

# The First Thirty Years

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When S.A.T.S. "General Botha" started her career as a training ship she was moored at a berth just about as close as she could get under the window of the study of the Pastorie at Simonstown, where Ds. de Villiers was at the time composing the music of our National Anthem. She flew the British Blue Ensign then, and the Dominie would have rejoiced when, six years later, our then brand-new National Flag was broken at our main truck for the first time, by myself. I have vivid recollections of the occasion; but it was more than thirty years before I was to serve under that flag again. There was no South African Navy or Merchant Service in those days.

Life at sea, even in wartime, is a routine-bound affair, though one would need to write a book to recount thirty years of it. To explain my absence, I give here some episodes which mark the way I have been, like buoys in a channel, but most of the time has been spent on passage from one buoy to the next, and that is not told of here.

On leaving the Botha in 1929 I joined, in Cape Town, the "Berrima" of the P. and O. Coy., then on her last voyage. On arrival in London I was transferred to the "Mongolia" for a year's voyaging to Australia during which time I got to know the seaman's way of life. It was the practice in this ship for the cadet of the watch to keep look-out duties in the crow's nest from 0400—0600. It was my turn one day during a thunder storm in the Australian Bight, when the foremast was struck by lightning. Fortunately the mast had been painted the day before and as the paint was still wet I was keeping my look-out trick on the forecastle head, or this report would have ended here.

After six months R.N.R. training I joined the "Kashgar", voyaging to China and Japan. I was cadet of the watch on the first day of our last voyage, when the "Hans Maersk" collided with us in the thick fog after we had dropped the pilot off Dungeness. Two years later the "Hans Maersk" entered Leith where she was "arrested", the warrant being nailed to her mast, and soon after I was involved in the only Court case of my thirty years at sea. For three quarters of an hour I had to give evidence and be cross-examined before Lord Merrivale in Edinburgh, the opposing advocate trying to get me to refute my captain. Fortunately I had a very clear recollection of the

event and was able to acquit myself to the entire satisfaction of our advocate and my own officers. Later I was to sit on a Court of Enquiry myself and found that it had been a useful experience.

Old Botha Boy Jeffreys, lost in the "Ceramic" during the war, shared digs with me in London when we were up for our Second Mates together. This was the time of the Great Depression. Present day second mates must find it difficult to believe that in so bad straits was the shipping industry, and jobs so scarce, that there were ships at sea in which every man on deck held a Masters Ticket, and the Bosun was an Extra-Master. Nearly all those of my Botha term had to quit the sea in order to earn a living. Some joined the Royal Air Force: "Pavlova" Thompson, since killed, Air Vice Marshall H. Graham, still in England, and Group Captain C. R. Taylor, now back in Durban, were among them. The excellent Company I had joined, however, created a job for me in their office to tide me over this time, though quite unobliged to do so. After two years of this and some more R.N.R. drill I was appointed Fourth of the mailship "Chitral". Seven years after joining the Botha I had got my first job as a certified officer. That was the lot of the fortunate ones, the others never got there at all. In due course came promotion to Third of the same ship, which job carried the duties of Mail Officer. I regret to report that I once failed to land at Aden a bag of mail addressed to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales who was then touring Kenya (there was no airmail then). At Bombay I explained my dilemma to an official at Government House and he, good soul, fixed things so that I heard no more about it.

Mussolini now gave my affairs a good push in a different direction. He ordered his troops to invade Abyssinia (now called Ethiopia). Britain apparently was very angry and called up some Reserves to commission part of the Reserve Fleet. I was among them. At Malta I joined the minesweeper "Huntley", afterwards lost in the war. There is no space to write of my time there but I must tell you of Rupert Lonsdale, our First Lieutenant, who subsequently spent nearly the whole of World War II as a prisoner of war, and on release had to go through the ordeal of being court-martialled for surrendering his ship (the submarine "Seal") to the enemy, the first R.N. Officer to do so since Nelson's time. An account of fortitude and great leadership in adversity came to light and he was acquitted with honour to the great happiness of the whole Navy. He is now a Minister in the Church of England.

After a year of this I returned to the P. & O. Coy. for a short while, serving in the "Kidderpore" between India and Japan and while there, like many others, was re-called to England and

given a permanent commission in the Royal Navy. Nine months courses at Chatham and Portsmouth followed and then an appointment to the new cruiser "Newcastle". World War II broke out while I was there. We were ordered to Scapa Flow and one of our first duties was to support the Northern Patrol, comprising Armed Merchant Cruisers, in case they got into trouble. They soon did.

