

CHAPTER SEVEN

HONGKONG TO THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

(1939 - 1941)

WE sailed from Liverpool for Hong Kong in a liner on St Patrick's Day, 1939. In those days there was no such thing as free passages for wives and families. If you wanted to take your wife you had to pay - or not see her for two or more years. My brother Peter came to see us off and spent St Patrick's Eve in a spare bunk on board.

We asked the steward if he knew of any quiet dance halls in Liverpool. He said that on that particular night they were a bit rough but recommended one as being better than the rest. On arrival the drunk were already being thrown out on to the pavement, so we returned back on board and had a quiet drinking session of our own.

Next morning we sailed at first light and pushed brother off the boat with the pilot! Then we took the all-red route for Hong Kong. Of course it was all familiar to me but quite a new experience for my wife who enjoyed it immensely, visiting unfamiliar countries and ports.

On arrival in Hong Kong I joined the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Percy Noble, a very dapper and popular officer but unfortunately there was little work to do in the intelligence line as we were in a back-water, with only the Japanese and the Chinese scrapping spasmodically, whereas in the West things were working up to a climax.

In early September, Hitler declared war and the Colony and Garrison were put on a war-footing - of sorts. But this phoney war was to continue for over two more years until the Japanese attacked after Pearl Harbour.

I was getting more and more restless doing virtually nothing of any use, so I went to Admiral Noble and asked him if I could be sent to sea, preferably in command of a destroyer.

"What do you know about destroyers?"

"Well, I have passed the destroyer command exam, sir."

This was a bit of luck and very near the truth. It was right up his street and he came back at once.

"You're just the sort of fellow I have been looking for. Young Sims is dying to join in the fight, and very experienced. I'll send him home and you can have the *Scout* and learn your trade out here before going home yourself."

District near Windermere and offered to take my wife in as she had a largish house and my wife was just starting a baby.

This suited us very well as I had been lucky enough to have been given command of an Atlantic Escort Destroyer working out of Liverpool and at that moment refitting in Vickers Yard at Barrow in Furness, not 50 miles from Windermere.

The refit lasted 6 weeks during which time between watches had a well deserved 3 weeks leave.

HMS Witch was a larger World War One Class destroyer but not completed till 1924 and still in pretty good shape and capable of 32 knots or more. The ship's company of about 200 consisted half of "pensioners", older men called up from the reserve at the beginning of the war, postmen, caretakers, farmers and Jacks of all trades.

One of the best sailors in the ship had driven a funeral hearse in a top hat and frock coat for years before the war.

The other half were young "hostilities only" men who were kindly and firmly pummelled into shape by the old hands. As a combination they were grand. The young ones to supply the youth and enthusiasm and the old ones to supply the steadying influence and experience.

In Vickers Yard there was little for the hands to do as the ship was stripped down and all the 4 inch guns and other armament removed for reconditioning. On arrival one evening in May, I found the Captain on leave and a handful of officers holding the fort. We were being subjected to a week's blitz from Hitler's bombers and there was nothing for it but to take shelter or walk on deck and listen to the flak pattering down on one's steel helmet. This was the first time I had been under enemy fire!

In July we moved down to the Gladstone Dock, the escort vessel dock at the mouth of the Liverpool Docks and joined up with the Western Approaches Command under my old chief Sir Percy Noble who had been transferred from the Far East to Commander-in-Chief of the Western Approaches, together with several familiar faces on his staff.

The Admiral was still the dapper lady's man and we had a well-known cartoonist on the staff who took this off. He drew a picture of a Wren at the very top of the map-room ladder with the familiar figure of the Admiral watching her

movements. Two very senior Wren officers in the background with one saving to the other: "Either they route that convoy South of Iceland or Wren Smithers goes into slacks!"

Life in the Western Approaches could be pretty humdrum with a few exciting incidents and attacks to liven it up; and then, of course, there was always the vile Atlantic weather.

A convoy under a retired senior officer called the "Convoy Commodore" would be assembled in Liverpool and Glasgow and an escort group of available destroyers under the orders of the senior escort officer present.

These would set off North of Ireland and rendezvous with another long-range escort group somewhere in mid-Atlantic. This group would take the convoy over towards the Canadian coast where they would be met by a Canadian escort group who would take them to Halifax, Nova Scotia, their main naval base and convoy assembly port.

This was ideal, but of course a thousand and one things could go wrong. German surface raiders could appear (very rare) and scatter the convoy. Very heavy weather or continuous fog or even icebergs break up the convoy. The mishaps that could happen are too numerous to mention, but it was always the escorts duty to try to gather up the broken bits and get them home intact. The convoy MUST get through.

