

Soon after this interlude I was transferred to another M.L. at a base in the southwest of England and soon after that an opportunity opened up for me to qualify for something for which I hankered, command of a vessel larger than an 80-foot M.L. After letting a number of very well qualified officers of the merchant service (like my brother) go into the army, the "Scuttlebutt" (navy gossip) said that some of the big brass at Whitehall were crying in their champagne over the shortage of navigators.

In any case an Admiralty order came out to the effect that any Lieutenant R.N.V.R. with a minimum of 12-months service afloat who could pass an exam in navigation and seamanship, would qualify for command of an auxiliary patrol vessel. I had my brother's sextant and polished up on the use of it before taking the exam. I passed well enough to obtain a First Class Certificate.

The case of my brother Dudley was typical of that of many merchant service officers and of a certain lack of vision in the conduct of the war. He had a flawless record including his Extra Master's Certificate at the early age of 25. He had applied for enrolment in the Royal Naval Reserve in 1915 but was kept cooling his heels in ante-rooms at the Admiralty so long without a definite answer as to whether he would be accepted or not, he lost patience and went to join the Inns of Court O.T.C., and in due course was gazetted to the 17th Kings Royal Rifles.

He was only in France about three months before he was very badly wounded when a 5.9" H.E. shell burst in the sector of trench he was in, giving him about 16 wounds. The surgeons took off his left leg above the knee but he was soon getting about with a wooden one and they made him a staff captain in the war office at Whitehall. But his days of seafaring were over, and he died in the terrible, pandemic influenza in 1918.



**M**<sup>y</sup> CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCY in navigation and seamanship is dated July 9th, 1918 and is still one of my most cherished possessions. It says that I was considered competent to command one of His Majesty's auxiliary patrol vessels.

At the time all the armed services were feeling the effects of the terrible pandemic influenza that left the navy even more short of officers than before. So the ink of the Admiral's signature on my certificate was hardly dry when I was sent off at a moment's notice in command of a typical North Sea trawler, about 140 feet long, ostensibly to escort a convoy of colliers from Penzance to Brest, about 130 miles across the mouth of the English Channel, a spot which had been the scene of a lot of submarine activity.

Most of the mines that normally supplied France with coal were in German hands, so the British had to keep France supplied with coal as well as they could. It meant running a convoy of colliers to Brest every 24 hours and the job of escorting these convoys was regarded as one of the toughest and most unpleasant the navy had to do.

The colliers loaded at the Welsh ports on the Bristol Channel and proceeded to Penzance where they gathered inside the boom defence across the bay. The routine was for a convoy

consisting of from six to twelve ships more or less, to sail in the small hours of the morning and if all went well reach Brest about 10 or 11 p.m.

The escort consisted of 3 trawlers which had a speed of about 8 knots and were manned by men who normally made their living by fishing in the North Sea or as far afield as Iceland. The captain had the naval rank of warrant skipper and the only commissioned officer was usually a lieutenant of the Royal Naval Reserve, a professional sailor usually with a captain's certificate in the merchant marine; he was O.C. convoy.

When the convoy arrived at Brest the officer could not turn in for a few hours of much needed sleep but must go through formalities and paper work with the French authorities before sailing with the northbound convoy of "returned empty" colliers at 2 or 3 a.m., hence no sleep.

Theoretically he would have two days lay-off after six days of this tough routine, but in practice the lay-off sometimes did not materialize for one reason or another, especially during the influenza epidemic. The job had the reputation of causing men in the prime of life, professional sailors of mature experience, to break down from sheer exhaustion after six months or so. But it was a vitally important job that must be done somehow.

This convoy route was an obvious place for the U-boats to ply their grim trade and while the losses of ships were heavy it seems surprising that they were not heavier.

I naturally felt a certain thrill when I first set foot aboard a ship of the Royal Navy of which I was in command on active service in war, but I admit being somewhat dismayed by the nature of this job I had stepped into. This feeling was accentuated by certain premonitory symptoms of the onset of a bout of the prevailing influenza, which I had hitherto escaped.

