**EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF ABLE SEAMAN RAY SHELLY, SS 5706.**

**Tuesday 20th September 1918**

At last I was detailed to another ship H.M.S. Derby. No information as to what she was could be obtained – passed the Doctor and at 6pm found myself with 72 men (all strangers except one that I knew as a prisoner during my reign in the Escort) in a Naval train bound for Port Glasgow. In the train all day – had meals of a kind at some of the large stations. Arrived in Glasgow at midnight and got our baggage into another train.

**Wednesday 21st August 1918**

Arrived at Port Glasgow at 4am and by the time our Baggage was loaded it was 6.30am. Proceeded to H.M.S. Derby which was moored alongside the jetty. She had been given queer names – some said the Derby was a Dreadnought – a light Cruiser – a Battle ship – some even said she was a submarine of the latest type. Our dismay could be imagined when we saw that the famous Derby was a “minesweeper” of the latest type and burnt coal instead of oil fuel. She was about 280 ft long and 35 ft beam. Two four inch guns should have been her armament but owing to the heavy loss of ships in this dangerous work there was no time to fix the second gun in place just now. Her coal space ran nearly the full length each side – 200 tons. Twin screws – powerful engines, drawing very little water, built solely for sweeping mines in any depth of water over 8 feet. Her speed was 20 knots – compliment 72 men and four officers (Captain – First Lieut – Sub Lieut and Chief Engineer). The men were Regular Navy men. All the officers except the Captain were Merchant Service men and slave drivers of a cruel calibre. The fact that the Captain was a Navy man was our only hope – we looked to him for our future welfare – he at least would understand the strictly disciplined Naval men he had under his charge. We took over the ship – she was full of coal and ready for sea – Port Glasgow was a Private shipyard so an armed sentry was placed on the jetty – ship was scrubbed from top to bottom in good old Navy style without a murmur from the lads – cleanliness was a Naval Inheritance. It was late when we were settled in our messes etc. and we slept well in our strange home.

**Thursday 22nd August 1918**

At six am we started getting the routine of the ship into a rough form and by 4pm we had succeeded to a certain extent, leave was granted and we enjoyed a few hours on shore.

**Friday 23rd August 1918**

In Port Glasgow. Taking in stores – ship ready for steam trial – at 5pm proceeded to sea. Trouble with boiler so we had to put into Greenock – leave until 7am.

**Saturday 24th August 1918**

In Greenock – repairs to boilers – stores. Very rough night.

**Sunday 25th August 1918**

At 8am left Greenock to join Flotilla. At sea all day. At dark we were ff the north of Scotland in the teeth of a terrible gale – coal was bad and the stoke hole was full of ashes.

**Monday 26th August 1918**

At 8am after a horrible night we put in at Peterhead to discharge ashes. It was here our Cap’t fought against his officers for his men, for the first time. The sea men would not get up the ashes in the harbour – and not at sea unless absolutely necessary. The lads would have one anything for the Cap’t after this – and they showed their appreciation later. At noon proceeded to sea and arrived in Granton at 8pm. Anchored near the Quay by the signal station.

**Tuesday 27th August 1918**

In Granton. Drawing stores from Dockyard. Sweep wires.

**Wednesday 28th August 1918**

Ashore drawing Rifles and ammunition. Cold weather.

**Thursday 29th August 1918**

In Granton. The worst blow of all, our Cap’t goes sick and leaves for hospital leaving us to the mercy of the Merchant Service Officers. From the moment he left the “Derby” the ship turned into a living hell. Our troubles had begun. The Derby was no a fighting unit or we would have had all Naval men as officers – the mine sweeping work was more dangerous and rough enough for Mercantile Marine Officers. How we all felt for each other. A temporary Reserve man took command and we were ready for mine sweeping.

**Friday 30th August 1918**

At Dawn left with the Flotilla for sweeping duties down the coast. Each pair of ships are “hooked on” by a strong sweep wire which is kept under water by means of a large wooden “kite” weighing 1 ton. The speed for sweeping is regulated by the leading pair of ships generally 10 knots per hour. Trawlers keep astern and sink swept mines by rifle fire. Sometimes a mine explodes if a bullet hits the horns (or one of them). Owing to the strange shipmates and strange surroundings I do not know what positions we were sweeping. The weather was very bad and the Derby rolled and pitched heavily. Now and again could be seen the white smoke of engines ashore. Perhaps passenger trains – how I wished I was there in safety instead of out here in the middle of a German minefield – not knowing the moment we were to go skywards. To be killed in action was fair enough but to steaming all day on a minefield was very uncertain – no wonder as each day ended, the dread of the next one got greater and greater until the lads dropped into a desperate mood which the Merchant Service routine only made worse. On the minefield from dawn til dark. In safety meant in Darkness. All watertight doors kept closed – no-one allowed below decks. Back to Dardanelles warfare with hard biscuits, Tinned Salmon and Bully Beef would have been easier because the food was the same – the danger greater and unseen. Armed with a cork life belt which made our limbs ache – and a rifle – our only two friends. The vibration of the ship from the powerful engines, against the terrible strain on the huge sweep wire, which if it snapped would cut everyone near it in pieces. The slipping of the large drum when the strain on the brakes was too much – yes: so much strain that the wood blocks went on fire at times. The trawlers coming up sink the mines as the flotilla sweeps them up. By dark we were a long way down the coast. Anchored for the night under the lee of some small island. Bad weather. Enjoyed a meal of softened biscuits mixed with salmon and baked in the oven. The monitor navy has made a good cook of me.

**Saturday 1st October 1918**

At dawn hooked on to our sweeping partner ship and began to sweep back towards Granton for coal – took in 160 tons in a curious fashion. This operation takes all day – in this case we were taking in coal all night long, so as to be ready for the next dawn. Surely this isn’t going to last long. A meal at 2am. A drink of cocoa at 4am.



**Some of HMS Derby’s Coaling Party. “Dirty but Happy.”**

**Taken after coaling in the Golden Horn, Constantinople, during heavy rain.**

*Front row left: Martin Shelly. Middle row: (with straw hat) Arnold Clinton Brotherton (“Pelman Bill”). Back row: 5th from left, the butcher, 6th from left (with pipe) a Dublin watchmaker.*

**Sunday 2nd October 1918**

By 7am we had finished and proceeded out with our partner ship which was coaling from another collier. Swept all day and anchored at dark – made a hurried meal and slept safely. Very bad weather.

**Monday 3rd September 1918**

At dawn proceeded on to the minefield and swept all day towards Granton. Anchored for the night. Enemy submarines reported. Terrible weather for mine sweeping.

**Tuesday 4th September 1918**

Minesweeping down the coast – passed several warships of the Grand Fleet out for target practice.

**Wednesday 5th September 1918**

Sweeping towards Granton – proceeded into harbour and anchored close to signal station. Leave.

**Friday 6th September 1918**

In Granton. Weather too bad for sweeping.

**Friday 7th September 1918**

In Granton. Weather worse. Mail and stores.

**Saturday 8th September 1918**

Scrubbing ship. The first chance since we coaled. Some bread comes aboard, also fresh meat and potatoes.

**Sunday 9th September 1918**

In Granton. Weather easing. Orders for coaling ship.

**Monday 10th September 1918**

At dawn proceeded alongside Collier and commenced taking in 150 tons of coal. Finished at 6pmand swept down our iron decks. Steam ready.

**Tuesday 11th September 1918**

At dawn proceeded with the Flotilla and swept seawards for six hours, then swept back. Anchored at 9pm. Submarines reported. Aeroplane ship “Argus” left harbour, camouflaged all over. Weather bad again.

**Wednesday 12th September 1918**

Proceeded to minefield and swept at an angle from Granton, returned and anchored at 10pm. Sent sick ratings to hospital. We have no doctor on board. Bad weather.

**Thursday 13th September 1918**

On minefield sweeping. Anchored safely at 10pm.

**Friday 14th September 1918**

On minefield sweeping. Anchored near signal pier at 10pm.

**Saturday 15th September 1918**

Drawing stores – wire and sweeping stuff, also ammunition.

**Sunday 16th September 1918**

Proceeded alongside collier and took in 125 tons of coal. Finished at 4pm and scrubbed decks. Money?????

**Monday 17th October 1918**

Weather too bad for sweeping. Leave, and most of the lads drowned their sorrows in strong drink. This began the punishment aboard this ship – leave was stopped, paid once in a blue moon, may not be living next day to spend the brass. So we lived in the present and never put off eating on the morrow what could be eaten today. Weather easing a lot.

**Tuesday 18th October 1918**

Proceeded with the Flotilla and swept North from Granton. It is impossible to keep count of mines swept as we are sweeping only in suspected German mined areas. Sometimes we may get a dozen – more often none at all. Anyhow the Drifters sink any mines swept.