The type of attack the escorts hated most was one developed early on by the Germans and known as the "Wolf Pack" attack.

A U-boat sighting a convoy did not attack immediately but whistled up her nearest colleagues and together they formed a pack of 3, 4 or 5 boats. These shadowed the convoy for a day or two and then one night tore into the convoy like a lot of ravenous wolves.

The confusion was terrific and it was difficult to distinguish the U-boats in the general slaughter and confusion. After expending their ammunition they then retired - or what was left of them if we had been lucky to sink one or two.

My personal life during convoys was confined to the bridge and my sea cabin just underneath it. This was a compartment about six feet by six feet containing a bunk, a washstand, a small desk and chair. Here I slept, ate, read or wrote, if I was not up top, awaiting the unwelcome cry "Captain on the bridge, Sir, please". I never dared go

as far as my spacious quarters and bath aft; so for ten days or a fortnight I went smelly.

So much has been written about the Battle of the Atlantic that I will not elaborate more but finish off with a little personal anecdote.

We had just got into Derry and were topping up with fuel and I was having my first bath for ten days, when there was a tap at the door from the Yeoman of Signals.

"Signals, sir."

"Oh, Yeo, can't you leave me in peace even in my bath?"

"Well, sir, I'll just read one short one through the door and leave the rest till later."

"Go on."

"From Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches to *HMS Witch*, 'It's a boy. Both doing well.'"

"Yippee, that's wonderful Yeo. Go and tell the Wine Steward to give you a very large drink on me."

And that's how I heard of my son Jasper's birth a week late!

CHAPTER EIGHT

BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

(1941 - 1942)

THE date of December 7, 1941, was a most important one in the Second World War. The Japanese Navy carried out a treacherous dawn attack on the US Fleet in Pearl Harbor without any declaration of war. The Japanese are very poor psychologists and they ought to have realised that it would make every American "madder'n a hornet", isolationists vanished instantly and US came into the war overnight. But not only against Japan, but also against the other Axis powers. This not only affected the Pacific, but the character of the Battle of the Atlantic was

immediately altered.

The U-boats could shift target and instead of having to operate against well-disciplined merchantmen and experienced escorts they were now free to do their worst on US merchantmen and escorts who had no training in - or conception of - this form of warfare. The larger U-boats all moved over to the eastern seaboard of America from Venezuela in the south to Newfoundland in Canada in the north.

There were no black-out regulations in the US and, consequently, all the coastal cities were lit up like greyhound stadiums and the merchantmen leisurely passing up and down the coast were silhouetted like haystacks against a full moon. Easy pickings indeed and the slaughter was immense, only limited by the long distance of the U-boats from their home ports and consequent difficulties in maintaining stocks of fuel and ammunition for any length of time.

By mid-January things had got to such a pass that it was decided to send, during the course of February, 20 Liverpool-based escorts across the Atlantic to join up with the Royal Canadian Navy based on Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Our refit over, we were one of the last of these escorts to leave for Canada in the last week of February, in company with another destroyer as escort to a slow convoy out of Liverpool into the Atlantic.

This was to be a very eventful trip for the 'Witch' and I can best describe it by quoting

jacks of all trades. One of the best sailors in the ship had driven a funeral hearse in a top-hat and frock-coat for years before the war. The other 50 per cent were young "hostilities only" men who were kindly but firmly pummelled into shape by the old hands.

As a combination they were grand. The young ones to supply the youth and enthusiasm and the old ones to supply the steady influence and experience.

We left Liverpool one foggy morning in February and took a convoy half across the Atlantic. Being destroyers, however, our endurance or time we could remain at sea was limited and so, in mid-ocean, we had to turn the convoy over to some fresh starters and go over to Iceland and get some more fuel.

That was one of the coldest mornings it has ever been my pleasure to enjoy. There had been a blizzard with driving sleet and we were trying to find the hole into Hvalfiord, where our oiler was, in the small hours of the morning. We'd lost our way into the bargain and the visibility was down to a few hundred yards.

However, we got in there in the end after it had cleared and actually spent 24 hours waiting for our next convoy.

Our next convoy was a couple of troop transporters filled up with Canadian troops going back to Halifax, Nova Scotia. There were three destroyers and we went out to meet them again in mid-Atlantic. This we duly did and set off at high speed for Canada.

Bad weather again, however, dogged our footsteps and, as we were passing St John's, Newfoundland, we once more realised we would never get to our destination without another drop of fuel. So we decided to nip into St John's one at a time - and get enough fuel to last us to the Canadian coast with something to spare.

We were the last to fuel and, having finished and cleared St John's, we put on speed to catch up our old transports. Round Cape Race at the south end of Newfoundland and then across the famous cod-banks where the bottom of the Atlantic suddenly, in a few miles, decides to come up to the surface.