One afternoon when we were patrolling South of Iceland, we received a signal from the "Rawalpindi", a few miles to the S.E. of us, saying that she was being attacked by the German pocket battleship "Scheer". Our frantic engineers soon got "Newcastle" up to thirty knots and, running before a cold front we could see approaching from the West, we were very soon on the scene. It was night now and dark, pitch dark, the darkest night I can remember; but the blazing "Rawalpindi" provided a beacon in the centre of the circle we steamed round until we saw the enemy silhouette, and what a surprise! There were two of them, "Scharnhorst" and "Gniesnau", much more powerful than the "Scheer" and each separately capable of blowing us out of the water. I will never forget the voice calling out ranges getting closer and closer. Then the front arrived with its rain and wind and blotted out the whole scene. By the time the first squalls had passed the "Rawalpindi" had sunk and the two enemy battle-cruisers were Heaven knows where. We carried out a "Curve of search" at thirty knots to regain touch for the information of our heavy ships, but to no avail. There was no radar then.

Next we provided cover for the small ships withdrawing the British Army from Dunkirk and were then ordered to Plymouth, our home port; but not for leave. The Germans had started to bomb the city which had no anti-aircraft defences. We anchored off the Hoe to provide them and soon became the main target — bombs bursting all about, but they did us no damage. Although I had now been made the ship's Air Defence Officer, I must honestly say that I do not think that we did much damage to them either.

Our next job was an unpleasant one. France had surrendered to Germany and there were many French ships in British harbours. The Admiralty decided that they must be captured. "Newcastle's" objective was the Contre-Torpilleur La Triomphant, lying in Plymouth Sound. I had no part in the actual capture of this ship which was carried out at night, but was officer of the watch on deck and it can be imagined that I had a pretty busy time. Most of the captures at Plymouth were carried out with as little hurt

as possible in the circumstances. In the case of the French Submarine "Surcouf", which the British Submarine "Thames" (I think) had been ordered to capture, the "Thames" crew managed complete surprise and their captain was able to get to the "Surcouf" captain's cabin where the C.O. was asleep. Waking him at the pistol's point, the British captain told the Frenchman to surrender as his ship had already been captured. The Frenchman pulled out a loaded revolver from under his pillow and each shot the other dead (or so I was told).

To sea again to bombard Cherbourg by night with the "Resolution". Our part was to act as a red herring and draw off enemy forces sent to intercept. In the event we were unmolested and returned to harbour as from a practice shoot; and there was my relief waiting.

And now an appointment as First Lieutenant of the destroyer "Boadicea", lying at Portsmouth being repaired after damage received at Dunkirk. A bomb had passed right through the engine room and out through the bottom without exploding but cutting the main steam pipe and killing everybody there. Our new Chief, who was soon to lose his life in the "Curacoa", and I had a tremendous time getting her ready for sea again due to the continual bombing of Portsmouth Dockyard, but we got away eventually to Scapa Flow to join the Home Fleet. After some time there, screening the heavy ships on operations, we were transferred to the Western Approaches as leader of the Fourth Escort Group based on the Clyde. Our enemy were the U-boats, except for an occasional long-range Focke-Wolfe reconnaissance-bomber. It was a world of asdics and depth-charges. Life in the Western Approaches is described very well in Nicholas Monserrat's book "The Cruel Sea" and I will only tell you of a silly incident which happened during my two years there.

As leader our station was always immediately ahead of the centre column of a convoy and in fog we had to be careful not to be rammed by the leading ship. One morning when doing this, a thick fog came down. Then suddenly a German U-Boat, lying stopped on the surface, loomed up almost alongside. We were so close we could have shot each other with revolvers, let alone blowing him to pieces with our guns, and he us with his torpedoes. Both sides were so astonished that nobody did anything. We ourselves could not stop without being rammed and when he disappeared in the fog astern we listened for sounds of a crash and rending steel. Nothing happened, and when the fog lifted

a couple of hours later the convoy was still intact and nothing untoward was reported. We felt a bit foolish about the whole affair, and said nothing about it when we returned to harbour. I dare say he did not either.

"Boadicea" was sunk later but long before that I had left to take up my first command, the old "V" & "W" class destroyer "Volunteer", also of the Western Approaches. Within a month my ship's company had sunk a U-Boat in such a distinguished manner that my report of the operation was received at Western Approaches Headquarters with much scepticism. Some time after the war had ended I received a letter from a friend congratulating me on my being mentioned in dispatches for distinguished service against submarines. Surprised, I enquired further, and found that the German Admiralty records had been captured intact after Germany's surrender and the "Volunteer's" beautiful work confirmed. Although my part had only been to give the right orders at the right time, without which my chaps could not act, I was thus honoured on their behalf. I wonder who else has been mentioned in the enemy's dispatches.

We were now sent to Iceland, with orders to join the escort of a convoy (PQ 16) to Murmansk, a Russian port in the Kola Inlet. We did not fare as badly as the following convoy, PQ 17, which was just about annihilated, but still had a very strenuous time, though we arrived with three-quarters of our ships still afloat. In mid-Summer there is no darkness in those latitudes and we were bombed from Norway continuously for days and nights on end, not to mention the U-Boats.