**Wednesday 19th October 1918**

Proceeded sweeping. Weather very cold. Terrible to think of having to swim for life on a cold day like this. Death from cold and exposure would only take barely 15 minutes. Beautiful thoughts like these help us along the road. Life on a minesweeper is misery.

**Thursday 20th October 1918**

Proceeded sweeping with Flotilla. Very bad weather. Anchored at ten pm. Submarines reported.

**Friday 21st October 1918**

Weather too bad for sweeping operations. Remained anchored.

**Saturday 22nd October 1918**

Proceeded sweeping with flotilla. Coal running very low. Returned to Granton, arrived at 10pm. Anchored.

**Sunday 23rd October 1918**

Went alongside Collier and took in 200 tons of coal. Owing to a strong wind which blew the dust about we were soon like niggers. At 7.30pm we had finished and swept up decks. Enjoyed a meal of stale bread soaked in water.

**24th October 1918**

Weather too bad for sweeping operations. Leave, til 7am.

**25th October 1918**

In Granton. Places of amusement closed to men in uniform owing to some “Flu” going about. Leave.

**Wednesday 26th October 1918**

Proceeded sweeping with flotilla – no accidents. Swept down the coast. The Grand Fleet out at Target Practice (necessary). It was a grand sight to see the huge Dreadnoughts with the swift destroyers steaming around, firing their heavy guns. Anchored under the lee of some land for the night. Submarines reported.

**27th October 1918**

Swept sea wards from our anchorage for 8 hours then returned and anchored in Granton at 10.30pm.

**28th October 1918**

Weather too bad for sweeping. Leave til 7am.

**29th October 1918**

Weather too bad for sweeping. Leave til 6am.

**Sunday 30th October 1918**

Proceeded sweeping with flotilla at 7am. Weather too bad. Returned and anchored near Argus at 4pm.

**31st October 1918**

In Granton. Weather too bad for sweeping.

**1st November 1918**

Proceeded alongside Collier for 190 tons of coal, finished at 6pm and scrubbed ship from top to bottom.

**2nd November 1918**

In Granton. Terrible weather. Trawler ran up on the charged Boon Defence, breaking away a part from it.

**3rd November 1918**

In Granton. Weather worse. Ships come in for shelter.

**4th November 1918**

In Granton. Rain. Wind easing down a little. No leave!

**5th November 1918**

In Granton. Weather worse again. Trawler salvaged.

**Sunday 6th November 1918**

In Granton. Sea very treacherous looking. No leave.

**7th November 1918**

Even tho’ weather was a long way from being suitable for sweeping we proceeded out with the flotilla. Rolled and pitched in all directions. Had a job to reach harbour.

**8th November 1918**

In Granton – awful weather. Sky clearing. No leave. Took in 100 tons of coal during the night, finished at 4am. Swept up decks. Weather a bit easier.

**9th November 1918**

Proceeded with the flotilla and swept seawards for 8 hours. Weather very bad – steamed against the heavy sea all night.

**10th November 1918**

Swept parallel to the coast all day. At dark or about midnight there was an awful crash and the poor “Derby” reeled – falling timbers could be heard. Towed into Granton by our sweeping partner.

**11th November 1918**

Orders to be towed to Dundee for immediate repairs. In the excitement, time of day was forgotten, but we left for Dundee at once, arriving there a hopeless wreck. The mast had fallen over, all the superstructure had been broken away. Anchor driven thro’ the ship’s side, our boats were smashed. A destroyer had run into us in the darkness, and we never found out who it was. One of her boats lay on our fo’castle broken up. One or two of the lads were damaged. At 10am to our joy, all the ships in the harbour hoisted flags and blew their sirens. Bells rang in Dundee. Peace. The war was over and the poor “Derby” had hardly managed to scrape thro’ – she was now a complete wreck unfit for anything. All the lads aboard nearly went mad with joy. Even tho’ the bells and sirens brought joy to us, how sad they sounded to thousands of mothers, wives and children? It was such a grand sensation to feel alive after the awful murder and slaughter. To be safe now after the “Race” – we didn’t win on the Derby but we came in beside the winner. We all vowed that we would never again volunteer for anything no matter what was at stake. The people of Dundee nearly went mad rejoicing – the Jam Factory girls turned out in great style. Bands (pipers) paraded until 4am.

**12th November 1918**

We came aboard and did not feel a bit sleepy. The dockyard men laid down their tools and refused to work for a fortnight – so thus it happened that half the crew of the Derby got 7 days’ leave, the other half to go when the first batch returned. Leave granted all night. We had no bread or fresh provisions aboard, but we were not a bit hungry or fed up now. Lads went on leave.

**13th November 1918**

In Dundee – enjoying life – leave all day and night, tied up alongside the jetty. Rockets, guns firing, etc.

**14th November** **1918**

In Dundee – ashore day and night.

**15th November 1918 – 19th November 1918**

In Dundee – lads expected back off leave. Good weather.

**20th November 1918**

In Dundee. Getting ready to go on leave. Leave ashore.

**21st November 1918**

Lads returned from leave at noon – we left at 4pm. Irish men travelled via Ardrossan and Belfast. Rough passage.

**Football Team, HMS Derby, 1918-19**

**29th November 1918**



Returned off leave feeling a bit homesick and fed up. Ship upset altogether. No-one remains aboard. Leave ashore.

**30th November 1918**

In Dundee. Dockyard men return to work. Football.

**Sunday 1st December 1918**

In Dundee. Undergoing repairs. Some of the officers go on leave.

**2nd December 1918**

In Dundee. Played football with Trawlers’ crews and got beaten.

**3rd December 1918**

In Dundee. Our Engineer Officer tries to be funny but fails. In peace time we can enjoy ourselves, so we do not mind him.

**4th December 1918**

In Dundee enjoying life. Bands and rockets ashore. Leave.

**5th December 1918**

In Dundee. Rumours of a mine sweeping flotilla being formed to sweep up the minefields being laid by all Nations.

**6th December 1918**

In Dundee. Concert ashore. Two of the lads invited some “Jam Girls” aboard for tea. Had a rough time of it trying to entertain them, borrowed some “cups” and did the thing in great style. Routine starts again. No leave tonight.

**7th December 1918**

In Dundee. Scrubbed ship from top to bottom, returned our four inch gun ammunition and war stores. The first sign of Peace. Dockyard men working hard.

**Sunday 8th December 1918**

In Dundee. Shifted ship further along the basin.

**9th December 1918**

In Dundee. Getting ship ready for sea. Leave 11.30pm.

**Tuesday 10th December 1918**

In Dundee. Took in 150 tons of coal from Railway trucks. Covered in dust. Leave granted. Everyone went ashore as they were – black – more like niggers. It was to be our last enjoyable night ashore in Bonnie Dundee. So we did not care for leave stoppage, clean faces or routine. Thus began the life of unbearable punishment and misery on board this now happy minesweeper. In our joy we had signed an agreement, willing to serve on this ship as a minesweeper, clearing the seas of mines that shipping might go on. Our contract would end in March.

**11th December 1918**

We were all placed in the report for leave breaking with the ship under sailing orders. A serious crime in war – a serious one apparently on a minesweeper in Peace under Merchant Officers. Our leave was stopped for an indefinite period. At noon we said farewell to Dundee – never knowing if we should see it any more. Heavy hearts were many on board. At sea all day. Heavy sea running. Rain.

**12th December 1918**

At 4am arrived in Harwich and anchored near H.M.S. “Ganges II” – she is to be our parent ship during this dangerous minesweeping. Further particulars come aboard from Ganges II. Increase of pay. Peace routine and a liberal leave formed the main conditions. £10 for a German moored mine. £1 for a British mine – floating or moored. We hoped for German mines by the thousand. Money will do almost anything. It makes a farce of country love. The Press termed us brave men. Yes: for the increase of pay. But: alas, if we had only know what shocks and punishment mingled with starvation, which we had to go thro’ – the mines would still be in the sea. We were coaxed and promised Xmas leave – no sweeping in bad weather – holiday on Sunday – never coal ship by night, and such conditions led us away from the care of the Royal Navy to the mercy of the Merchant Service and Lloyds hipping Insurance Company.

**Friday 13th December 1918**

In Harwich – getting in stores – wire hawsers, etc. – leave.

**14th December 1918**

In Harwich – scrubbing decks and getting in Sweeping stores.

**Sunday 15th December 1918**

In Harwich. Leave from 1.30pm til 7am. Pay. First pay since being knocked out of action. Lads drunk ashore.

**16th December 1918**

In Harwich. Drawing Cork Life Belts from stores ashore.

**17th December 1918**

At dawn, proceeded to “Ymuiden” Holland. The base for sweeping the coast of Norway and Holland. It was dark when we arrived and we were pulled thro’ the different “loughs” and tied to a large standard. Crowds watch us.

