupon Dalgleish was promoted to the rank of Captain and appointed Director Seaward Defence Force. It is interesting to consider today with those of exalted rank falling over themselves in abundance, that Captain Dalgleish headed the entire navy throughout the war years with the rank of Captain and in control of some 10 332 serving men and women. His was the highest rank held in the S.A. Navy during the war and in fact it was not until August 1st 1945 that he was promoted to Temporary Commodore and confirmed in that rank on May 1st 1946 with the formation of the present Permanent Force Navy. Generally speaking, promotion was hard-won during the war years, and mere Lieut Commanders ranked as minor Gods.

But I digress. Whilst waiting for Commander Dalgleish on that Monday morning so long ago I was addressed from time to time by an impressive-looking civilian, pompous of manner, fairly oozing self-confidence, and towards whom, as a stranger in a strange land, I regarded with some awe and deemed it advisable to treat with due deference. Dalgleish burst into the office, glared at this individual and grunted, 'It's about time you got yourself into uniform. See to it.' Next day I was somewhat mortified to note that he too,

bore the single stripe of a Sub Lieutenant but edged with the purple of an engineer. Just how deceptive can appearances prove?

At this remove I cannot help but feel that the authorities had little idea of what to do with this influx of new officers. Some were sent on crash courses, but the majority of us wandered aimlessly around Cape Town docks like lost sheep. Due to the unprecedented expansion necessitated by the demands of war, matters were truly chaotic and savoured of 'Chinese fire drill'. Newly-joined seamen wore mostly boiler-suits, or part uniform, and followed blindly wherever they were led. Eventually a duty list made its welcome appearance and it transpired that every two or three days we were to go to sea in the minesweepers which left harbour in the pre-dawn chill. Then too, we were detailed as night duty officer which entailed sitting in a makeshift office situated in a dockside shed which seemed to serve also all the manifold needs of the navy. Our sleeping accommodation was provided by two railway coaches drawn up at an adjacent siding. Quite a brainwave on someone's part although certain amenities were lacking, especially all forms of heating during the cold winter nights. It also occurs to me that the Navy still owes me 50 cents for an occasion when, as duty officer, I had to place my hand in my pocket to provide the necessary petrol for a lorry to convey a patrol to Sea Point to effect an arrest. At compound interest that 50 cents must be worth something today — 40 years later!

The ships in those days consisted entirely of hastily converted trawlers and whale-catchers. They were painted warship grey, armed with guns and depth-charges, and wore the White Ensign of the Royal Navy aft, and the South African flag at the fore. They were seaworthy little vessels, albeit extremely lively in anything of a seaway and that, as any sailor will tell you, is the rule rather than the exception in Cape waters.

Came the day when I headed the list for my first excursion to sea in a minesweeper. The alarm clock shattered my nerves at the stipulated time and I walked all the way from Glengariff Road at Sea Point in the cold and dark to board the little ship lying in the Alfred Basin. Two or three of us were detailed for this brief voyage and upon stepping onboard were welcomed with enamel mugs of thick coffee liberally laced with too much sugar and sweetened condensed milk. Since that morning I have shunned both in any beverage.

We put to sea, two little ships in company, to sweep the approaches to Table Bay along a searched channel extending some 32 kilometers seawards. On the outward voyage, bucking into a head sea and swell, I felt distinctly light-headed and experienced disconcerting flushes, a condition I attributed to the early rising, the long walk, and that appalling cup of coffee. Only on turning at the end of the channel and putting the wind and sea astern with the resultant easier motion, did the awful truth dawn on me that I, a professional sailor, had felt the dreaded pangs of seasickness. It was fated not to be the last time by any means and never again on putting to sea in similar small craft, did I ever do so without an uneasy foreboding that I would disgrace myself.

Inbetween all this, certain of us were allocated to stand-by whale-catchers in the throes of conversion. Since none of us knew anything about such matters we were soon bored and whiled away our time at the nearby Harbour Café, with an occasional foray to the scene of our responsibility. We soon learned that if we strode purposefully along the quay armed with a look of intense concentration, a clip-board and a sheaf of papers, we were seldom challenged. My main recollection of those neglected little ships is of the smell of rotting food, the flies and the fleas, all of which I took with me in good measure to Sea Point, much to the disgust of mine hosts.