My trawler had a wartime crew of 20 men who were of a

rugged type practically born to a life of deep-sea fishing under all conditions of wind and weather. I don't know what they thought of setting out on what was known to be a tough assignment under the command of an officer of the R.N.V.R., not a professional sailor, but they appeared to take it as all in the day's work. We arrived at Penzance soon after dark and I went ashore to report to the S.N.O. who proceeded to quiz me about my qualifications for the job. He seemed concerned to learn that I had never been to Brest and had no knowledge of the channel inside Ushant used by the coal convoys. It really needed local knowledge such as possessed by pilots or captains of coasting vessels, especially as some of the navigation marks were removed in wartime.

It was customary for the trawler with the O.C. convoy on board to lead the convoy through the channels into Brest, because some of the collier captains did not know the way any more than I did. So the S.N.O. decided to send the officer I was supposed to relieve with me to "show me the ropes," making an extra trip for him instead of the "lay-off" to which he was entitled.

The next 48 hours was a night-mare experience for me as I was feeling steadily worse and running a temperature with influenza, while trying to absorb a mass of technical detail about the convoy. Fortunately we were not troubled by submarines on that trip.

When we returned to Penzance I was ordered to report to the doctor who sent me to the hospital, where I was put to bed and slept the clock round and felt better on waking. All very well but a humiliating end to my first command.

I was afraid it might count against me but apparently not as after a brief convalescence I was suddenly sent back to Canada to take command of a flotilla of drifters that had been built there for the Admiralty, and which I learned later were intended to go to Gibraltar.

I still have my copy of the signal from Admiralty to Naval

Base, Falmouth, appointing me to *Niobe* additional for command of net drifters. *Niobe* was an obsolete cruiser that functioned as the depot ship for the naval base at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The reference to "Net Drifters" was somewhat obscure to me, as I had only a very vague notion what they did and no idea where I should be sent.

I made the passage to Halifax as a sort of paying guest in the wardroom mess of an ancient passenger liner equipped with 6-inch guns, and one of the 10th Cruiser Squadron. The ship served as ocean escort to a westbound convoy; the trip took 12 days and was very dull.

On arrival in Halifax I reported to the S.N.O., Rear-Admiral Storey, who proceeded to quiz me as to what I was all about, which was disappointing as I had been hoping he would be able and willing to enlighten me on the subject. He seemed to know as little about net drifters as I did but the interview took a sudden turn for the worse when I chanced to refer to the fact that the ship I had come on had 200 tons of mines for the nets in her hold.

It was some months after the great explosion caused by a cargo ship in the harbour with 3,000 tons of TNT catching fire and blowing up, causing some 1,800 deaths, injuries to 20,000 people and untold damage to the town. So it was not surprising that everyone in Halifax was still very sensitive on the subject of explosives on ships in the harbour.

The Rear Admiral abruptly broke off his talk with me to issue orders for the ship to leave her berth at one of the docks and anchor in the roadstead outside, for which I am sure the people on board would call down curses on my head if they got to know I was responsible, however unwittingly.

It seemed there were no instructions from the Admiralty about me and it took a little time to get sorted out, so that I would know what to do or where to go to find my flotilla of

drifters. The only sure thing was that they were not in Halifax at the time.

In time I learned that the drifters (all 12 of them) had been built in Canada for the Admiralty, and I was supposed to take them to Gibraltar for the purpose of setting up a barrier of steel nets festooned with contact mines, across the 12 miles of the Strait, to keep submarines from getting into the Mediterranean.

I had heard of this being done in the Dover Strait which was about 21 miles across, but I had never seen anything of the scheme at first hand. However, the first thing of course was to find the drifters and get them fitted out for the passage to Gibraltar via Bermuda and the Azores.

There seemed to be a definite lack of communication or a credibility gap or something of the kind between what was referred to as Naval Ottawa and the Admiralty in Whitehall. However, by dint of picking up a scrap of information here and another there, I learned that some drifters were in the harbour of Quebec, though no-one seemed to know why they were there or how long they planned to stay, or in fact to whom they belonged.

So it was arranged that I should go to Quebec and rendezvous there with the (then) Lieut. Percy Nelles, R.C.N., who was Flag-Lieut. to Admiral Kingsmill, the Chief of the Naval Staff in Ottawa.