**Thursday 19th December 1918**

In “Ymuiden”. My first experience of Dutch people or their country. Leave granted. This is a very small town – but clean. It boasts of the flood gates, or “loughs”. Holland or the interior of it is below the sea level so sand is plentiful. The whole country is of a sandy nature. The “loughs” are worked with large steam pumps – so ships can get to Amsterdam by canal. The “loughs” prevent the sea from rushing in and flooding the country at high tide. The people are friendly towards us but suffering from the effects of war. Soap – Tea – Bread – Margarine – Sugar and Tobacco are very scarce altogether. A well-to-do Dutchman will pay 17s/6d in English money for a pound of tea, or exchange fish for any of the above. Lots of the lads made lots of money, the messes suffered and the caterers were always in trouble, until the boys began to dry the old tea leaves and sold them to the Dutch fishermen at half price. The people became unfriendly then – except the classes that made money out of the Flotilla. We spent our money as freely here as we could have spent it in Blighty – but still the re-dried tea leaves gave us a bad name which stuck to the minesweepers during the whole Ymuiden stunt.

**December 1918, January – March 1919**

In Ymuiden – getting ships ready for sweeping. There are 11 ships here all the same type as the “Derby”. The weather is not bad, only lumps of ice can be seen at this side of the loughs. The outlook if we strike a mine – turned into a frozen corpse in five minutes. It’s unlucky to go to sea on a Friday according to superstition, but out we went sweeping. Life belts must be worn, watertight doors kept closed. The precautions were enough to make a person windy. We should be at home at “even tide” or with the “ebb tide”. We had breakfast before we went on the minefield – good idea – because we got nothing until we came off at dusk. The day was long – being new – the suspense was rotten. A shock at the start turned us against danger. Of course we had to be introduced and when the HMS (??) struck a mine about noon a cold shiver ran down our backs. They managed to tow her to the Hook of Holland and after strapping her up a bit got her as far as Harwich. We still went onwards – how I would have loved to pack up this voluntary job now – this was impossible, so to settle down to it was a task. However, March would come with Good Luck and plenty of care, and no more minesweeping for us. We came into harbour each night and leave was given – money was plentiful so we made good use of it while we were alive. Ymuiden boasted of a Dance Hall with “Tivoli” printed in English over the door. The Dutch people pronounced this the very same as we did, so armed with this much Dutch we did well at the nightly dances. Only for the Tivoli we should be mad now. Soon we taught the pretty Dutch girls all the English Dances and even some of the Irish Jigs and Reels, thanks to the Irish Jazzer we had aboard. The name “Tivoli” rang thro’ the entire flotilla – the minesweepers’ blood money kept the Hall going all thro’ the winter and it was the only reason we kept wishing for a safe return at night from the minefield which was some thousand of square miles. Holland was neutral during the war and suffered a lot and now the Flotilla was leaving a bit of money in this nice little town. For days sometimes the place would be covered with snow. Twice the ship was “frozen in” in the still waters of the canal and an ice breaker even failed to get us out. It was great fun skating round the ship, even at midnight after the Tivoli Dance. Some of the lads succeeded in breaking their necks – one chap fell thro’ the ice and for four days we could see his body below two feet of solid clear ice without being able to remove it, Later when the ice softened the body was as fresh as when it first went under. The lads that didn’t break their necks suffered, by getting into conflict with the Dutch Police – one chap in particular who fell thro’ a plate glass window and did not remember it, drinking some strange Dutch wine which maddened instead of making drunk.



**HMS Derby.**

**Holland 1919**

Discipline stepped in again and stoppage of pay and leave put a check o a lot of crime punishable by the local Dutch authorities. Several ended in prison, a large number were dismissed from the mine sweeping Service. The Dutch Police waged war with us for offences ashore which were not offences in England at all. Ymuiden was behind the times. The shops were managed in a curious fashion. Things could be taken without paying so easily that soon our ship boasted of all kinds of musical instruments, clocks and dolls – some bought and some stolen. A large portion of the inhabitants turned against us and soon officers had to go ashore on leave armed – men had to land in fours – never alone. We had swept a large portion of the minefield. Ymuiden was too hot – we spent Xmas there – a funny one. We went to mass several Sundays to a lovely little Dutch Chapel. We made several train journeys to Amsterdam, The Hague, Haarlem and Layden. Our English money was not worth its full value – at least the Dutch people swindled us right and left. We made our base down the coast at “The Hook of Holland”. A smaller but more scattered town – a large railway terminus where tourists landed for the Continent. We missed the Tivoli greatly. We journeyed to Rotterdam by train a few times – and owing to having to change twice on the journey none of the lads ever reached The Hook the same night. No being able to speak any of the Dutch language did not help us. It was here we came to grips with the Dutch Custom and Excise Authorities. Every month we proceeded to Harwich to clean boilers. We generally got four days leave, and returned to the minefields at once on our return. The Lads bought tea in Harwich and sold it in The Hook. The Customs were not smart enough. If they were we would never be skirmishing with them. Police too failed and for revenge swore to give us a rough time. We were not at open war with the Dutch Police until the night of a concert in a large Public House. Some of the lads drunk too much and the enmity towards the Police came foremost. A row in the street and batons were drawn and several of the lads lay in the snow unconscious. We brought our wounded aboard, swore we’d haul a mine up on the shore and blow a hole in the coast to let the sea into Holland. War began in which several of the lads suffered badly. One chap fell on the tracks and a train nearly mangled him. Officers were robbed coming up from Rotterdam one light – sailors fought in dark streets with anyone who could hit back. Bricks often heralded the shorecoming of the minesweepers – what a change – all over re-dried tea-leaves and block Atora suet for soap. A chap fell from the upper deck into the stoke hold – though ladders and iron gratings. We didn’t carry a doctor – it was midnight. The poor chap was dying fast. A pilot came aboard and we raced down the canal to Rotterdam and tied up alongside the jetty near the lough gates. An ambulance awaited us and soon the dying man was on the way to hospital for an immediate operation. We remained in Rotterdam until 4pm the following evening when we knew the operation was over. A piano accordion was swiped here from a Dutchman.

We returned to The Hook. The chap never returned to the ship so I can’t say what became of him. The minefield was nearing completion – many the shock we had after the first Friday’s sweeping we did. Our hands were torn from the jagged sweep wires – they would never again be white. Our nerves were badly twisted – food had been scarce – the money plentiful. Cigars had been cheaper than cigarettes and no-one can say that the minesweeper’s crews swanked with cigars because we couldn’t get cigarettes. Mine explosions – rifle fire – our shoulders were sore from firing at swept mines. A machine gun came but no-one knew how to use it. It nearly cost a life to get it going and more life to stop it. The comic part of the danger. Even with a mine a foot away you’d have to laugh at some of the daft simple things we did – a bloke fires a revolver shot at a mine barely six feet from the ship – it blows up and he is unconscious for 56 hours and he nearly blows the ship up as well. The rules for sweeping, as far as coaling by day only and sweeping in fine weather, went did not last long. We were out in some terrible weather. The engines raced and had to be overhauled the night following so as to be ready for the next day. At last March 31st came. The Derby, Harrow and two other ships were detailed to proceed to Harwich for overhauling.

We had a rough passage but the joy of finishing with minesweeping covered everything. We did not remain long in Harwich, but proceeded to Hull. Twelve days leave greeted us here and soon we forgot the horrors of minesweeping. Hull proved to be a second Dundee for amusement and sports – plenty of money made life a perfect joy here and while we were in this joyous mood we were asked to sign an agreement to sweep in any waters until 11th November this year. Several retired – but a big majority of the lads volunteered – all because we were enjoying life at Hull. How we would regret this action no-one knew until some months later when we hadn’t a bit of soap to wash ourselves with. Pay was increased again. A promise of 96 days’ leave with full pay from November 11th and a first class passenger trip home from whatever part of the world we should be in on November 11th.

**April 1919**

When the crew had been brought to its full strength by volunteers from the depots we got ready for an unknown destination. The fact that we signed “next of kin” forms and made wills like men going to certain death made us think we were bound for some terrible minefield which ate up ships by the dozen. Minor repairs such as fittings for heavy awnings, made us think of hot countries – straw hats and sun helmets reminded me of Gibraltar – Malta – and the Dardanelles during the war. We left Hull a bit downhearted as we had indeed enjoyed ourselves. Had a rough passage down the coast to Harwich where we made all final arrangements. Remained in Harwich about six days during which time we encountered Yankee sailors in battle ashore and settled an old Genoa dispute re swank.

**27th May 1919**

At dawn we sailed from Harwich with HMS Harrow and two other mine sweepers for the East. Owing to a heavy fog we put in at Brighton in the evening and remained overnight.

**28th May 1919**

Left at 4pm and anchored at Portland near the breakwater. The huge prison was above us – surely a fit place for crews of minesweepers from Holland. Very bad weather – leave until 11.30pm.

**29th May 1919**

In Portland awaiting orders – leave until 11.30pm.

