

NAVAL INTERLUDE

An Account based on a Diary
of a Midshipman R.N.V.R.

during the last year of the First World War

by

W. B. ADAM

FOREWORD

This account of the experiences of a schoolboy turned sailor in the final year of the First World War was started in 1934 in an attempt to recapture an old enthusiasm and provide a relief from the restrictions imposed in the writing of scientific and technical papers. The task, which proved to be too difficult to accomplish at the time, was set aside on the advent of the Second World War and was not completed until 1952.

It is easy to contrast the naval sides of the two wars and to see in the first a slower tempo, with the normal hazards of the sea more nicely balanced against the misfortunes of war. But to those who serve, all major wars must be Great Wars, and that of 1914-18 fully deserved the name by which it was long called.

The main events described in these pages cover little more than a year's break between school and university, the shortness of the interval suggesting the title, Naval Interlude. The chief source is a diary kept at the time - a naive document full of strange rumours, unwarranted deductions, and unfulfilled longings for a fleet action - which was written partly in port and partly at sea, and generally under a yellow-shaded lamp in the cabin of a destroyer. In this diary one sees, through the eyes of a temporary midshipman, some of the activities in a specialized field of naval operations towards the end of the First World War, and all that this account attempts to do is to fill in the details of the picture and give an indication of the background against which these events appeared at the time.

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This document is the final chapter of the full diary, covering the Surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in the Forth, November 2018.

Midshipman Adam served with the 20th destroyer flotilla based out of Immingham. This was a specialist high-speed minelayer flotilla. Their modified destroyers could cross the North Sea under cover of darkness, lay mines outside the German home ports then return safely before daylight.

The flotilla laid a total of 23,136 mines in the course of the war.

Admiral Beatty acknowledged their role in keeping the High Seas fleet bottled up in harbour by inviting them to the surrender pageant on November 21st 1918.

XI

A few weeks before the end of the war we had been fitted with paravanes, + the new mine-protecting gear +, but most of us had become so used to the thought of passing through minefields that we viewed the new contraption with mixed feelings. The two paravanes were ~~fixed~~ attached by wires to a fitting low down on the forefoot, and were towed several feet below the surface about level with the after funnel and some little distance from the ship's side. The gear sometimes gave trouble and was always awkward when the ship was under helm at low speed but we developed a pride in being the kindest ship in the flotilla at dropping paravanes and getting them towing at the right level. We eventually reached such a state of efficiency that, on receipt of the executive signal "Out P.Vs" from Abdiel we were able to hoist "One Pennant" (Evolution Completed) eight seconds later. On one occasion when there was some trouble with the paravanes towing unevenly I was sent to lie along the fore-castle-head and hang over the bows, the ^{guardrails} ~~handrails~~ rails being down, to watch the movement of the wires supporting the fitting in the forefoot. Actually I was more interested in the rise and fall of the bows and the tiny plume of spray that unaccountably curved forward from our stem like a perpetual and self-renewing note of interrogation.

On the night of 19th-20th November, as we prepared to turn north at Spurn Point, Vanquisher, ahead of us, had trouble with her paravanes and this caused us to reduce speed so that we overrode our own paravanes as we swung slowly to port. As the

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disentangling of the wires would have been a most tedious operation we promptly discarded the whole gear and proceeded unencumbered to our destination.

By nine o'clock next morning we were off Ray Island and two hours later had anchored at Craig Wough near the island of Inchkeith. All around us lay the destroyers of the Grand Fleet, amongst the nearest being the flotilla leaders Shakespeare, Spenser and Saumarez. Further up the river, behind the spans of the Bridge with its suspended submarine nettings, lay the Battle Fleet and Battle Cruise ^{Force} ~~Force~~ with their attendant ^{cruisers,} light cruisers and destroyers. There was little movement in the fiirth, except where one small destroyer, lighter in colour than the rest and with tall heavily raked masts, passed through the lines of ships wearing the Royal Standard at her forepeak. She was the "Oak", with the King on board making a tour of inspection of his fleet before they put to sea to accept the surrender of the German fleet.