The depth changes from a few miles deep to a few fathoms deep in the space of a few miles and

it was just here that we chose to strike the father and mother of all gales I've ever seen and I've seen a few. This was the last straw. The wind got up to hurricane force and drove down cold and bitter at us.

In this unfortunate spot we happened to strike it, the Atlantic rollers having come over thousands of miles of deep ocean, met suddenly, the famous banks toppling over themselves with joy. Of course, we had to "heave-to", which is another word for steaming slowly in to the waves, so one just rides easily over the crests instead of trying to force oneself through them.

I am not exaggerating when I say those waves were 60 feet high. We could estimate their height because our bridge was 45 feet up and, when we were down in the trough, sometimes the crests were 10 feet or more above us. Luckily, however, the gale blew itself out as quickly as it had sprung up and, that evening after nearly 24 hours, we started to increase speed again slowly. But there was one last blow of fate waiting for us.

Just as everyone was sitting down to supper and one officer had raised a bowl of soup to his mouth (it was far too rough to use spoons), a belated monster of a wave made up of several thousand tons of water hurled itself at the ship. The whole ship was knocked clean sideways as she took the blow and I shall never forget the officer's face emerging with a sickly grin from a sticky mess of pea soup!

But that was the end of our troubles for the time being, as it calmed down rapidly after this and we started to make good speed for home, having realised by now that it was quite hopeless to try and catch up our old convoy.

The next day opened bright and gusty as we neared Sable Island, a long low sand spit lying some 200 miles off the coast of Canada and very commonly called amongst sailors the "Graveyard of the Atlantic". Luckily a Catalina came along and told us our position, for we were beginning to get a little worried about getting mixed up with the gravestones, having been driven a long way off our course by the gale and no sun or stars by which to fix our position.

Then things started to happen once more. We found ourselves steaming through numbers of ships looking like lost sheep, with destroyers fussing around like sheep-dogs trying to get them into shape again. This was a UK bound convoy, which had got split up by the gale. Then an SOS was received and, of all places, the ship that sent it was sitting in the Graveyard. There was nothing for it but to go and have a look.

Sable Island, as I said, was a long, low wicked-looking sand spit, running due east and west about a mile broad, and 20 miles long. At each end was a continuation of the island under water, shoals reaching for 15 miles or more composed of quicksands with the surf breaking over them and occasionally, sticking out, was an odd mast of a wreck which had been swallowed by the sands.

The situation when we arrived was that a lovely new American merchant ship had been broken in two by the gale of the day before. She had been carrying a lot of heavy tanks on the upper deck and the weight of these had broken her back. The two separate parts had floated ashore and were sitting on the sand.

There were two Catalinas flying around and three Canadian men-of-war on the north side of the spit. We had approached from the south and, although we were only some couple of miles away from them, we were nearly 50 miles away from them in steaming distance.

We approached the scene just after lunch and made the signal: "Can we be of any assistance?" "You sure can", came the answer. Then the Catalinas started to signal: "Fore part of ship no sign of life. After part 20 men or more alive."

As we approached we came across two boats with men in them and we thought at first that they were from the wreck, but on picking them up, they were the boats from the Canadian ships which had tried to battle through the surf to the wreck. But when within a few hundred yards a very strong tide sweeping from north to south had swept them right past and over the spit towards us and, for the time being, they had been quite helpless, as they were unable to row against that strong tide to get back to the wreck.

The officer in charge told us the surf over the spit was simply killing and they were lucky to have got through it alright. However, it was calming down every minute and it was decided that, as there was a nice stiff breeze from the south, perhaps a boat under sail might have a chance against the strong northerly current.

The captain decided to take the ship slowly as near as he dared to the wreck. There were no charts of this locality showing the depth of water as the sands had a habit of shifting from year to year. Two men with lead and line each were placed in the bows and the ship steamed dead slow towards the after part of the wreck on which it could now be seen there were a number of men.

Meanwhile the whaler had been rigged for sailing and volunteers called to man the boat. Did I say volunteers? It was more like a chucking out party at a night club on St Patrick's Day in Liverpool. Everyone had some very good reason why he should be specially selected to go.

However, the captain selected the pick of the ship's company with the 1st lieutenant in charge. Meanwhile, the ship was slowly approaching the wreck. "By the mark ten" - "And a quarter eight" - "Deep six" came the soundings in the fathoms from the leadsmen.

We were now less than half a mile from the wreck with every prospect of getting quite close before having to stop due to lack of water when, suddenly, "and a half two" came the leadsmen. The captain nearly jumped out of his skin. The ship was drawing about 13 feet and 2½ fathoms in only 15 feet.