On the Roll of Honour Board in the "General Botha" is the name A. J. Hay, D.F.C. Let me tell you how I met him in the Arctic. Our station was on the port bow of the leading ship of the port column, the "Empire Lawrence", which was fully loaded with explosives and ammunition. Mounted on her fore-castle was a catapult with a Hurricane fighter aircraft piloted by Alastair Hay. On the first day of intense bombing he was shot off into the air to engage single-handed the squadrons of Heinkel III and Junker 88s. Eventually, wounded, he had to bale out as there was no carrier to land on. I lowered a boat to pick him up, and just as the boat's falls were hooked on again for hoisting, two torpedo-bombers came at us low down from the North. With the boat still only a few inches out of the water and my hair standing on end, I ordered Full Ahead and Hard-a-Starboard to steady course on a course to comb the tracks of the torpedoes which we could see, one on each quarter. This took us on an exact collision course with the "Empire Lawrence". There was

just time to alter to port ahead of the port torpedo, and then both of them struck her and she disintegrated in an immense explosion; just a grating and a few bits of wood left floating. The gallant Alastair was killed later, but I had him safe on board this time. Vice-Admiral Campbell, in his book "The Kola Run", says simply: "Pilot Officer Hay, though wounded, successfully baled out of his aircraft and was picked up by "Volunteer". He goes on: "Empire Lawrence was sunk by five direct hits from Junkers 88s." But I think I know better, though possibly it was the second ship in the line which was struck by the torpedoes, and "Empire Lawrence" struck simultaneously by bombs.

In Murmansk I met another Old Boy, W. Hogg (now Commander S.A.N.), who was at the time navigator of the "Huzzar", and he came on board seeking medical aid for the survivors of the "Gossamer" which they had rescued.

On return to Rosyth we paid off Volunteer into dockyard hands and dispersed. Rear-Admiral Burnett, who came out to the Cape as C-in-C South Atlantic after the war, was at that time Rear-Admiral, Destroyers, Home Fleet, and I remain very grateful to him for approving no less than eight of my recommendations for awards and mentions for my Ship's Company; and for myself, as their Captain, he recommended the Distinguished Service Cross.

My next appointment was to the destroyer "Walpole", in command again. Based on Harwich, our forces' main object was to provide first warning of a German invasion. We patrolled the Channel and North Sea by night and anchored under shore defences by day. Though in February the previous year, under my predecessor, the ship had taken part in the chase of the "Scharnhorst", "Gniesnau" and "Prinz Eugen" up-Channel, mines and enemy torpedo boats (called E-boats) were our main pre-occupation in those shallow waters in my time. After a year, to the day, of a war of occasional quick and fleeting skirmishes with the young German captains of the E-boats, I left "Walpole" and reported to Admiral Talbot for duty with Force S, then forming up for the Normandy Invasion. But before this C-in-C Nore had kindly arranged to have "Walpole" in port for a period while the King was holding an investiture at Buckingham Palace, to enable me to attend. Inside the Palace I met Old Boy O.R. Barr (now Commander R.N. ret'd.) and living near me in Newlands, who was also there to receive the D.S.C.

The task of Force 'S' was to land the Third British Division on the left flank of the front for the initial assault. Originally appointed Beachmaster of Sword Beach, I was later made Staff

Officer (Operations) of the Support Squadron of Force 'S'. I am thankful for this. My relief had his head blown off within half an hour of landing. Our headquarters was the little ship LCH 285 which was fitted with a PPI, very novel then and the first I had seen. We were the leading ship of the assault on Sword Beach. We landed our 3rd Division before Ouistreham and had the River Orne close to the East of us.

This was the left flank of the Allied Assault Area and the Germans massed artillery and mortars on the other bank and let us have it, both in the anchorage and on the beach. We held our own for about three weeks but eventually, on the first of July, we abandoned the position as it had become too hot for us. Just before this, however, one day at about 12.30 p.m., our LCH 285 struck a mine, laid by aircraft the previous night, when the ship's company were down below having the mid-day meal. She immediately turned over to port on her beam ends, and all were trapped. The Officers on the bridge, who were dreadfully injured, Commander Currie, and myself, were the only survivors. The Gunboat "Locust" gave us their hospitality for a couple of days and we were then sent back to England for leave, as our job was finished in any case. It had been an anxious and arduous month and I hope never to have another like it.

When my leave was over I was sent to the Clyde to take delivery and carry out the sea-trials of the destroyer flotilla leader "Caesar", then building at John Brown's yard. On completion of the trials I, South African, signed a receipt for one destroyer leader on behalf of the people of Britain, and then took the ship to sea for working up exercises and afterwards to Scapa Flow, where I turned her over to Captain Brewer who was to be Captain (D) of the first "C" class flotilla.