In the afternoon a fresh breeze sprang up and all the ships in the flotilla lowered whalers for a race. I joined the crew of ours and, although we got away with a bad start we soon picked up rapidly as we sped along the course round the flotilla to an exciting finish, where we were just beaten for second place. Most of us were tired that evening and, as we were to put to sea early next morning, we turned in betimes.

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By 9 o'clock next morning we were off May Island and two hours later had anchored at Craig Waugh near the island of Inchkeith. All around us lay the destroyers of the Grand Fleet, amongst the nearest being the flotilla leaders *Shakespeare*, *Spenser* and *Saumarez*. Further up the river behind the spans of the bridge with its suspended submarine nettings lay the Battle Fleet and Battle Cruiser force with their attendant Cruisers, Light Cruisers and Destroyers. There was little movement in the Forth, except there was one small destroyer, lighter in colour than the rest and with tall heavily raked masts, passed through the lines of ships wearing the Royal Standard at her fore-peak. She was the 'Oak' with the King onboard making a tour of inspection of his fleet before they put to sea to accept the surrender of the German fleet.

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* * * *

At about 3.30 am next day, 21st November, we weighed anchor and proceeded slowly towards the mouth of the Forth in company with the squadrons and flotillas of the Grand Fleet. Bright moonlight shone through a sea mist and lit up the dark shapes of ships moving to take up their stations as they heeled asteward at ten knots, but as I was not on watch I soon turned in and did not come on deck again until shortly after seven. It was hardly more than twilight when I mounted the after gun platform and looked at the long lines of destroyers disposed ahead and to Starboard of us, and watched the numbers increasing as the Longs heeled in the gathering light of day. All the ships in the 1st flotilla were dressed in battle array with two white ensigns at their masts - one worn at the peak of the foremast and one on the mainmast. Abdiel, at the head of the column, looked impressive with a great white ensign flying from her mainmast and astern of her came the full strength of the 20th Flotilla, consisting of Vanox, Vanquisher, Venturous, Tarpon and Telemachus, with Gabriel, Legion, Prince (just joined us from the Grand Fleet), Sandfly and Ferret in the rear. Ahead were the 11th Flotilla, with the three other Battle Fleet flotillas all in line ahead disposed abreast of one another to starboard, and units of the 3rd + 21st Flotillas in a similar position on the starboard side of the formation to that occupied by the 20th on the port side. A gap of nearly two miles between the central columns left a lane through which the German fleet would pass.

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The 13th Flotilla - the destroyer escort of the Battle Cruiser ^{Force} ~~Force~~ - spread out in line abreast across the van, with the light cruiser *Lantor* flying the broad pennant of Commodore Tweedie in command. Astern of us I could ^{just} see the shapes of cruiser and light cruisers, while astern of them, but invisible in the mist, came the massed squadrons of the Grand Fleet with "Queen Elizabeth" flying Admiral Beatty's flag as Commander-in-Chief.

It was an impressive sight, but it was also time for breakfast, so I went down to the wardroom, where all was in a bustle to get the meal over in time to see the two fleets make contact. This event was not long delayed, for, at about 7.50 a.m. a messenger slid down the ladder in the wardroom hatch, tucked his cap under his left arm, and addressed the First Lieutenant with the words "Message from the Captain, Sir - Enemy in sight". The messenger's words had an odd ring about them, and conjured up the prospect of a long-delayed meeting, but we gave little thought to this as we hurriedly finished or left our breakfasts and went up top.

On the horizon some distance ahead of the ~~Grand~~ Battle Fleet destroyers was a smudge of smoke out of which the slim lines of the British light cruiser *Cardiff* soon took shape. Astern and towering above her were the heavy upperworks and control towers of the German battlecruisers, and at eight o'clock the head of the German line entered the gap at the centre of the British columns of British destroyers immediately ahead of us. We were then about 60 miles to the east of May Island at the mouth of the Firth.