We found half a dozen drifters there and got them routed out and on the way to Gaspé. I should explain that by the time I met Nelles in Quebec my orders had been changed, and I was told to "wash out" Gibraltar for the time being and establish a base in Gaspé Harbour, from which to maintain an anti-submarine patrol in the Gulf of St. Lawrence with my drifters, till navigation on the St. Lawrence route closed down for the winter, which usually happened about December 1st.

It appeared that two German U-boats of their most formidable

able type, known as the Deutschland Class, were operating on the American side of the Atlantic. They had laid mines off Halifax and Sydney, Cape Breton, and torpedoed some ships off the American coast. There was concern lest they operate on the St. Lawrence route in the gulf or the river, where some important shipping with both troops and munitions was to be found.

Incidentally I found that the rest of my drifters were already in Gaspe, and under the command of a French-Canadian warrant skipper in a trawler that belonged to the Canadian navy. It was a somewhat involved situation as the drifters were the property of the Admiralty and the warrant officers and other ratings were all like myself under Admiralty orders and on Royal Navy rates of pay which were substantially lower than Canadian rates.

As a lieutenant I out-ranked the French-Canadian warrant skipper but he obviously did not like being superseded by me or taking orders from me. So I put up at Bakers Hotel and sent a communication to my immediate boss, the (then) Captain Walter Hose, R.C.N., captain of patrols at Sydney, outlining the situation and requesting necessary action to solve the problem. In a short time another trawler appeared on the scene, the property of the Admiralty, and the French Canadian was recalled with his trawler and I never saw or heard of him again. I don't suppose he liked me though.

So there I was in Gaspe in command of a flotilla of 12 drifters and a trawler, with a total of over 160 warrant officers and other personnel, with rather vague ideas of what I was supposed to do. The ships were all fresh from the builders yards but the drifters especially developed what I thought was an unduly large number of defects, to both the hulls and the engines and boilers.

Facilities for repairs were limited to those of the village blacksmith's shop. I was the only commissioned officer in the

unit, having no engineer officer or pay officer or medical officer. The world-wide influenza epidemic was raging ashore with a very high rate of mortality among the civilian population, and I was much worried lest we should get it in the ships; somehow we escaped that fate.

When I arrived in Gaspe I found the drifters already there were obtaining the provisions they needed from the local store of Messrs. Robin, Jones & Whitman, one of the old-established trading firms of the Maritimes. I had had no instructions about this but assumed it was in order with the naval authorities. From time to time I signed invoices for thousands of dollars worth of food in the hope that eventually I would not have to pay myself, which would have been quite impossible at that stage of my career. It seemed so very different to anything I had been used to in England but of course there was no place in Britain to compare with Gaspe, which was much more isolated from the outside world in 1918 than it is now.

The Gaspeians I met were all very friendly and co-operative. I believe I could have bought everything that was for sale in the village by merely signing invoices. Their confidence in being eventually paid by the government was touching, and far greater than mine. I think they were glad to have us there with our little ships and guns, one gun per ship and the largest, a 12-pounder on my trawler, a mere pea-shooter by comparison with the two 5.9's on each of the German submarines that were somewhere around. I estimated that the 5.9's would throw a projectile weighing just about 100 pounds to a range we couldn't begin to touch with our guns, but I saw no point in explaining this to the good folk of Gaspe. We would also be at a disadvantage in the matter of speed, as the U-boats were credited with 25 knots on the surface with their diesel engines, whereas our best gait was about 8 knots, so they could literally run rings round us.

To the best of my knowledge no U-boats penetrated the

Gulf of St. Lawrence in the first World War, though they could easily have done so if they had wished. They did in 1942 and torpedoed some ships well up the river.

Under the circumstances it was as well that I had received my training as a works apprentice in a shipbuilding plant. We had to improvise to some extent in dealing with the defects that developed in ships and machinery, but in one way and another we did keep them all functioning and maintained a patrol in the gulf. My trawler was fitted with wireless but not the drifters, so once the latter were out of sight they were out of touch with me.

The warrant officers and men who formed the crews of my ships were all Canadians but not sailors in civil life; many came from the Prairies. They had spent some time overseas with one branch or another of the Royal Navy, but they did not seem to be very happy about their experiences, or the training they were supposed to have received, which seemed to resemble that of the M.L. crews I had encountered before, in being somewhat superficial.