"Stop boat." "Half astern together" and gradually we drew back out of it. It was now or never, as the whaler was dropped and sent off towards the wreck under sail while the ship was kept in position as near as possible by moving the engines slowly ahead and astern.

Everyone was watching the whaler through glasses - 200 yards, 100 yards from the wreck, now she's entering the surf. Will she make it? Just then an enormous roller caught her and spun her round like a cork and over she went.

The crew were flung into the water, but they

had their lifebelts on and the tide was bringing them towards the ship. One of the Canadian boats was quickly manned and pulled out towards them against the tide. The ship once more took herself as close as she dared.

The captain on the bridge was swearing fit to beat any Thames bargee. He always did that when he got upset. It was a sure barometer.

One of the Catalinas dropped a rubber dinghy but it unfortunately missed them. However, in 20 minutes the men were all safely aboard the Canadian boat and being brought towards the ship where the doctor and his party were waiting for them with blankets and hot stimulants.

Ten minutes later the Captain sent a message down to the doctor asking how the men were getting along. Back came the answer: "Regret to report one dead, sir and the other five unconscious."

We couldn't believe our ears. The captain went as white as a sheet. It was his responsibility. What we hadn't taken into account was that the temperature of the water was 33°F, one degree above freezing and could cut like a knife. No-one can live long in that water.

Luckily the other five recovered in a short time, but the one who died was our chief bosun's mate - and quite one of the best in the ship. But what to do now? There were still 30 men in that wreck.

After a general conference on the bridge it was decided that as the tide was slackening up by now, to try and pull the Canadian boat, which was sturdily built in under oars. Any more volunteers? Of course, there were as many as you want. "Bad luck on the poor chief bosun, but there are still men to be rescued way over yonder" (We were a West Country ship).

The Sub-Lieutenant took the next trip in. "Gosh, she's got there." "Well done Subby, well done boat's crew." Back they came, heavily laden through the surf with a dozen survivors very exhausted and cold after their 48 hours on board the surf-covered wreck.

Subby was sent back with a fresh crew to bring off another bunch of survivors. He had reported that there were still another 25 on board, all in a pretty bad way. This

second trip was frightful.

As the overloaded boat was on its way back, the biggest roller of the whole afternoon then swooped down on it and, as the boat met the wave, her bows went up. And she literally stood on her tail. By the grace of God, however, she was not rolled over, but came down again like a knife still pointing in the right direction.

This effort, however, had shaken the sub who, on his return, came up to the bridge and reported to the captain that he didn't think that the boat could do another trip. "How many men left in the ship?" "15 sir." "It's got to do it."

Both Canadian officers were clamouring to take the boat in again. The RNVR sub and the midshipman were begging to be allowed to take the boat in. Finally, one of the Canadians got it and the RNVR sub and the midshipman were told as a special favour that they could take an oar with the men.

It was getting dark now, but off the boat went with the aid of the searchlight and came back after half an hour or so with what, we hoped, was the last of the survivors.

It was pitch dark now and, unfortunately, there were still left half a dozen men on board, including the only surviving deck officer of the ship who had taken charge on board the wreck in a splendid fashion and looked after putting the exhausted men down into the boats pitching and tossing in the surf alongside, which had been no mean feat.

The tide had also turned now and was against the boat on her difficult journey back to the ship. The searchlight lost her as she got alongside the wreck for the last time and nothing more was seen of the boat for a whole hour and we all thought she was a goner.

Just as all hope was being abandoned, however, up she bobbed hard against the tide making no headway, but only advancing literally inches at every stroke. She made it at last and we hoisted her, with the last of the 37 men from the wreck, on board.

And then it was "half astern together to get to hell out of it".

The Graveyard is another of those places I know that none of us ever

want to see again. When we were cleared we turned around and steamed off to Halifax at high speed to get the men in and arrived there next morning to be greeted by quite a reception committee of ambulances, nurses, doctors, US Naval officers coming to thank us and, much to the delight of the ship's company, a telegram from Mr Knox.

Well, that was the "old witch" that was. I've left her now and it is extraordinary how one misses the old woman. She was a good old thing and may she live for many years yet. So, in the words of the usual escort's farewell, "I bid you goodbye and good hunting."

In due course, I received the OBE (Military) for "Skill and seamanship in rescuing survivors from a torpedoed merchant man" and the Petty Officer in charge of the first rescue boat, the BEM for "bravery and seamanship". Three officers received "Mentions in Despatches for bravery" and also a "posthumous mention" went to my friend, the Chief Boat-swain's mate.

I have never seen a finer example of an award being given for "Other Buggers Efforts" but that is the way it goes. It was my responsibility and mine alone, and if the luck had not held I would have been for the high jump.