An HMS Kildwick Memoir – Part 2

In this, the second part of his wartime memoir about HMS Kildwick, Cyril Dennis gives us a wonderful flavour of what life was like on convoy protection duty during WW2. You can read Part 1 of Cyril's memoirs here.

Cyril Dennis

HMS Kildwick officers:

Lt. Pannel (Capt)
Lt. Shepherd (No.1)
2nd Lt. Ogden (Gunnery Officer)
2nd Lt. Duckworth

On leaving the US we did not immediately cross the Atlantic, but went first to Jamaica where we spent a day and then on to Trinidad where we spent two days. Our journey across the Atlantic was uneventful but we had to be constantly on the alert. The majority of U-boats tended to be in packs farther north than the tropics but some merchant ships were sunk there. Eventually we arrived at Freetown in Sierra Leone which was to be our main base until the end of the war. The RN had a fairly large land base (HMS Philoctetes) at Freetown and all Naval operations on the West African coast were organised from there.

Freetown was not the best place to be based, although it was of course far safer than being sent on Russian convoys. Freetown was known as The White Man's grave, and there was nothing to do and nowhere to go apart from the "King Tom Canteen". I don't know how it got its name but it was a reasonably good canteen and those who were drinkers were issued beer tickets before they went ashore. I can't remember how many we were issued with but they were rationed. On the few occasions that I went ashore, I usually gave my ration to others.

They used to have an open air film show which changed its programme twice a week. Local residents were allowed to attend but natives were segregated from the Europeans.

The Kildwick built up quite a name for itself by having the strongest football team in the whole of the West African coast. Even when we got to Gibraltar on our way home in 1945 we were able to hold our own against most service teams. This was remarkable as the total number of the ship's company was only about 60 to 70.

The main task of the Kildwick was to form part of a flotilla of Naval vessels escorting merchant ships sailing along the West African coast between Casablanca and the Equator. The senior ship of the flotilla was usually HMS Snowdrop, a fairly new corvette of the Royal Navy. The convoys were not as large as those crossing the Atlantic, but with the Suez canal closed there was a constant stream of merchant ships going both North and South, all of which had to be protected. It was easier to protect the ships if they all travelled together, but the snag was that the speed was governed by the that of slowest.

The Kildwick was fully equipped with all of the necessary weaponry. As well as radar, depth charges and Asdic, we had a very modern gun to ward off any attacks from the air. Shortly after arriving at Freetown we travelled to Dakar (now the capital of Senegal) to be fitted with a Hedgehog – which was the very latest of weapons for attacking U-boats. The previous method of attack had been by depth-charges, which were dropped from the stern of the ship. This had been very successful but clever U-boat captains had learned that a fairly good way to avoid attack was to steer straight at the attacking ship and then, when they were about 100 yards away, turn sharply away. The Hedgehog consisted of 24 missiles fired from the front of the ship. This, of course, required the ship to change course quickly after firing.

As I look back on those days I marvel at how efficient a fighting force we were, considering our lack of experience. None of the officers were regular Navy men and, of the rest of the crew, some were regulars but the vast majority of us had been called up as conscripts. A few had served in other ships earlier in the war but a lot of us had never been to sea before. Many like me, were still in their teens. The majority adapted themselves to Navy life but for a few, myself included, life was very difficult. Before the war I had spent 18 months starting my training as an accountant, had never been any good at using my hands, and was no use at anything practical. I was happy as an Asdic operator but my seamanship left a lot to be desired.

It was normal for an Ordinary Seaman to be made-up to an Able Seaman (AB) after they had been in the Navy 12 months. In theory this meant an increase of pay of 3d a day (pre-decimal money), in practice we never got it; pay days were very irregular and I am sure we were all short paid. There were a large number of us (mostly teenagers) who were applying to be made AB and the commanding officer of the Philoctetes decided that we should all face an examination of some sort. I do not think that they had any intention of failing anyone but it gave the commanding officer the satisfaction of knowing that he had not given us automatic promotion. We gathered together, about 50 of us: in the morning we had a talk by a Petty Officer on torpedoes and electricity, and in the afternoon we were asked questions on what we had been told earlier. Two days later I was sent for by Lt. Pannell. I went into the ship's office in fear and trembling, wondering what I had done wrong. The captain glared at me and said "You are the most cantankerous individual that I have ever known. it was my intention to request a delay of 6 months for your promotion to Able Seaman. There is nothing able about you. You are bloody useless. However you have come top with 100% in the senseless written test and it will make a mockery of the whole thing if I suggest a delay".