When I found them in Gaspe they all said they had not received any pay for a long time and were practically "broke." So I sent a request to the naval base at Sydney and in due course received a large cheque which I was able to cash at the branch of the Bank of Toronto in Gaspe, and doled out the proceeds on account. I must say I found the men very well behaved and had no trouble at all with delinquency of any kind. A feature of life in Gaspe was the occasional influx of lumberjacks coming in from the woods for a bit of dissipation, which usually took the form of imbibing an overdose of a fluid known locally by various names such as "White Mule" or "Dollar Dead-eye," and then sitting on a big log in the village square and howling like a wolf. Fortunately none of my men experimented with this form of diversion so far as I knew.

On one occasion a vessel of the Canadian navy paid a visit

to Gaspe and anchored in the harbour for a few hours, sending some of her crew to stretch their legs ashore. A few of them seemed bent on emulating the lumberjacks in sampling the local firewater, but instead of working off excess high spirits by sitting on a log and howling, they began to get rough and wanted to take the village apart.

By that time the good Gaspesians had practically adopted my outfit as their lawful protectors, and some leading citizens appealed to me to do something about the rambunctious visitors. I was not at all sure of what the extent of my responsibility was if any, especially as the captain of the visiting vessel was senior to me in rank by a half-stripe. He had not himself come ashore or made any contact with me, and it was necessary to act promptly to prevent the situation getting out of hand. So I quickly organized two naval shore patrols which went to work and gathered up the trouble makers, and sent them packing back to their ship in the boats in which they had come ashore. I felt I was sticking my neck out to some extent but we heard no more of the incident, and the Gaspesians were grateful for our efforts.

With the onset of autumn it began to look as if the war would be over before we ever started our projected journey to Gibraltar, a prospect I regarded with mixed feelings. The task of getting all my small ships safely across the Atlantic offered a challenge such as almost any man in my position would have welcomed, despite the difficulties.

One problem was getting enough coal into the ships to take them from Bermuda to the Azores, especially in view of the difficulty of obtaining coal of good quality under wartime conditions, and the fact that many of the stokers had had very little real seagoing experience. I had good reason to know that daily consumption of coal could vary very widely with the knowledge and skill of the men who shovelled it into the furnaces.

It was almost certain that some of the drifters would experi-

ence defects of one sort and another, and trying to cope with these in mid-ocean could present insurmountable problems. If we arrived at Gibraltar minus two or three of the drifters, there would be a court of enquiry with me as the star turn and probable scapegoat if one should be required.

With the Armistice on November 11th I ceased to worry about these things and looked forward to being demobilized and free to return to my business in Toronto in the very near future.

Not so fast, however. The first thing I noticed after the Armistice was a blank silence that descended over our communications with the outside world. Up to November 11th I had received "Signals" by wireless, addressed to various titles such as "C.O. St. Lawrence Patrols," "S.N.O. Gaspe, Quebec" or a more humble, "C.O. TR 38," which was the designation of my ship. Some of the signals were of immediate interest to me but many were for information of a general nature. Some of them originated in Sydney or Halifax or Ottawa, or even Whitehall or Washington.

I could not help feeling that there was some lack of clear understanding as to just who was supposed to be giving me orders, though of course the various fancy titles to which the signals were addressed could not but be flattering to a mere Lieutenant R.N.V.R., just a young fellow trying to get on with his part of the war and keep out of trouble with his own side.

Came the Armistice and no more signals from anywhere, but within three weeks or so another problem to wonder about. Winter sets in early in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and I think it was earlier than usual in 1918. It was obvious that if my ships remained in the inner harbour much longer they would be frozen in till next May or June, a most unpleasant prospect for all of us.

So I sent a signal to naval base, Sydney, asking for instructions and received an answer promptly, "Proceed to Halifax."

So all the ships stocked up with provisions, coal and fresh water, we said good-bye to our friends in Gaspe and set out one wintry day in early December with flags flying and sirens sounding.

The outlook for weather was not promising and I decided that the war being over there was no point in taking needless risks. The important thing was to get all my ships with their crews intact safely to Halifax.

