

An HMS Kildwick Memoir – Part 1

A little while ago the History Group published an article about HMS Kildwick, a Royal Navy ship of the second world war. Shortly afterwards we were contacted by former Able Seaman Cyril Dennis who served on HMS Kildwick from 1943 until the end of the war in 1945. We are delighted that Cyril (pictured below) has now written a memoir about his war-time experiences.



Cyril Dennis

HMS Kildwick officers:

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

I give here my memories of HMS Kildwick on which I served from its initial trials on Lake Michigan until it arrived back in the UK in 1945 at the end of the war in Europe. However, after 70 years I cannot remember everything so the account cannot be a complete record. Nevertheless I am confident of the accuracy of what I do record and although some of it is personal to me It may be a fairly useful historical record.

By the middle of 1943 America's amazing industrial capacity was fully geared to the war effort and Britain was gaining to a large extent. Many ships were being built for the Royal Navy(RN) and it was necessary to send personnel to the States to man them. Ocean liners like the Queen Mary and the Mauretania were used as troop ships for this purpose.

A British base was set up at a place called Asbury Park in New Jersey which was a prominent sea-side resort, about 54 miles south of New York. Two hotels were used as a transit camp for a large number of British sailors who were awaiting their draft to the ship they were to serve on. I don't know the exact number of British there at any one time but it must have been getting on for a thousand, or possibly more. Every morning hundreds of Americans would stand outside the gates and wait for the Royal Marines band to march out and play the two National Anthems and raise the Stars and Stripes and the White Ensign. I understand that people used to drive from quite a distance away in order to watch and listen.

The RN ordered 50 escort vessels from Pullman Standard Car Co. of Chicago which were to be used for escorting convoys in different parts of the world. Chicago is obviously not noted for ship-building but as the nation was at war, every bit of industry was used to the maximum. It so happened that when the first ships got back to the UK the Navy did not really like them so they cancelled the rest of the order and only 15 were actually built. I don't know why the Navy didn't like them but I can testify that they did their job and were well equipped with everything needed for a fighting ship, including Radar, Asdic and depth charges.

By early 1943 I had completed my training as an Asdic operator. Asdic stands for **Anti Submarine Detection Investigation Committee** (highly secret then). This committee was formed shortly after WW1 in order to get an efficient system of detecting submarines by sending sound waves through the sea and receiving an echo back. By the beginning of WW2 the system had become very sophisticated and it played a vital part of the war in the Atlantic. By the end of the war, with more up to date equipment and with the use of early computers it became almost impossible to fail to detect and then destroy enemy submarines. The loss of German U-boats in 1944 and '45 was very heavy.

I received my draft to join British Escort Craft 6 (BEC6). At first I did not know where I was going but it soon became obvious. I had time to send my girl friend (later my wife) a card to say, by means of a simple pre-arranged code, that I was off to the States. I sailed from Liverpool for New York on the *Mauretania*. I had hoped it was to have been the *Queen Mary* which was in Liverpool at the same time but the *Mauretania* was almost as luxurious: not that we had any luxury, as we were terribly overcrowded. It took us 8 days instead of scheduled 5/6 to get to New York. Apparently the U-boats were out in their packs, so they took us down to the Equator and up the east coast of America.

I remember that I won the raffle for guessing the time that we passed the Statue of Liberty. It was easy really. I made sure I was the last one to put a time down and then made sure that my time was the last – so that if we were late I would win. Sure enough we were five hours late and so I won: one pound nineteen shillings and sixpence. Everyone said I was lucky, but we make our own luck.

The train journey from New York to Asbury Park gave me my first experience of the American countryside. I cannot remember much of that trip. I was only 18 years of age and at that time and was not greatly interested in the scenery, but I do remember noting that once we got away from the busy city everything was much cleaner, quieter and unrushed. I was to stay at Asbury for three weeks and I look back on that time with fond memories. I found the American people very friendly and hospitable and have had a warm affection for the nation ever since. I am particularly thankful for the friendship and fellowship I enjoyed at the 1st Baptist Church that I attended while I was at Asbury. I have for many years wanted to go back there for a visit but now know that I never shall.

However, I must record that at that time the Americans were very parochial and had little knowledge of anything outside of their own country. Everything that is the best must be in America. One had to be very careful not to criticise in any way or even suggest that some things were as good in the UK as in USA. On one occasion I was asked "Do you have radio in Britain?".

When the time came for me to join up with the rest of the crew for the journey to Chicago it meant an overnight train journey from Newark (New Jersey) via Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. I would have liked to have done the journey in daylight but it was not to be. However, after the black outs of Britain, it was interesting to see the massive fires at the steelworks of Pittsburgh. For the first time the name of Kildwick was given to us. We had a long discussion as to where in Scotland Kildwick was. One Scot thought it was on the east coast of Fife and another said it was on the west coast of Ayr. The lad from Sheffield who thought it was a town in Yorkshire was thought to be a bit silly as up to then all of the "kil" ships had names of places in Scotland.