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Leading the German fleet was the battlecruiser Seydlitz, flagship of the First Scouting Group and astern of her ^{Mottke} came Hindenburg, Derfflinger and Von der Tann. All the ships wore the German ensign and Seydlitz flew the broad pennant of Commodore Tölgert at the peak of her foremast. It was the first time that Hindenburg had been seen by the men of our fleet and she looked a more powerful ship than any in our own Battle Cruiser ^{Force} Fleet, but all the rest were old enemies and had fought gallantly on various occasions against our own ships. Von der Tann covered herself in a heavy pall of smoke as she entered the lines of British destroyers and we saw little of her.

About half a mile astern of the battlecruisers came the 3rd + 4th Battle Squadrons comprising most of the larger battleships of the German fleet and led by Friedrich der Grosse flying the flag of the German Commander-in-Chief, Admiral von Röntgen. One by one they appeared out of the mist and followed their flagship through the gap in the columns of British ships - König Albrecht, Kaiser, Kaiserin, Prinzregent Luitpold, Kronprinz Wilhelm, Grosser Kurfürst, Bayern and Markgraf. It was a melancholy procession - like the captives of a Roman army forced to pass beneath the yoke.

The next ships in the German line were the light cruisers - and 'light' they were only in name - Emden, Frankfurt, Brummer, Bremen, Köln and Dresden. Brummer and Bremen, two heavily armed ships, reputed to be the fastest cruisers afloat, had made sorties through the Sound from their Baltic base on several occasions and attacked our convoys in the Skagerak.

Leading the German fleet was the battle cruiser *Seydlitz*, flagship of the First Scouting Group, astern of her came *Moltke*, *Hindenburg*, *Derrflinger* and *Von der Tann*. All the ships wore the German ensign and *Seydlitz* flew the broad pennant of Commodore Tagert at the peak of her foremast. It was the first time that *Hindenburg* had been seen by the men of our fleet and she looked a more powerful than any in our own Battle Cruiser force but all the rest were old enemies and had fought gallantly on various occasions against our own ships. *Von der Tann* covered herself in a heavy pall of smoke as she entered the lines of the British destroyers and we saw little of her.

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It was in these northern waters that we had expected to meet them when we were about our job of minelaying, but they had failed to find us, and it was too late now.

As the last of the cruisers entered our lines we could see the columns of enemy destroyers, 49 ships in all in five lines disposed abreast, keeping fairly good station and looking different from our own in being lower in the freeboard. Shortly before we came abreast of them a signal hoist appeared at Abdiel's masthead and in a few minutes the flotilla had altered course in succession 16 points to starboard. As Abdiel passed about two cables distant on our starboard side she was flying "H20.G12" - a signal for the flotilla to alter speed to 12 knots. Signals for alteration of course and speed flew from the mastheads or yardarms of other flotilla leaders and from the flagships of the squadrons which had been following astern of us, and in a short time the entire fleet was proceeding westwards astride the line of German ships. On completing this manoeuvre we took station on the starboard side of the 11th Flotilla and closed in on the light cruiser squadron ahead. The whole of the sea in the semicircular arc to port was now studded with ships moving slowly towards the fort within an horizon limited by a typical North Sea haze to little more than ^{three} two sea miles.

At noon I went on the bridge to take the afternoon watch with the gunner, and about one o'clock we had May Island abeam. Far ahead of us - perhaps 15 miles distant - leading the combined fleets were our battle cruiser squadrons with their escort of light cruisers in the van, and between us and them were the squadrons of