I had found by experience that some of the drifter skippers were not too sure of their navigation, but when we were at sea they were all right so long as they could see my trawler, the flagship of the flotilla. It was the season for winter gales and thick snow-squalls that sometimes reduced visibility almost to zero.

So I decided to go by way of the Northumberland Strait and the Gut of Canso. By the time we reached the Gut, I received another signal from Sydney ordering us to go to Sydney instead of Halifax. We emerged into the Atlantic Ocean and turned north in the teeth of a howling gale with thick snow and very low temperatures. I don't know just how cold it was because the mercury vanished into the bulb of the thermometer, but I felt like an Arctic explorer when the alcohol compass froze, especially as I depended on it for accurate navigation. The alcohol did not freeze into a hard block as water will, but into a sort of slush in which the compass card could not revolve freely, making it useless for navigation.

The other compass inside the warm wheelhouse was inaccurate owing to the proximity of a mass of iron and steel in the form of the steam steering engine.

The steering gear chose this awkward moment to go out of business, owing to the spray freezing as it hit the deck, till the ice was so thick it jammed the quadrant on the rudder head. So I had to keep two sailors chopping ice continuously to remedy this trouble. It was necessary to relieve the ice-chopping detail every hour in that bitter cold, and I remember wishing

I could have whoever designed the trawler on board so that I could set him to chopping ice for the experience. I suppose he would have said he didn't design the ship for such conditions, but I remembered seeing exactly similar trawlers coated with ice, returning to Liverpool from a fishing trip to Iceland in the depth of winter.

Somehow we all managed to beat our way into Sydney, with the drifters following the trawler like a flock of sheep. The harbour was chock full of shipping of one sort and another so that it was hard to find space to anchor. As soon as possible I went ashore to report at the base office, and when I opened the door was greeted by a voice calling out, "What the hell are you doing here?"

So I produced the signal ordering me to proceed to Sydney instead of Halifax, and was told that they had sent me still another to go to Halifax after all. This last signal ended as usual with the word "acknowledge" but we never received it and naturally never acknowledged it, so there we all were! It was certainly one of those moments.

I could not help feeling that things in that office were not quite so businesslike as could be desired. Though the war was over it seemed a bit too soon to pack up the customary procedure to that extent.

So we had to fill up again with coal and water and provisions and set out for Halifax. A redeeming feature was the addition of two more trawlers to the flotilla, the warrant skippers being experienced professional sailors who were thoroughly familiar with those waters. One of them suggested going through the Bras D'Or Lakes to the Gut of Canso, which we did with the skipper acting as pilot. I would not have done this myself as some of the navigation marks had been taken up for the winter but our pilot knew the route so well he could dispense with the buoys and other marks.

So without further misadventure we all arrived at the en-

trance to Halifax harbour and steamed to our allotted berths with the knowledge that for us the war was really over.

I had to stay for a few weeks in the relative luxury of a hotel, while my ships were stripped of stores and equipment, and relegated to mooring buoys in the Nor-West Arm.

I was demobilized myself as of January 15th, 1919 and I think I must have been the first one of my group of Canadians in the R.N.V.R. to arrive home.

I never heard what became of my trawlers and drifters but they had been built with the idea that they could be sold off after the war for commercial fishing in the waters around the British Isles, for which they were eminently suitable, being sturdy to stand rough weather and economical to operate.

Reading over the above I realize that I may seem to have temporarily mislaid my rather new wife. For some time before the Armistice the papers carried columns of what seemed at least semi-official advice to the wives and families of Canadians in the armed services, to return to Canada while they could, because available ships would soon be fully occupied repatriating the troops, and accommodation for civilians hard to obtain.

It seemed good advice so my wife applied for passage and was notified she could travel in H.M.S. *Olympic*, the popular White Star liner temporarily in the navy like myself. The fare was the fixed sum of 13 pounds and passengers took what accommodation they were given. The ship was not fully occupied and my wife happened to be the only naval officer's wife on board, and was given a deluxe suite to herself, with two stewardesses to look after her, truly a bargain in travel accommodation not likely to ever happen again.

The ship happened to arrive in New York just in time to see natives celebrating the Armistice with typical American ebullience, though it was something of a shock to her to see the crowds of people of apparently mature age in the streets,