Chicago had a fearful reputation. It had not been all that long since the days of Al Capone and the gangsters. In fact, on one afternoon I witnessed an array of police cars tearing down the street with their sirens blaring away. A few minutes later I heard gun fire and hurried in the other direction as fast as I could. Nevertheless, I found Chicago a tremendous place. Once a quarter, President Roosevelt presented a banner to the city who was the most hospitable to service men and Chicago was the only city at that time who had won it twice. Everywhere we went it was admission free with the best of service.

However, we had important things to do and over the next few weeks we were giving the Kildwick extensive trials on Lake Michigan. I was amazed how rough the lake was and in fact I was seasick twice. That was the only time that I was seasick. Even when I was doing my initial training off the Mull of Kintyre I was never sick but I did feel a bit "queasy" at times.

I had one particularly frightening experience before we left Chicago. I was with a crew member and travelling on the "Metro" train from the harbour to the city centre when a black man suddenly stood up and shouted to a white man "Leave me alone, you've been on at me all day". Fists were raised and all of the other blacks stood up ready to come to the defence. Then all of the whites stood up ready. I whispered to my companion "What do we do?" and he replied "Sit still". Fortunately the train stopped at a station and the first black man got off, and things quietened down.

Eventually, the trials were completed and it was time to leave on a journey that tourists would have to pay thousands of pounds to do today. At 18 years of age I did not really appreciate it. There were of course wartime restrictions in place and naval discipline to endure. Nevertheless I have lasting memories of the journey, particularly the visit to Niagara Falls. Our schedule was to sail to Detroit and then to carry on through the Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence River and on to the sea via Montreal, Quebec and Halifax. I was not able to see anything of Detroit as I was on duty on the day we were there. Once we got into Canada we pulled up somewhere each evening and were able to go ashore and then sail on in the morning. It was fascinating negotiating the numerous locks on the canal built to avoid Niagara. I don't know how many there are but there are a large number of them, immediately after each other. The drop on each one must have been 40 or 50 feet (possibly more). Our seamanship was put to the test and we were very pleased with ourselves.

We were given a day off in order to have a bus ride to the Falls. It was an experience that I will never forget. I found the province of Quebec very disappointing. Montreal was not too bad but Quebec city was very inhospitable. More often than not the people would pretend not to understand what was being said because it was not in French. However when we reached Nova Scotia things were different and we were back in the real Canada.

The time had now come for us to remember that there was a war on and we had to sail down to New York for the ship to be officially handed over to the British. We might never have reached NY, and the Kildwick's war was nearly over before it had begun. I was personally involved as I had a spell of "look out" duty during the middle watch (midnight to 4am). We were heading for Casco Bay in Maine and, when I took over as look out, my predecessor pointed out that there was a ship ahead that had its lights on which were occasionally flashing. I naturally thought that he had reported it to Lt. Duckworth who was the officer in charge. There were three or four others on the bridge (including another look out) who must have seen the ship which was rapidly approaching us. Suddenly, all hell broke loose when the ship of the U.S. Coastguard fired a shot across our bow.

Apparently they had received no radio response from us. After they had come along-side us and exchanged verbal comments with Lt. Pannel, our captain, who was dressed in his pyjamas and dressing gown but wearing his naval cap, they received confirmation as to who we were and that we were expected. We were allowed to proceed on our journey with cries of "Bloody Limeys" from them.

I cannot remember how long we stayed at New York but it was about two weeks. During that time I had several visits to different parts of Manhattan including a memorable one to the top of the Empire State Building. Kildwick was berthed at Staten Island and we had to get the ferry to Manhattan. On one occasion I decided to walk the whole length on Broadway (which started at the ferry terminus) to Times Square. I hadn't gone very far when I was stopped by an Irish American policeman who said I should take the Subway train. I explained that I wanted to see as much of the country as I could but he insisted saying that "no-one walks in this country". There was no arguing with an American policeman so I took the train for one station and then continued my walk. In thinking about it afterwards I wondered whether the policeman might really have been concerned about the possibility of me being attacked.

The day came for the official handing over of the Kildwick from the Americans. I have never been so cold, before or since. Up to then the weather had been very warm but the temperature dropped on that morning and we were all frozen. The ceremony lasted for about one and a half hours and the whole crew were lined up on the forecastle to listen to a lot of speeches, most of which were far too long. In addition to several Naval officers from both countries there were two people from the firm who built the ship in Chicago and even the Mayor of NY came and gave a typical American speech.

The next day we set sail and our share of fighting the war began.

----- END OF PART 1 -----

Part 2 will follow next month.

Were you a member of the Kildwick crew ?

Cyril would like to hear from any surviving members of the HMS Kildwick crew. Please email the [history group](#) and we will pass on your message.