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The Battle Fleet. As we entered the constricted waters of the Firth the flotilla was ordered to break away from the main formation of destroyers and follow astern of the battlecruisers, so we altered course and, proceeding round the rear of the fleet and skirting close to the shores of May Island, we increased speed and stood towards the battlecruisers at the head of the port columns. In making this manoeuvre we sighted ships of all types. We had a glimpse for a few moments of the lattice masts of a squadron of American battleships, looking strangely foreign in the midst of this great array of British ships. More familiar were the shapes of the two 15-inch gun heavy cruisers of the First Cruiser Squadron - Courageous and Glorious. I was glad to see Courageous again, as she reminded me of an early morning adventure on Southsea Common when I had lain in wait for her to leave Portsmouth Harbour for her trials, and had illicitly noted the ^{details} ~~shape~~ of her armament and sketched her outline. Further over to starboard was the strange shape of the newly-converted aircraft carrier Furious, conspicuous with her flat flight deck and her harshly dazzle-painted hull, and the seaplane ship Vindictive astern of her, while ahead of us was the Second Battle Cruiser Squadron consisting of Australia, New Zealand, Indomitable and Inflexible all easily recognizable with their tall tripod masts.

In our new station we steamed slowly westwards, where, low down on the horizon the sun shone red through the mist, until about 3.30 pm, when we left the battlecruisers to seek our own anchorage off Granton. In doing so we passed close

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to the ships of the combined fleets now anchored near Inchekeith. A few minutes later, at sunset, the German ships, obeying an order from the British Commander-in-Chief, hauled down their ensigns for the last time. ~~Next day, they were to hoist them below the White Ensign.~~

Life on board Venturous that evening must have been much the same as that on most of the ^{other} British destroyers anchored in the Forth. At dinner in the wardroom the Captain presided, and, after the toast of 'The King' had been honoured, we drank another to 'Der Tag'. Then came rowdy games and a good deal of laughter which grew noisier as the evening wore on and more childish in proportion to the seniority of the officers joining in. Some of us found a good deal of innocent amusement in satisfying the curiosity of one very inexperienced officer who happened to be present and wanted to know the names of the German ships. He failed to spot anything incongruous as he noted down the time-honoured variants on the names of the two most famous battlecruisers - Sidelights and Dirt flinger - but smelled a rat when we solemnly suggested that two of the battleships were called Fredrick the Grocer and Grocer Cure-first.

Towards midnight I went on deck and looked over the dark waters of the Forth to where the combined fleets lay at anchor. Never before had such a great force been assembled under one command and probably never again would so many ships be under the orders of a single ^{admiral} command. Out there in the stream lay about 60 battleships and battleship-cruisers, about an equal number of cruisers and

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light cruisers and upwards of 200 destroyers, besides auxiliary ships of various sorts. The surrendered fleet were ~~more~~ one ship short in each class, their most modern battlecruiser Mackensen, the battleship König, the light cruiser Karlsruhe and one destroyer being absent for various reasons. As far as the destroyer was concerned it was said that she had set out with the rest of the fleet but had run foul of a mine off Horns Reef. One in the 20th flotilla smiled when we heard this news and wondered who could have been so inconsiderate as to lay mines there!

Looking towards the southern shore of the Firth, where the towers of Fettes would have been visible in daylight about three miles away, I felt that it would have been pleasant to have called in at Glenrose, but we were at two hours' notice to sail, and no shore leave was granted. The determination which I had expressed while at Fettes to be present when the British and German fleets ^{met} for the next time after Jutland had been realized, though not in the way I had hoped and it would have been good to have let my friends know that I had been at the final meeting. It had been an historic day, but few of us felt much satisfaction at seeing a once-proud fleet submit to the humiliation of surrender.

By early next morning we were under way and were soon clear of the defences at the mouth of the Firth and heading southward towards the Humber. The surrender was over and the curtain rung down on the last act of the naval war. There were no outwards signs of triumph - no broom at the

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most like Tromp or whip at the mast like Blake. If such thoughts had not crossed our minds as we shaped course for our base they came to us as we approached the bell-mouth of the jetty at Immingham and saw the outline of the masts of the destroyer *Nimrod* silhouetted against the sunset. An odd shape about the trunk of her foremast puzzled us for a moment until we recognized what it was.

There, tied to the masthead, was a broom!