It was a very 'slap-happy' navy in those days with no clear direction, at least insofar as we very junior officers could tell, and it was not long before we sprinkling of ex-Merchant Navy officers grew to resent what we considered preferential treatment being meted out to members of the R.N.V.R. (Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve — S.A. Division) and former yachtsmen. There is no doubt at all that there was a great deal of 'old buddy' and 'jobs for pals' when the plums were handed out. In the case of R.N.V.R. officers this might be forgiven for at least they had enjoyed some basic naval training if only at weekends and for short annual cruises with the fleet. But, to we professionals they were only 'weekend sailors' although we quite overlooked the fact that for all our previous sea-going experience we knew little of naval methods and customs. Fortunately we soon overcame this prejudice as we increased our naval knowledge. It might not be out of place to mention here that while many a Merchant Navy officer develops into a good naval officer, the reverse is seldom the case. As an example of the former, the last three Chiefs of the Navy all started their careers in the Merchant Navy.

In due course qualifications and experience were assessed and a seniority list promulgated which seemed to satisfy everyone. It was, quite rightly, headed by ex-Royal Navy officers and tailed off into the delightfully phrased, 'Gentlemen recruited from other sources.' Nevertheless it was the 'weekend sailor' who prospered in that they carried into the Service ranks gained in peacetime, and were by and large, promoted accordingly when in the promotion zone. These comments are not intended to be disparaging. R.N.V.R. officers did a magnificent job of work and many achieved deservedly high rank in the post-war navy. A situation perhaps hardly any of them could have envisaged when, between the wars, they enrolled in the R.N.V.R. either in a spirit of patriotism, adventure, or in submission to the 'bite of the sea bug'.

With the sudden development and rapid growth of this new branch of the armed forces consisting largely of men from all walks of life with little or nothing in the form of previous experience, the stiff core of seasoned and veteran Royal Navy officers and instructors worked the clock around in an endeavour to sort order out of chaos and their disciplined minds must have boggled at some of the outlandish things that came their way. Many of the minesweeper crews were fishermen taken over with their ships, and professional fishermen are a fiercely independent breed. Licking them into shape must have been heartbreaking work to both sides concerned, but it was done.

This influx brought with it some amusing incidents. Never to be forgotten was the sight of a grim-faced crew following the progress of their portly and red-faced captain and his First Lieutenant, heading for the stores with a basket of rotten vegetables to 'note protest' with the victualling officer. Their mission having proved fruitless, they returned onboard still carrying their basket whereupon the disgusted crew promptly plucked vegetables therefrom and proceeded to pelt their officers with the contents. Those worthies, deciding discretion to be the better part of valour, promptly took to their heels.

There were other odd sights such as sentries sporting striped football jerseys, seamen wearing a flower tucked into the cap tally (all uniforms in those days were Royal Navy pattern), and others of their kind displayed ornaments such as crucifixes and other unauthorised adornment conspicuously displayed.

Officers were not guiltless either. On one occasion we had returned from an arduous few days spent sweeping a German minefield off Cape Agulhus. Within minutes of our return to port our ship was ordered back to sea to sweep a suspected area off Cape Point. The ship must needs replenish her stores and water, and while this was going on my captain and I set an indignant course to H.Q. to complain to Commander Dalgleish over having to go to sea again without sufficient rest. He happened to be engaged and while we paced his ante-room his secretary, a Paymaster Sub Lieutenant, inquired quite disinterestedly into our reason for seeking an interview with the Director. When we told him he appeared stricken and cast anguished glances at the still closed door. 'Forget it,' he begged of us, 'and get out while the going is good.' Eventually commonsense prevailed and, to this day, I am so relieved that we saw reason when we did. Mind you, Commander Dalgleish's certain reaction to our request would surely have been something about which to tell our grandchildren in the years to come. For years afterwards my former captain and I referred to it as 'The Great Escape'.

One could go on and on as memories of those days come crowding back, but so quickly and so efficiently did this rag and bobtail of ships and men organise themselves onto a war footing that to go any further would be to start a recorded history of South Africa's war at sea.

Should, God forbid, hostilities break out in this day and age, at least we would not be caught as unprepared as we were in 1939. The policy makers of the middle 1940's were wise to insist on the retention of the navy in post war planning and today's navy, plus its hundreds and hundreds of trained reservists, could give a good account of themselves if called upon to do so.

But, let today's generation never forget that, just as the mighty oak grew from a little acorn, so did the things they see about them today evolve from the little ships and their hardy forbears of yesteryear.

* Footnote

Capt C. J. Harris was attached to the Navy for twelve years until 1952, when he rejoined the Merchant Navy, where he served continuously as officer, Master and latterly as Marine Superintendent. He has now entered upon semi-retirement and possibly into full retirement in 2 1/2 years time on attaining the age of 65. Capt Harris was recently elected President of the Society of Master Mariners, SA.