Then came an appointment as commanding officer of the almost new fleet destroyer "Tumult", recently returned from the Mediterranean and re-commissioning at Plymouth. The war in Europe was now nearly over and our orders were to proceed to Sydney, Australia, and then join the British Pacific Fleet to carry on against the Japanese. On arrival we were sent up to the forward base at Manus in the Admiralty Isles.

Returning to Manus one day with Admiral Vian's aircraft-carriers I was manoeuvred by the carriers onto a coral shoal (it was not our fault) and had to return to Sydney, a long way off, to dry-dock and so missed the operation we had been ordered to take part in. Consequently I never saw another shot fired for the rest of the war. On return to Manus we were sent out on

the next operation, but before we became engaged the U.S. Air Force dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and everything came to a stop. After refuelling we continued to Japan and anchored in Tokyo Bay. We were there when the Japanese Commander-in-Chief surrendered on the quarterdeck of the U.S.S. "Missouri", first to General MacArthur for the United States of America, and then to our own Admiral, now Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser of North Cape, for Great Britain. The war was over.

Our job now was, with others, the releasing and fetching of Commonwealth prisoners-of-war from Formosa, Korea and Shanghai. In Formosa, of all places, I met Lt. Cdr. Cuthbertson, R.N.R. of the Union-Castle Company, who had married my old friend Mary Brunyee of Cape Town.

In due course we found ourselves back in Sydney, and later were ordered to Melbourne to embark £2,000,000 worth of Bank of England gold which had been landed there for safety for the duration of the war. On our way back to Europe we were diverted to Bombay to help quell a mutiny in the Indian Navy. I was relieved to find, when we got there, that it was all over, as I had been pondering the complications of a South African officer commanding a British warship quelling an Indian mutiny. We proceeded uneventfully to Portsmouth where we laid off. "Tumult" is still serving on the Active List; she fought gallantly under my predecessor, but not in my time.

Now, being very anxious to get home, I asked to be appointed to the South Atlantic Station. I was told: No; and was sent to the staff of a training establishment for a while. I applied again, still 'No', and was sent in charge of an organisation known as the Ship Target Trials Party, an interesting job. While there I heard that the post of Captain-Superintendent of the S.A.N.C. "General Botha" had fallen vacant. I was anxious to apply for it and wrote to the Admiralty a letter saying a number of things which did not go down at all well, and got a snorter in reply; but it was followed shortly by an appointment to H.M.S. "Kempenfelt", to take her out of reserve at Chatham, steam her to Simonstown, and replace her in reserve. Although now much too late for applying for the "General Botha", I was on my way home at last after all those years and was elated. For the first time in my life I sailed with another Old Botha Boy for a shipmate — V. D. Wikner came home with us as my first lieutenant. On arrival at Simonstown, Vice-Admiral Moodie, the C-in-C South Atlantic, made me Senior Officer, Reserve Destroyers, and I spent three whole years back in South Africa with my family before being relieved by Old Botha Boy S. Jagger.



Then the Korean War broke out and I was ordered to Tokyo as Liaison Officer on the staff of the American Admiral Joy, the United Nations Commander of all the Naval Forces (there were sixteen nations involved in the Korean War). I spent the whole duration of that war on the staff at Tokyo and afterwards, for a short time, as Assistant Naval Attaché at Tokyo. After three years I was back in London and received an appointment to H.M.S. "Ben Lomond" as Naval Trials Officer to carry out Germ Warfare trials with a team of scientists in the Bahamas Area. We carried a cargo of monkeys, guinea pigs and white mice in that ship and they gave us a rare old time. I cannot tell you anything about the trials as they were, and are, secret.

I came now to my last three years in the Royal Navy which were spent lecturing. In 1956 I steamed down Spithead for the last time as passenger in the "Arundel" Castle and waved my final 'Goodbye' to Portsmouth, the heart of the British Navy, with great regrets on the one hand and grand elation on the other — I was going home for good.

Twenty years in the Royal Navy will not now happen again to a Botha Boy. The pioneering days are over, and you have the good fortune of being able to choose between our own Navy and Merchant Service. Neither were there in our time, and we had, perforce, to serve our country second-hand as it were: In my own case I had the good luck to serve both the Navy and the Merchant Service, but I had never, up to this time, been able to serve under the South African flag since leaving the General Botha.

To make good the omission, I returned to the Merchant Service when I got back to Cape Town, and made three voyages to the United States in the "South African Merchant" and then took on the University of Cape Town's little research vessel "John D. Gilchrist" for three years. I relinquished the post in August last year.

And now? Full cycle: again I am your faithful servant — Hon. Secretary/Treasurer of the S.A.T.S. General Botha Old Boys' Association, Cape Town Branch.