**30th May 1919**

In Portland awaiting orders. No leave – foggy weather.

**31st May 1919**

At 10am left Portland – owing to thick fog we anchored at 2pm under the lee of some land. Proceeded again at 6pm but nearly went ashore on a reef so we anchored once more and decided to wait until fog lifted. Fog signals sounded every five minutes. Very weird.

**1st June 1919**

At Dawn we left our anchorage at Gibraltar. Had a lovely trip altogether – feeling lonesome to be leaving England again and thoughts of never seeing it again made us feel rotten. At sea all night.

**2nd June 1919**

At sea. Lovely weather. Passed several ships.

**3rd June 1919**

At sea. Altered clocks from Greenwich Time.

**4th June 1919**

At sea. Wind rising a little. Heavy swell.

**5th June 1919**

At sea. At 5am arrived in Gibraltar and tied alongside coaling jetty. We took in 200 tons. Natives on strike – WE coaled.

**6th June 1919**

In Gibraltar leave til 7am. Windy weather.

**7th June 1919**

At 10am left Gibraltar for Malta. Ground swell leaving the Rock. Ship pitching and rolling.

**8th June 1919**

At sea. Weather favourable. Mines sighted.

**9th June 1919**

At sea. Storm brewing. Wind dropped suddenly.

**10th June 1919**

At sea. Storm broke with great force at 8am but eased a bit towards midnight. Lads seasick.

**11th June 1919**

At sea. Arrived in Malta at noon and proceeded up the Grand Harbour – tied under a huge crane. Maltese boats came alongside selling fruit and lace as they did in 1915 when I first visited Malta. Took in stores – stuff for awnings – leave til 7am.

**12th June 1919**

In Malta refitting. Our engines were overhauled and ship was inspected from top to bottom. There was terrible heat during the days that followed. This part of the harbour was surrounded on all sides by high cliffs and houses – so the air was still and heavy. When we wanted a swim we had to go round to Bigi Bay in small boats. We spent a good time here and by this knew we were bound for the Dardanelles minefields - the last place I ever expected to see again. Knowing the deadly way the entrance had been mined by allies and enemy, the latter keeping no charts, we looked forward to a rough time indeed. Considering the aforesaid rough time expected we enjoyed ourselves in a reckless sort of fashion during our refit in this Mediterranean Port.

**29th June 1919**

Took in stores in the shape of explosive stuff for the sweep wire – renewed our wills and Death warrants and at dawn steamed from the Grand Harbour bound for the Dardanelles minefields. At sea all day. Decent weather – Altered clocks again.

**30th June 1919**

At sea. Very heavy seas running, which washed us down. Meals irregular – steamed slowly as coal was low.

**July 1st 1919**

At sea. Encountering terrible seas. At 9pm reached Mudros and anchored near HMS Europa. She was still here in the same spot as usual. Mudros remained unchanged from war time except for the absence of fighting ships relieved by minesweepers and trawler section boats. We remained in Mudros five days getting in stores and coal before leaving for Kephalo.

**5th July 1919**

At dawn left harbour and reached Kephalo at 10am. The reminder of the fight with the Goeben and Breslau came when the Raglan’s tripod mast was seen sticking up out of the water at Cusa Point. Back once more under Peace conditions at Kephalo. How strange I felt – not safe yet – but free from Turkish heavy gun batteries, submarines and aeroplanes. Anchored near the flotilla which we were to join. They had suffered a lot and we were only making up for lost ships. HMS Banchory sent mine charts over to us. The Dummy Dreadnoughts were still above water but battered looking from heavy seas. A Balloon was up. A captive one made fast by means of a strong rope to a paddle minesweeper. From this the mines could be seen a good distance below the water. A large number of trawlers were anchored here, also 12 minesweepers of this type and three paddle ones.

**6th July 1919**

At dawn proceeded with the flotilla for an introduction to our new job. We did not sweep but steamed slowly behind the flotilla as we were “odd ship”. The day was queer. We would have felt happier sweeping, but alas the HMS “Kinross” struck a mine and sank with nearly all hands. The explosion was terrific. It shook the windows in our wheelhouse – and some of our nerves too.

**July 1919**

The canaries brought from Malta by the lads, also the dogs nearly went mad with fear. It was a dull kind of a day too to make matters worse, and soon only a few floating objects remained to show the spot where the poor “Kinross” sank. We proceeded and “hooked on” in her place and the flotilla moved on in a heartless fashion, the trawlers picked up any survivors that were not killed by the explosion. Before sunset we returned to Kephalo and felt everything but content. Leave was granted but there was no amusement ashore – not even a house. I learnt a lesson during this awful time, words nor pen could ever describe what we endured and the feelings we had as we waited for our turn in suspense. It was here and then. I did not keep a diary of events – it is all too horrible to put on paper. The engines of destruction invented to destroy human life in war, did it only too well in Peace. After a month the change which came over the lads was terrible. A kind of a “settled down to their doom” mood. Life belts never left our waists for a week on end. Sundays faded from the list of promises of only a month back. We slept but little – coal ship all night, to be ready for the breaking of Hopeless dawn. Slavery and starvation in every sense – plenty of money, but who can eat money? No leave, even if there was, there would be nowhere to go to ease the strain. No soap to wash ourselves with, not a smoke, not a taste of fresh bread, fresh meat or potatoes. Bully beef – endless salt provisions, we begged crusts from an English merchant ship – from the Chinese crew. What a fall for white men? A match was never seen, we never had a fag to light with one. Who was to blame? The men of the Merchant Service who had us under their charge. We wished ourselves blown into Eternity scores of times. Then the poor “Duchess of Richmond” struck a bunch of mines and sank in the same old way as usual. She was towing the Captive Balloon at the time which slowly descended to the water. The loss of life was big, she was a paddle sweeper. The several awful explosions in rapid succession made the very Heavens and hills tremble – awe struck – hungry, thin rakes of humanity we gazed in amazement. Anyone would have cried to see us. Our hair sticking up straight – there was no such thing as a fearless man. My God! This would make the bravest man in ten worlds wonder and tremble.

On 20th we reached the minefield at 10.10am and at 11am we had swept 143 mines – our wire parted once. Three very heavy reports under water = 27 mines. The next day between 1pm and 2.30pm we swept 120 mines. Mines were observed by observer in Balloon towed by a minesweeper. These two days were similar to any day up to 28th August except that some days our sweep wire would be blown completely to atoms when several mines bumped together under water and exploded. A huge mountain seemed to rise out of the sea. An explosion and the water hummed as it curled and fell back discoloured. It was like a large whirlpool. Many a time we steamed over one, only barely missing steaming through the column of dirty humming water going skywards. The odour was fearful; lumps of mine fell into the water fro ten minutes after and we had to be careful of splinters. One chap had his kneecap blown about a bit; he cried because we had to cut his new trousers to get at the wound.

Coaling was a right job, dangerous too. One of the lads was hit by a swinging hoist of 11 bags, he was unconscious 49 hours aboard awaiting an hospital boat. Later we heard he did not come round for 52 hours after. He never returned to the ship. Then came a tropical storm one night, a deluge of rain, thunder and lightning and the Balloon burst into flames. Our nerves unstrung and seeing the blinding flash in the sky, never dreaming of the Balloon, the poor lads went crazy. It was the Day of General Judgement, or had we struck a mine – Was this Death? All the strange thoughts. Our awnings sagged under tons and tons of rain water. The storm ceased suddenly, not a breath of air – sleep impossible – a hopeless Dawn looming.

**Explosion. HMS Derby. Minesweeper. Black Sea**

**August 1919**

With no balloon now to observe we sweep onwards. Hundreds and hundreds of mines have been swept and blown up when a poor Drifter goes skywards on one f those mountains of angry sea. She was blown bodily without exaggeration – like a child throws a ball. The force and explosion was worse than any so far. She sank. Our turn could not be far off now. We were surviving well and no mistake – surely the Almighty had us in His care. Our sweep wire got round the propeller. An AB had his toes cut off several others were slightly damaged. The poor “Pontypool” near us pulled two mines in on her quarterdeck with her sweepwire. They bumped and exploded and she was divided in two as if a large saw had been used. Her stern sank, her bows remained afloat – she was towed to Mudros – curious to say her number was 13th and she had 13 men killed. Later a portion of a body with a Naval officer coat on it was picked up off Tenedos Island. It was recognised as the Pontypool’s first lieutenant. The piece of body was buried ashore in the small graveyard with full Naval Honours. The day was a drizzling rainy one and as the hundreds of bluejackets were lined up with their oilskins on, it made the scene very sad indeed. The lads returned aboard and the flotilla was shrouded in gloom for weeks. As days went by so bodies were picked up either badly blown up or partly eaten by sharks. They were beyond recognition, but nevertheless we buried all bodies with honour.