I often have a chuckle when I recall what happened. The moral of the story is that one should be careful about pure theory over the practical. Any one of the others would have been far more useful than me in the use of electricity and torpedoes but when it came to writing things down it was the other way round.

In the two years that we were escorting convoys we called in at several ports on the West African coast but none of them were as depressing as Freetown. Generally, the ports in British colonies were better than those that were French and they were definitely cleaner. Having said that, Casablanca was quite clean and Freetown, a British colony, was a bit mucky. I very much enjoyed my visits to Lagos (Nigeria) where we went several times. it was on one of our visits there that Lt. Shepherd, our No. 1, got married at the local Anglican church. Several of us attended and we lined up to present arms as the couple left for the reception.

I remember one port we visited in what was then French Equatorial Africa. A lot of residents were enlisting in the Free French Forces and were to join a liner being used as a troop-ship (presumably coming northwards from South Africa). The Kildwick was part of the convoy of naval ships that escorted the ship as far as Casablanca, where another convoy based at Gibraltar took over. We were only there one night and we received a tremendous reception The flags decorated the town and the local band played a lot of English songs (mostly from WW1). It was a mixture of welcome for us and a farewell to their boys going off to fight in the war. It was just as well that we were only there for one night as the local wine was very strong and the next morning, the captain of the Snowdrop had to go ashore and apologise for the damage done in the town. I was not responsible, as I was on duty that night and in any case was teetotal at that time.

Casablanca was different to every other port that we visited. It was partly a typical French colonial African town and partly a European city. It was, of course, a town where Roosevelt and Churchill met at least once. Because of its proximity to the North African conflict there was a strong military presence there. There was a larger number of white European civilians there, mostly French, more than any other place we visited. I am not sure whether I liked the place or not, even though there was greater prosperity there. I remember a member of the Kildwick crew saying that there was a strange sense of unreality about the place. On looking back I think it could well have been the hostility of the French to us amongst all of the military activity. Things did improve on our second visit: by then the allies had recaptured Paris and there was a completely different atmosphere. I remember visiting a restaurant where the same waiter who had previously served us very reluctantly and who pretended not to understand us, now greeted us very warmly and even made a small reduction in the price.

Most of the convoys that we escorted were uneventful and there was a lot of sometimes very tedious work done by the Navy in ensuring that the merchant ships got through safely. However, I must record the account of my most vivid memory of my time on the Kildwick, when a German U-boat got through the escort and sunk one of the ships, the Silvermaple.

I had just left my bunk after having a sleep before going on duty for the 6pm watch. I went up on deck for a breather, dressed only in a pair of shorts and rubber shoes. As I idly looked across at the convoy, something I had done many times before, I was aghast to see the Silvermaple burst into flames. I shall never forget the sight. I didn't see her go under but the last I saw she was in a bad way.

Action Stations were called and we immediately began to chase after the submarine. However, the Kildwick was detailed to return to pick up the survivors, which was itself an unforgettable experience.

A total of seven men died when the Silvermaple was sunk. We found the survivors, along with the body of the dead captain, in the lifeboat. Whether the captain died on board or in the lifeboat I don't know.

I remember helping the poor souls clamber aboard. At first the captain was left in the lifeboat but a small party were very soon detailed to bring the dead body aboard and he was taken to the officer's wardroom. The bedraggled crewmen were given a good hot drink but I don't think that they felt like eating anything. Next morning, after a good breakfast they were in slightly better spirits but they were of course still feeling low. We had, by now, returned to Takoradi and we were lined up on parade to say farewell to the captain. The order "Off Caps" was given and the body was piped ashore as he was carried slowly down the gangplank. It was a very moving moment.

We were reasonably comfortable on the Kildwick. Being an American-built ship we slept in bunks rather than hammocks that the British ships had. Each of us had our own little cupboard to keep our belongings in. I remember that early on I padlocked the door with the keys inside and had to get the ship's carpenter to break open the padlock and I was never again able to lock my door. The crew were mostly good types but there were a few who one would describe as "a bad lot". We were very well fed but occasionally we were served with the special wartime dried potatoes and the chef hadn't got a clue as to how to cook them. He was a regular navy man and usually a good cook but this dried potato was vile. I remember on one occasion Able Seaman Green made an official complaint to the officer of the day saying that the food was not fit to eat. Lt. Ogden came into the mess, kept his cap on showing that he was on duty, sat down and ate Green's meal. On leaving he said " Who says the food is not fit to eat ?". The chef was highly delighted.