* * * * *

The war was over, and it remained only for the actors to make their bows, to leave the stage, and in due course to read their press notices. Our own trickled out slowly, the first in January 1919, being from the First Lord (Sir Eric Geddes) who said:

"As the German Navy would not come out in force our submarines and minelaying boats had, day after day and night after night, entered huge German minefields off Heligoland and blocked the channels through which some German boats left and returned. These trap mines led to over 100 German craft being caught during the first six months of 1918"

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A year later as the flotilla was being disbanded the naval correspondent of the Times, in a long article on

its work wrote:

"By its many achievements the 20th Flotilla created a record for gallantry, coolness and daring which was unsurpassed. With the 6th Flotilla at Dover - the incomparable Sixth as Sir Reginald Bacon called them - the vessels of the 20th Flotilla had the distinction of being perhaps the best known of all the destroyer flotillas of the Navy, although the 3rd Flotilla at Harwich, composed of the 'L' class, came into prominence in the early days of hostilities. In other cases it was generally individual boats, or small groups, which earned distinctions. But the 20th Flotilla stood apart from all the rest, and its own special task, as the First Lord once explained, was to go through the enemy minefields and mine inside them."

This was more than our fair share of praise, as the Flotilla had merely done the job it was set to do. In the eight months of its activity the eleven destroyers which composed it may have crippled or destroyed close on 200 German craft. The exact number of enemy ships forced by the flotilla to keep company with *Vehement* and *Ariel* on the bed of the North Sea is unknown, but it must represent a fair-sized fleet.

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For us the curtain descended on 22nd. November as we penned into Immingham Basin on our return from the surrender of the German fleet, though the flotilla was to see active service and lose one of its numbers in action against the Russian fleet in the Baltic in 1919. On our return from the Fort there was little left for the snotties to do, for lectures on navigation previously given by the Lieutenant (N) in Abdiel had been cancelled. Attention to Confidential books, correction of charts, filing of notices to mariners, work on the wine accounts, and on demobilization papers occupied our mornings. In the afternoons we played rigger or walked through the bare lanes and flat countryside of north-east Lincolnshire. Following the custom of their captain the midshipmen addressed one another by the names of their respective ships: I was 'Venturous' and my friends 'Tarpon', 'Sandfly', 'Ferret' or 'Prince'.

For a brief moment the monotony was relieved by a ceremonial parade, but the high hope that we might be provided with swords for the occasion came to nothing and it was a disappointing day for the snotties. Christmas came along and with it leave in London. Then New Year's Eve when we indulged in celebrations while waiting for the signal giving the honours list and half-yearly promotions for the Navy. Captain (D) was awarded a C.B. and the captain of Vanquisher promoted to Commander. It was at least an acknowledgement.

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Early in the new year my skipper told me that he had intended to apply for my special promotion to Sub-lieutenant if the armistice had not come along, and suggested that I might consider transferring to the R.N., but life in the peacetime navy did not appeal to me at the time. So the days moved on and for a short time flags were flown at half mast for the death of Prince John; then, on 21st January, all R.N.V.R. officers were given indefinite leave. On the morning of 25th January I said my goodbyes and left the flotilla; two days later, on 27th January, I was demobilized.

* * * * *

For the next few weeks I explored London in uniform, and it was quite by accident that I found myself on the Mall on the day of the opening of Parliament. The road was lined with soldiers spaced a few yards apart, but the crowds had dispersed after seeing the state procession on its way to Westminster, and so I had a good view of the return journey, standing in the same line as the troops. The procession appeared from under the Admiralty Arch, the sovereign's escort passed in a clatter of hooves, the troops came to the 'Present', and the King and Queen drove by in an open state landau, but not before the King had acknowledged a midshipman's salute and the Queen had bowed. The next carriage contained the heads of the fighting services and, on a prod from the C. I. G. S.,

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(Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson) my salute was returned by the First Sea Lord (Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss). The rest of the carriages, containing Heads of State departments and other estimable people of high rank, were just so much chicken feed to me, but I gave them each a salute all the same. A few days later I wore my uniform for the last time.

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