**28th August 1919**

The dawn broke about 4.30am but we did not leave harbour until about 6am. From 6 until 9pm we were always on the minefields. Then one morning we left for Deadagatch on the Bulgarian Coast in the Aegean Sea. I had been here in October 1915 when we reduced the railway terminus to ruins. It was here we found the cursed Bulgarians laying mines as we swept them. How we escaped no one knows; the coast was full of dangerous rocks and one night we barely scraped over a reef in a heavy sea. We seemed to be surrounded with danger and Good Luck. The latter saved the crew too on shore in Deadagatch when we fought hand to hand with Bulgarian Hillsmen who insulted some of the lads because they were drunk. They hated the Navy since 1915 and the town was an abject picture even after the weary years that had passed. Explosions of mines laid in shallow water sent heavy stones up from the sea bed which fell into the sea again with queer sounds. The coal ship operations here were painful. A trawler ran ashore and we had a terrible job to get her off the mud.

**September 14th 1919**

At 8am left for Constantinople to begin sweeping in the Black Sea and the Bosphorus. We arrived at the Dardanelles entrance at dark and anchored near Cape Helles as it was not allowed to navigate the Dardanelles after dark. It was proposed to allow the lads on shore to visit the graves and battlefields on the morrow.

**September 15th 1919**

At 8am men going ashore were landed from the ship’s boats. I was interested in this part of the war zone perhaps more than any onboard so I went ashore with two pals. The wreck of the Duchess of Richmond could be seen – the strong currents had washed her into shallow water. Heavy seas too played a great part. We climbed the rugged paths used by the troops before the evacuation and reached Sed-dul-barr village and fort. They were both in ruins yet the inhabitants had returned and were living in their broken down homes which they had hatched up roughly with large sheets of canvas. Heavy guns bedded in concrete broken and out of order, rusty from the rain and want of care, piles of sand bags fallen over – the bags torn and rotten from shell fire and exposure to weather. Every step you took you walked on rusty tins – the army used a lot of tinned food. Here and there a solitary machine gun stand with piles of tins around and burnt shrubbery. Shell holes – huge craters full of horses bones, smashed up wheels, old uniforms, and the endless tins. Tent pegs still stuck in the ground and the crosses marking the graves, in gullies, on the hillsides, scattered all over the place told a sad tale. The shrubbery had been burnt every year after the evacuation, sometimes by shellfire – the idea was to kill germs and the awful stench of human bodies. Just now the gorse bushes were being burnt. Some trenches were hidden with the high grass and the only warning you got was to fall into the place. Rats as large as rabbits ran away as we disturbed them. Surely they could afford to be fat. Also walking along ground which would be level, you would suddenly sink to your knees. We supposed that bodies had been buried here and the ground after all those years was now hollow underneath. We were soon as black as the French Colonial Army of Occupation which were all over Gallipoli. Now and again you’d suddenly come face to face with a black soldier dressed in khaki – with a treacherous bayonet fixed to his rifle. His white teeth would show plainly he was smiling at us so we would venture nearer to him. Figs grew in abundance all over the place. The Turkish women wearing the trousers to their ankles were constantly passing with huge jars of water on their shoulders or on their heads – balanced so evenly as to remain without even the touch of a hand to keep the jars steady. On the square (or the ruins) a pedestal 9 feet high or so alone remained undamaged except for the absence of the God who once stood on it. Now a huge 15 inch shell, unexploded through a faulty fuse, was standing in the God’s place on the pedestal. Its own weight nearly 1½ tons kept it steady and a man’s strength would not push it over. We went nearer the pedestal and shell had names scratched on it. The HMS Queen Elizabeth had fired it in 1915. The troops must have mounted it on this marble stand after the landing, and here it remained and remains still for all I know. A lonely memento with all the names. Some of those men were buried on the hills. We wrote our names on the pedestal and went on. Sometimes a cross all alone would mark some grave of a poor fallen hero; often two or three crosses in a bunch. It was all so sad. Down through roads full of shell holes we walked and came upon the beautiful gate front of a French cemetery. They had made this to rebury their fallen. We went in – Greeks, Turks and French men were busy digging lovely graves in a straight line about 18 inches deep. The remains were dug up from their isolated graves. The bones were placed in the sun for a day or so to dry with armed guards to keep anyone from desecrating them. Then they were placed in long boxes divided into sections which were carried to the Cemetery gate by rough looking Turks and Greeks. What surprised me was the gentle way they handled each little bone, as they took the remains out and placed them in the neat little graves. A ghastly sight to walk down the path with open graves on each side. The bones were placed in order according to what had been recovered and alas, in some graves only a few ribs alone remained of what was once a French soldier. No one spoke. The silence was Sacred – even the unchristian Turks did not break that Sacred silence. Now and again you would find the boots intact with the leg bones bedded in with clay, the flesh of course was long since gone. A piece of wood with a name was put on each grave as it was filled in, until such time as crosses or monuments could be placed there. One large marble monument had been erected to mark some General or another. We were glad to get away. A British soldier appeared from nowhere. He spoke to us and took us to where the British fallen were being reburied. It was similar to the French Cemetery. He took us to a large field kind of place where bones were strewed about drying before being taken to their new graves and explained that Turkish bodies were hard to distinguish owing to the awful slaughter of 1915 and the advances made. It was horrible to even look. After the times we had spent on the minefields our nerves were nearly done and I was sorry to my heart that I had ever come onshore to witness this weird work. A good many of the lads returned aboard unable to look upon the ravages of savage war. Now we were on what was once no man’s land – fallen in trenches, dugouts full on tins and lumps of shells. Locusts and flies swarmed every place; field mice in thousands. Unexploded shells too heavy for one man to lift or even two, lay bedded on the ground. Surely this was an iron foundry and no mistake. Queer thoughts and memories came to me. I do not know how the others felt, but I proposed returning. On our way back we picked up souvenirs in the form of shells, old Turkish bayonets, hand grenades and such like. (The Naval doctors I’m afraid took some bones and skulls.) We lost our way several times, humour seemed to desert everyone, but this was the last place in the world for humour. I haven’t described half what we really saw, but this was enough, we wandered to the shore and saw the barbed wire under the water which the troops were caught in at the first landing and shot as they stood up to their knees in water. Wrecks of ships remained too. A clock remained on one wreck, we took it aboard. How it escaped the hands of the Turks is a mystery. The queer sound of the sea as it splashed round all the different compartments. When we spoke our voices sounded hollow. At last our boats came ashore for us; we tumbled in all black from the burnt gorse and soon we were enjoying a meal of Bully and Biscuits. In fact we were not hungry after the sights we had seen. At 3pm we left Cape Helles and proceeded up the Dardanelles. (We had a pilot). The scenery was the nicest I ever saw, a mile or so up on the Gallipoli side we could see a large white cross marking a grave. It was properly away from the rest and we just wondered who was buried there. Splendid buildings facing the Narrows and forts. Small villages and one or two large towns. We got into the Sea of Marmara before dark and steamed slowly so as not to arrive in Constantinople before dawn.

**16th September 1919**

About 8am we passed the Golden Horn. The sun was shining and the Gold crescents and Stars on the Mosques and Minarets glittered in a beautiful way. The Sultan’s Winter and Summer Palaces with lovely steps down to the water’s edge faced us. Constantinople from the sea looked like a city in a fairy tale, but later when we went ashore we were never so disappointed in all our lives. The streets were narrow and dirty and the Turkish people did not add anything extra in the way of cleanliness to the streets. We visited Stamboul over the Galata Bridge, also the Mosque St Sophie which is considered the largest in the world. The harbour was full of huge British Battleships, a few French and an Italian. Destroyers etc. HMS Marlborough and Iron Duke, Ceaser was to be our parent ship. All nationalities of troops were based ashore except Australian and New Zealand troops. They could never forgive the Turkish soldiers for the unchristian way they butchered and tortured their comrades. Hence the absence of the Australian and NZ or Anzacs as they were called during the Dardanelles campaign. We remained here three days during which time with the graves of Gallipoli haunting us we fought with the Turks. A petty officer was killed, stabbed with a curved knife which the Turk could not withdraw in his hurry. The day we buried him was wet and the funeral was mixed up owing to the little knowledge we had of Constantinople. Full Naval Honours were given the murdered man. The Turkish women wore veils from the eyes down and a kind of hood. Some wore pale blue others wore brown. We understood the women wearing brown were of the Sultan’s harem. The ones in blue were chosen by him as vacancies occurred and no one else was allowed to talk to them. I could never tell if this was true. We bought revolvers to carry this war further and a few Turks went East to their God. We left Constantinople for Beikos Bay at the other end of the Bosphorus which was to be our base during the Black Sea sweep. Seven Bulgarian mine-sweepers had been blown up so we looked forward as per usual to a rough time. We began sweeping around the entrance into the Black Sea and we picked up mines laid in the Balkan War covered with seaweed and cockles and still dangerous as they exploded when we hit a horn with a rifle bullet. Beikos Bay was only an hour’s run from Constantinople. A large ferry boat left three or four times a day for Stamboul and the last Turkish ferry from Stamboul left at 11pm. (The return fare 1 frank or one shilling English). The flotilla arranged to have a drifter leave at midnight so that we could remain longer ashore in the Turkish capital. The first few days hardships at Beikos Bay nearly drove us into the Turkish lunatic asylum and also drove us to draft out the following letter for some paper in England so that the public could see how we were faring during the sweeping of the seas. (WRITTEN LATER: More self pity) The Ayrshire Post was the paper to which the letter was to be sent. The letter ran as follows:

“Dear Sir,

Having commissioned this minesweeper during the latter months of the war, we sailed from Greenock (Scotland) with many happy recollections well dug in on our minds. We were ready for anything that might come along, but still we had nothing much to grumble about and we carried on our dangerous work of minesweeping under war conditions and discipline. Hostilities ceased on November 11th and service in minesweepers became voluntary. Increase of pay with a promise of Peace Routine tempted us and we volunteered for the first period which expired on March 31st. Trouble over money caused some of the lads to resign then, the remainder signed an agreement to serve at home or abroad until Nov 30th. We had been sweeping off the Dutch coast and no one knew what we endured there with the cold. When the sweat of our hands froze on the oar looms and then our hands froze until the blood came from under our finger nails, that was a time of agony. To strike a mine and five minutes in the water would convert us into human ice bergs. Sweeping from dawn until sunset in every kind of weather and danger. However, a few days leave each month were to be looked forward to and we completed the minefields on the coast of Holland, which ended in the Dutch flotilla being scattered all over the world to continue the work of minesweeping. Five ships including this one arrived to take their places with the Dardanelles flotilla. The trip from England was a good one. We called at Mudros – our base to be – only remaining there a few days. With our departure from Mudros began the misery and starvation of this ship and Mudros, even though it was our base, faded from our hopes forever. Bread we never saw until we went aboard other ships and begged for the crusts left over after meals. We began to understand things then and the one time merriest ship of the Dutch flotilla turned into a home of trouble and punishment. Bully Beef and hard Cabin Biscuits were added to all these things and life became a perfect burden. Perhaps that accounts for the fact that we are alive to pen this letter before we eventually get swept into eternity, for god alone only knows how we can ever scrape through this ordeal with the rules of “safety first” beaten out of the way and replaced by slavery. A smoke took the strain away, the hunger seemed less and we worked on in hourly risk with that fed up, uninterested feeling which made life drag on somehow. After a hard fight we managed to get £5 a month, payable when it was weeks overdue and oh! The mockery of the whole thing there wasn’t a house in Kephalo (where we anchored at night) unless you risked being arrested up in the village 12 miles away. Soap disappeared from our stores then. Tobacco was scarce or mouldy. The only time we remained in harbour was to coal ship, and after slaving with shovels down in the depths of a collier we would come up to our meals of Bully Beef and jam, breathing coal dust for twelve hours. We had no soap to wash ourselves with – let alone our clothes – or at least what clothes we had as we couldn’t buy any. We had to beg nearly on our bended knee for a bit of soap to make ourselves look like white civilised men. In Kephalo during the war on Gallipoli (ten miles distant) we had almost everything we wanted as far as soap and tobacco etc went. Our money was paid when God sent a chance for us to buy anything; clothes we could get plenty of, we got leave too in places where a few pleasant hours could be spent just to try and forget the monotony of a place like Kephalo. It’s Peace time now and it’s hard when we read the papers a month old relating to peace rejoicings over in Blighty – a place for aught we know we will never see again. But if God spares us and we ever do get settled down again in Civilian life we will all be useless wrecks of humanity. The orders of the minefields are many but perhaps the most sacred are those relating to the closing of watertight doors and keeping them closed. No one allowed below decks and wearing lifebelts. This makes meal hours a thing of the past, but we don’t mind as God help us we have nothing to eat, but if we can’t have the meals we would like the allowed time so that we could rest our weary limbs and give our wire torn hands a chance to heal. Later on we began to bake our own bread, and what a God send dry bread is only ourselves knew. The coal ship day went a bit easier, but alas, the cook had to help to get the coal in too so the day after coal ship was a breadless day. To lie down at night in safety till dawn and not know where the next meal was to come from. The Dardanelles was swept clear. The loss of life was appalling – a miracle it wasn’t worse. Many was the prayer offered up for the speedy arrival of November 30th which seemed so far distant and so slow in coming. We were to proceed to the Turkish capital. Our hopes were raised and at the last moment had to proceed to the Bulgarian Coast. Trouble and punishment ran hand in hand right through this ship. Nearly the entire crew were under stoppage of leave for some reason or another. We looked to the officers for help in our troubles but they being Merchant Service men did not understand strictly disciplined Naval men. We found the Merchant Rule a cruel and unthankful one – not that we want to be thanked – but during the war the Navy motto was not like unto the one followed by the men in charge of this ship. No one seems to be looking after us or care a single bit about how we fare in this world and now we are here off the Bulgarian coast in a semi-starved condition. I am ashamed to have to admit that we wash our clothes by towing them from the ship’s side and the force they travel through the water at cleans them, just so that we don’t look exactly like savages. There isn’t half a pound of soap at the Lower Deck end of the ship. The stokers fare worse than we seamen do as they get black every four hours. It was easier to borrow a pound note than an envelope and when we went ashore in Deadagatch we spent our money on worthless stuff losing ¾ in the changing of our English pound notes into Bulgarian notes. We haven’t had a cigarette to smoke now and we are all slowly ruining our health smoking mouldy tobacco that must have seen its day twice over – forced to pay 3/6 for 10 boxes of matches in an enemy country, which we helped to blockade during the war, useless trash, while there’s plenty of everything somewhere in the Mediterranean. We have seen the last of the salt pork today; Bully Beef can’t last much longer, tinned salmon has spun out after a very hard struggle. Jam, our best friend, runs two 1lb tins per 10 men per week, suet the same. No potatoes, not a grain of rice. Was there ever such a Peace Time Scene? The Public would not rejoice if only they knew how things are in the East. The Navy was to have an extra tot of rum on Peace Day. The papers published it for the whole world to see, but this unhappy ship was not one of the rejoicing ships of the Navy. Why? We don’t know, unless it is to economise the rum and should we run short of that our life’s blood and only hope will run short with it. What we can’t understand is the hurry and bustle with which they expect this dangerous work to be carried out. A Sunday is a day of rest even in Bulgaria. One Sunday in Turkey we were slaving getting in coal while the Mohammedans rested from servile work and laughed at us. What do they think of Christian Europe when they take us for an example? When we try to imagine our own people at home on a Sunday while we are steaming over the minefields, armed with a life belt, a pocket full of hard biscuits and a rifle or coaling ship, our feelings towards this Service is anything but friendly. Not being satisfied with risking our lives in the Great War, we have volunteered for this minesweeping so that the world’s shipping may go on. Can you picture us as the great ships go by us on their way to and from Blighty through the swept channels of Blood and misery? We look on them and think of happier days to come with God’s help. Our minds stray homewards to the dear ones we have left behind and who we can’t hope to be with again with this terrible danger facing us. There’s gladness in Remembrance and for the time being we forget the Present, mines and all. We thing of peace celebrations and home and fancy we are there too. But an explosion and a sudden awakening to our real position turn our happy few moments of thought into those of an uncertain future. We hope to meet the ships of the Royal Navy soon in Constantinople from which we have been exiled for such a long time. We will crawl back and like the Prodigal son beg for forgiveness, for surely it s our own fault that we have wandered away into the cruel care of the Mine Clearance Service. But November 30th is not so far off now and we can put up with it till then. We hope also that no one will ever again ask us to volunteer for a further period because as much as we hate the service we will be very sorry to part with our shipmates who helped to make things a small bit merry and bright by their wit and sense of humour and even now things might turn out well if we had Navy Officers who understand us and what we endured during the war as far as discipline is concerned. We feel now in conclusion that we have not voiced our feelings properly but you more than anyone else may understand that after all even though the war was fought and won we are still men of the White Race – the Great White Race that these countries here are led to believe is the coloured man’s Guiding Star.”

HMS Derby, 14 Sept 1919. Deadagatch, Bulgarian Coast, Aegean Sea.