Writing about the chef has reminded me that one night he returned from shore leave in a very drunken state and fell off of plank giving access between two ships moored next to each other. He was down there for about 15 minutes, singing his head off. I think he was completely unaware of the danger he was in as it was very choppy and we had difficulty getting him up. In the end we persuaded him to swim the 60 or 70 yards to the front of the ship where there were some steps leading back to the shore. He then of course had to negotiate the gang plank a second time. However the swim had sobered him up a bit and he managed it OK.

We closely followed how the war was going by listening to the radio. I remember being fascinated by hearing about theV1 rockets and the V2 flying bombs. I had no real idea of the fear that these were causing back at home. We were very excited about D-Day and followed events with great interest. On one occasion we were moored alongside of an American destroyer and we had an vigorous but friendly discussion with some of the crew as to who would be the first to reach Berlin. The British under Montgomery or the Americans under Eisenhower. Little did we realise that Ike had already decided to save a lot of lives by allowing the Russians to get there first.

The news that the war against Germany was almost over and that we could now go home was greeted with great joy and the night before VE Day we called in at British Gambia. We were only there for two nights and, for some reason, none of us went ashore. It was an eventful stay as in the middle of our first night there we were all awoken as our anchor was dragging and we were drifting about in the harbour. Next day (VE day) was one that I will never forget. We were in a very large harbour and there were a lot of ships from many countries, but the Kildwick was the only British ship.

We were given instructions that there was to be no celebrations until 3pm when Churchill was due to make a speech declaring that the war in Europe was over. From early in the morning bedlam broke loose for several hours as all of the other ships sounded their horns but we remained silent. By lunch-time the noise had had quietened down but at 3pm we sounded our horn and every other ship responded and the noise started up again and lasted for a long, long time.

The next day we sailed for home and a few days later we arrived at Gibraltar where we stayed about a week. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there and one part of me wanted to stay longer, but another part longed to be home. I was born at Gibraltar in 1924, my father being a regular soldier and stationed there. My mother had said to me “If you ever get to Gib. go into the chapel at South Barracks and look up the baptismal records”. I was not really interested but as I happened to pass the entrance to South barracks I thought “Why not ?” I asked a soldier for directions to the church and he told me. However, it turned out that he had thought that I had jokingly asked for the way to the canteen bar, so I never did get to look up the church records.

At last we were home; with Sheerness our port of arrival. It was a wonderful place. I remember Leading Seaman Page rushing ashore to kiss the ground. This was a bit amusing as he came from Lancashire and was often very critical of the South of England and the allegedly toffee-nosed people who lived there. We were at Sheerness for several days before we were decommissioned, and were not given any immediate leave. However it is amazing how much effort servicemen would make to get home, even for just an hour. I had a journey of about 1½ hours by train from Sheerness to Victoria, London and then another half hour to Epsom in Surrey where my home was, and then the return journey in order to be back on ship in time. I did this two or three times – even when I only had a half day’s shore leave.

Eventually we all said goodbye to the Kildwick, and I never gave it another thought. We all had to return to our home base which was Portsmouth, Chatham or Devonport; but for Asdics this was Dunoon in Scotland, so I had to travel there before I got any proper leave. I was eventually given a long leave and when I returned to Dunoon I was immediately sent away for another 2 weeks on what they called “star leave”. This happened several times because so many ships were returning to the UK and they had not the accommodation for us all. It all meant that apart from several tedious journeys to and from Scotland I was able to spend a long time at home. I have often wished that I had done some of the train journeys during the day to have seen more of the country but I always took a night train. I was keen to spend every possible moment at home.

My time of service in the Navy was not yet over, as I was eventually drafted onto HMS Poole which was a minesweeper, and I spent several months sweeping mines in the English Channel before being “demobbed” early in 1946.

My memoir of HMS Kildwick has now come to the end and if I had known how long it would be, I would never have started. Unlike some, I have never been one talk about my wartime experiences but recently I have become very nostalgic and wish that I had made some effort to contact some of my old shipmates.

Some years ago I was driving from Leeds to Skipton and deliberately did not take the quickest route. When getting near the village of Kildwick I considered stopping; however it was getting late and my wife felt that we should press on. I never have seen the place.

In June of this year there was a celebration for those who had received the Atlantic medal in WW2. All of us who served on the Kildwick received that medal and although we had a much quieter time than those who were on Russian Convoys we nevertheless played a vital part in the war and I am proud to have served my country, in however small a part. I am thankful to God that I survived and every Remembrance Day I remember those in my class at school who did not.

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