The letter never went (WRITTEN LATER: a good job too – we would have been court martialled) because when we reached Constantinople the Royal Navy took us into its care and we had plenty fresh food and money up to date. Then the Merchant men stopped the leave and even though the food was good we were like prisoners. We got out of the ship in all kinds of ways. Chaps were drowned and only one body was ever recovered. We buried him beside the murdered Petty Officer with naval Honours. The body was seven days in the water and a young chap went mad one night in a boat coming from shore. The boat struck something, he put out his hand in the dark and it was a human body. It got on his nerves and he was taken away to hospital. Fighting ashore took place at intervals. Wounds were common. No one did his bit ashore unless he could show a wound. An inventor from England arrived with an idea for a safe way to sweep up mines. A ship could sweep alone and always remain on swept ground. This was called the “Orepesa” sweep. Perhaps it was safe but experimenting with any new invention always ended badly. The poor Derby was picked for experimenting ship – all aboard wished inventor and invention in the Happy Hunting Ground of the Great Beyond. Fed up with minesweeping as we were and so near the end of our voluntary term of horror, that we let the inventor see our disgust in many ways. A thing like a huge torpedo was fixed to one end of our sweep wire which we called a “float”. Along the wire we secured explosive stuff which worked knives to cut the mooring wire of mines. These explosives in themselves were dangerous and a nuisance. Time wasted fixing them and the uncertainty of life taking them off nearly turned the lads grey. Not fear of mines now but fear of the very sweepwire which we worked with. As the ship steamed so the “float” went off at right angles to our beam. The cursed thing was entangled in a bunch of mines when the two minutes silence was sounded off on the anniversary of peace. (WRITTEN LATER: I seem to be mixed up here. We slipped OUR wires that morning). We dare not stop our engines like other ships or we should be blown to atoms. We cut the sweep adrift and managed to destroy the mines after a dangerous days work. The “Orepesa” sweep did not suit us so we returned to our old way again. The seas were always heavy in the Black Sea so we suffered every discomfort and danger. Mines were tossed about like footballs and our shoulders were sore from the recoil of our rifles from trying to sink them. At last after only one accident we left one morning for Varna on the Bulgarian Coast in the Black Sea. Varna was a pretty large town with a big railway terminus. The people were fairly civil to us but still great care had to be taken. The black troops were here too as French Army of Occupation and they showed more hostility towards us than the Bulgarian inhabitants. Not being able to speak to anyone we were very strange. Our term was nearly up, everyone got very superstitious. The flotilla would lie alongside the quay wall every night. We had two lovely cats which we stole from a Chinese crew on a boat in Hull. They used to get out on the quay and one morning as we left for the minefield we saw one of the cats on shore. The Captain would not go sweeping so we spent nearly an hour chasing the black cat to get it aboard. A nice slate coloured cat we had was killed accidentally one night and I was surprised to see two hard heated seamen crying with sorrow – men who handled dead and dying without a shiver. A launch struck a mine and went alight, a trawler was blown sky high too and four other ships foreign to us. The Bulgarians had started sweeping on their own and suffered terribly for want of knowledge and patience. The Bulgar money was nearly valueless in any other country. It could be bought in Constantinople as cheap as matches and the full value in material could be had for it in Bulgaria. It was too late now to know these good things.

**October 1919**

We witnessed a Bulgarian funeral. The coffin was very ornamental and seemed to be made of some very light cork kind of wood. The coffin was brought back again which was very curious. Later we had to place guards on the quay. Several of the lads forgot the instructions they got aboard as to how to answer the Black soldiers’ challenge so they had a few lumps of lead flying round them. The Black soldiers were a hidden danger to us. We bought loads of souvenirs and generally ran without them when the challenge was heard from a dark corner. We ate Bulgarian bread, drank their coloured wines, in fact we lived a Bulgarian life for the time we remained here. Drink and drunken brawls on shore led to the loss of a few chaps of the flotilla. Even though we tried to be friendly to the rough looking Bulgarians they would always look at us in a dangerous fashion. So we kept on the more public streets and tried to be aboard before dark. Each morning as we left for the minefield we prayed that as we were now so near the end of this period of horror for god to look after us. Such a change to come over brute looking men after the horrible experiences we had been through, in fact the change was a new horror, it made us feel as though we must fall here at the very winning post. The weather got very bad. A coal strike in England when the cursed Turks were thinking of turning on us for our cheek in wandering to her capital. How dare those huge British ships of war anchor off the Golden Horn, Stamboul? We had no coal, helpless, not able to move if we got orders to make for the Aegean Sea. An Englishman in Constantinople gave us a hundred tons (each ship) which we nursed and spared in case of a blow in the back. The mountains around were infested with Bulgarian and Turkish brigands so with these thoughts we wondered would the miners go back to work if they saw us in this position. The days of no coal were days in harbour, but by no means days of safety. Would we ever have a calamity which would cause safety to us poor beggars? Even the cats were hungry and heaven help us we were too superstitious to drown them. One more accident on the minefield and once more we settled down to our doom. We prayed for an eternal coal strike and cursed the meddling Englishman for giving us coal. We would chance Turkish treachery with no coal, surely some of us would be spared in a hand to hand fight with an unchristian foe. We would fight desperately knowing this and still the cursed Turks and Bulgars, as uncivilised (WRITTEN LATER: I don’t know where we got that idea from) as they were made to the White race, played fair in war to us except in the case of the Australian and New Zealand forces. They fought us believing us heathens and those who fought them found fairness. Perhaps now they would play a clean game. Still we got our rifles supplied for sinking mines ready for defensive purposes. At last a huge supply of coal came (nearly three weeks in harbour). We felt half sorry after our preparations for another turn of events, yet it was an easy thing to be bottled up in the Black Sea. We wandered too far once and ran up against the Bolshevik element which decided the fate of the Black Sea mine Sweeping flotilla – we would kill time sweeping off Varna until November 11th and then we would return to Blighty. The days that ****followed we did not get many mines but it would seem that a minefield could be swept a hundred times and then give forth mines. One or two escapes made our hearts nearly stop beating. Carelessness, knowing we had swept the area before.

**October 1919. Water Polo team of HMS Derby, Black Sea Flotilla.**

**Taken during a spell from Minesweeping, in Constantinople by a Turkish photographer.**

**November 1919**

The morning of the 11th dawned. It was the final run on the minefield; our orders were to sweep down to the Bosphorus entrance and proceed to Constantinople before leaving for Malta. About 11am HMS Banchory and Stoke swept a mine; we were steaming straight for it and it looked terrible with the water glistening on the protruding horns. We put our engines full speed astern and slowly the mine was drawn nearer and nearer by the disturbed state of the water caused by the propellers. We were moving slowly backwards drawing the mine with us ever so gently. We all stood with our mouths open waiting for the explosion. It tipped the ship as gently as a feather and drifted off again. It was a cruel experience and an hour later when we slipped our sweep wires for good there was a rousing cheer from the whole flotilla. Saved. A man rescued for certain death did not feel as thankful to God as we did then. The dead on the Crimean Battlefields up yonder must have heard the cheering on that never to be forgotten day. We made a meal but no one was hungry. At 6pm we anchored in Beikos Bay – finished minesweeping forever. If ever again volunteers were needed they would not be found in this weary flotilla. We had had our Baptism and now looking forward to safety we realised the danger we had been in for Gold. Gold will do strange things, a man in certain moods places money before life as we did – but never again with God’s help. (Minesweeping ended 11th November. We got paid and bought souvenirs – 3 days leave. Paid until Dec 31st). We left Beikos the following morning as the Bosphorus was not safe to navigate during dark hours. Houses built on the very water’s edge had early risers that morn. We cheered until we were hoarse. Once we grazed by a house so near that we could see the people in their rooms jump up in excitement. At last we anchored near Galata Bridge in the Golden Horn, Constantinople. We hoisted our “paying off” pennant. It was 108 feet long from the mast head. We took in coal and embarked six Royal Air Force men for passage to Malta. It was a lovely sunny morning as we left the Golden Horn. There were a good many gaps in the flotilla, ships that had gone to the bottom, for a moment we felt sad but the thought of being Homeward bound soon overcame our sadness. The huge grey warships soon faded from our view and we were in the Sea of Marmara. We entered the Dardanelles at 6pm hoping to get through before dark owing to sunken wrecks. At 9pm we were through and into a terrible storm we steamed. It was dark half an hour later and the wind howled through the rigging. The Air Force men should have been considered but seas mountains high would not stop us as we were Homeward Bound. Still in spite of our joy with the beautiful thought of Christmas at home in safety, the seas, the sky looked treacherous. The ship was thrown bodily for hundreds of yards with one wave. Islands were numerous in the Aegean Sea and we feared that we should run ashore. We would be glad to be clear of the Aegean Sea. For days we steamed against the seas which never once abated, making very little progress and using all the steam coal could give. We slowly emptied our bunkers making the ship light and liable to toppling over. Never once passing a ship. The nights were blackness itself; now and again the dull streak of white light from our mast head would show a huge wave of green water forming to hurl itself at this tiny ship. The scene below had long since turned into one of misery and seasickness for the Air Force chaps – for us it was bad too, weather and danger beaten as we were. The eternal oilskins and souwesters and sea boots shining with salt water made the scene like a drama for a Moving Cinema Picture. It was indeed the end of a great Drama of life: a torn up flotilla returning after slaughter and absence mixed with starvation and hardships. There was not a Camera man to snap the scene. Who? Only men going home were at sea in this storm. The flotilla jogged along, food was not cooked, a leak in the fresh water tank and we were forced to drink the water with a decent amount of salt water mixed with it. Rum was our only drink – neat – and it would burn like blazes. It would be a sin to spoil it with the tainted fresh water. The tables were turned upside down and fixed to the mess deck. No juggler could keep his seat on this sea unless on the floor, so squatted round the turned tables on the floor we eat to live only. Then during my four hours at the wheel the storm got worse and worse. A messenger and the Helmsman alone occupied the Wheel House – isolated from everyone but in communication by voice pipes. Above the roaring of the seas could be heard the order to “Batten down”. Here at the wheel I must stay now as no one can remain on deck, no one can come up to relieve me nor the messenger. Sometimes the poor ship seemed to be turning right over as she dropped hundreds of feet into space left by the passing of a huge wave. The mast creaked in its socket as she listed over on her side. The heavy thud as the seas hit the ship driving her back and down with green water all over her. To look through the Wheel house windows as the ship dived and all you could see was a dull green which meant a wave was passing over us. Then the ship would stop dead a moment, perfectly still and silence, then she’d shake and tremble and drop into the depths of space. All during that awful night with only the dull light of the compass and telegraphs to cheer us we worked. The messenger was a hero, only a very young sailor, he took the wheel three times. He even wanted to risk going below decks for food. His face was a deathly pallor – or was it the dull light? The clock alone remained unmoved but we could not hear the tick with the roaring of the elements in anger outside. Man would never master those angry seas. God alone had us in his keeping this night. Out in the Mediterranean on a night like this with coal running low and making no progress. At 9am after a whole night at the wheel the seas eased. The messenger managed to run across a tin of salmon and some cabin biscuits. We enjoyed the meal and felt ever so much better. We donned our cork lifebelts and just then the report that coal was very low came from the engine room. HMS Harrow had run out and was being towed by another minesweeper. All her woodwork had been burnt to try and keep her bows to the heavy seas. But alas the coal supply of the whole flotilla was low now and the poor Harrow was cut adrift. A wireless call for help went out – SOS. We were 19 hours from Malta. At last we started to burn our mess tables, doors etc. A small drifter cut down her main mast. The feelings of all could not be described. The poor Air Force men were very sick and we feared for one chap’s recovery. Our boats were next on the burning list. It was our last hope. With the boats gone we felt doomed yet they were good for nothing else in such a sea and they would give us a few hours steam in the boilers. Having sunk to the lowest depths of despair for a chance of being saved we found this settling down to a cold watery death awful after all our prayers – to be saved from a minefield death and now this. It was a cruel ordeal and brave men’s hearts failed them – a destroyer could be seen tearing through the seas. She sent a signal – only two hours more and we would be in safety. Encouraged thus we strove on like a drowning man when he sees a chance of his life but after an hour we were taken in tow, nearly sacrificing eight mens’ lives. No one prayed when we reached Malta. We had yet a long distance to go and after this experience we were not worth much. Our entry into the Grand Harbour caused a lot of excitement. Men who thought we were done for out on those cruel merciless seas gave us a rousing cheer and welcomed us back to life but we did not pay much heed to them. They were safe on huge ships lying in harbour. We had yet to face the Atlantic Ocean with the famous Bay of Biscay as well as part of the Mediterranean before we would be in a position to cheer and say brave things. We emptied our fresh water tanks and got the ship ready for dock. A hot meal was provided by a large ship near us and we began to investigate the damage done to the poor Derby. Nearly al the rivets were shook so we were lucky to get the ship even this far. The following day we took the ship round to Sliema and anchored in the small craft berth. Somehow it is always fine in Malta – sun seems to delight in throwing its rays on this lonely island. The weather while we were here was beautiful.

**December 1919**

A large dance hall stood out on the harbour front and that night the beautiful foreign music wafted over to us. During the Dutch sweep the Derby got a bad attack of “dance-itis” and as the lads all got together on the upper deck and listened to the music and watched the couples dancing they forgot the horrible experiences of the last few hours. Yes, even the last twelve months – and the Dutch Tivoli and the girls of the wooden clogs came back again to their mine-shocked minds. The Tivoli Dance Gang was re-formed and decided to go ashore to jazz – but once more the “Heads” would not grant us leave. Was it for punishment we were anchored forty yards from a sea front dance hall? Did they think that a dancer could look at a dance from a distance without wanting to be in the very middle of it all? Well, whatever the thought, the Tivoli Dance Gang was strong – boasted of three-quarters of the crew – so away we went to dance and forget the past and look forward to the “safe” future. Trouble began, leave was not granted which meant that we devised all kinds of means for getting ashore and always when the patrol raided the hall the fair sex gave them a hot reception. I don’t suppose the girls fought for us alone – no, we had tons of money to spend foolishly. Anyhow, time flew and the Derby went dancing mad. The “Heads” decided to send the crews of the minesweepers home on a large Dreadnought HMS Canada which was proceeding to England. We moored the ship returned all the stores to shore yards and left in a tug for the Grand Harbour. We were put aboard the Canada. Nearly two thousand men were taking passage let alone her ordinary crew, and that first night not a sinner could be seen on deck so huge was this mighty ship of war. She boasted of a telephone exchange, a laundry and all the latest improvements of modern ships except that she consumed coal and oil fuel. The latter was only in cases of emergency. How pleased we were to be on this floating city compared to the rickety tiny minesweeper. Each man had some small job or another to do. My new job was in the telephone exchange and I had a good time. We left Malta one evening early in December and such cheering was never before heard in Malta. The whole ship vibrated with the strain of the engines; they were terrible engines, in fact she was one mass of machinery. The only reminder that we were out on the ocean was this vibration and a slight slow heavy roll which compared to Derby’s quick one was a treat. The four days run to Gibraltar was lovely and we ran alongside the coal sheds. I had often coaled ships but never like this. 1,600 tons were to be taken in. each man had a basket which he carried on his shoulder full of coal. The first dozen are light enough but get heavier as you go along. It took two days to take in the sixteen hundred tons and my shoulders and back were sore for months after. We had six hours sleep during the coaling – some wasted a precious hour having a bath only to get black again after. The entire ship was covered with coal dust and the “Water Carnival” (scrubbing ships) lasted the greater part of two days. We left Gibraltar on our last lap one evening – we were too tired to cheer. We did not know the day nor date, we had received by wireless that Carpenter had beaten his opponent which message we passed to merchant ships not equipped with wireless. Then came a Sunday at sea. There was a Roman Catholic chaplain aboard and Mass was said on an improvised altar. Heavy seas were running which had little effect on the huge steel ship except for the slow, heavy roll unnoticeable when walking. During Mass you would fall suddenly like a half sleeping person. Now and again the Crucifix would topple over on the altar. It was strange to me. If only this was so on board during my Dardanelles war experience how much happier we would have felt. A piano was part of the ship’s comforts and a marine kept us dancing day and night. Eddystone Lighthouse came in sight and we anchored in Plymouth Sound on morning at 9am and landed some stores. We left at noon for Portsmouth and tied up alongside the docks about 6pm. Got our kits and baggage on the jetty ready for transport to the Naval Barracks Portsmouth (or Pompey). Such a collection of stuff – canaries, parrots, monkeys, white mice and rats, goldfish, cats, dogs and other things such as musical instruments etc. The cats and dogs would not be allowed to land and were put in some home for six weeks at the owners’ expense. Having passed through the Customs we went in search of our hammocks which had been thrown on the Bk Square anywhere and any ould how, It was dark and thousands of lashed up hammocks lay seven and eight deep all over the place. Tired and excited as we were we decided to go ashore to sleep as it was like looking for a needle in a haystack to find your own hammock and they were not very clean after being knocked about. Once ashore three of us went to the large sailors rest and over some lovely tea and stuff we talked over past experiences and thanked God we were safe once more in our own climate and amongst English speaking people. It was here the three of us swore by everything that never again would we wander into heathen countries. It was beautiful to be able to ask in English for whatever you liked instead of taking what you got in other lands. We slept like tops and after a good breakfast in the morning returned to barracks where we managed to sort out our belongings and had to pass about ten doctors who ordered every man to the barbershop and to the hot baths after which we returned and passed medical inspection for long leave. We then put our hammocks and kit through the fumigator as they could not and would not tolerate Turkish, Bulgarian nor Maltese “jumpers”. It was a big job for someone to get thousands of men on leave, but I remember well on Saturday morning armed with our pets etc we were marched out on leave until March 1920. Three months leave – after all, this would compensate us for our hardships on the high seas. Most of the lads went to London and here they were thinned out going their different ways. After many goodbyes and good time wishes on the platform at Victoria Station we parted and each man looked forward to a happy Christmas; the second for me in dear ould Ireland since 1914.