

Bernard de Neumann's memoirs of his Father's service aboard HMRC Vigilant

VIGILANT came into service with HMC&E in 1947 and was fitted out for service in the Royal dockyard at Chatham. Initially her hull was painted 'navy blue' but after a short time she reverted to 'battleship grey'. After the war there was not much work in Chatham dockyard, and so VIGILANT's conversion took an extraordinarily long time to maintain employment for the dockyard 'mateys'.

She was based in Gravesend Reach from 1947 until mid 1953, when her base moved to Southampton Water. Originally her Commander was Mr Pine, who, coincidentally had been Chief Officer on my Uncle's Strick Line ship. My father, who was also a Master Mariner and served as Master on a number of ships, was Chief Officer, but Mr Pine was often ill, and so my father was usually in command. Mr Pine eventually retired through ill health and my father took over as Commander. My father resigned in 1953 when VIGILANT moved to Southampton and joined the Port of London Authority. The Exec officers on VIGILANT had to have foreign-going Master's Certificates, and my father and Mr Pine went on the Waterguard training course before receiving their commissions as Officers of Customs.

In her early days of service, VIGILANT used to take the Board on an annual tour of British and sometimes near continent ports. It seemed like a annual holiday excursion for the Board members, who enjoyed much that was not available within the UK during those days of austerity! VIGILANT always carried a good stock of alcohol and other luxuries like liqueur chocolates. The Chairman of the Board, Sir Otto Mundy, when on board, used to enjoy mackerel poached in whisky - the more the better. Sir Otto and my father became good friends. During 1947, Sir Stafford Cripps, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, travelled aboard, and in a conversation with my father, who couldn't understand Cripps's socialist pretensions, asked him why he was in the Labour government. Cripps replied that he wanted to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, but knew he wouldn't get the job in a Conservative government.

At the GATT conference in Torquay, the first ever live outside TV broadcast from a ship was made from VIGILANT. My father took VIGILANT to the 1953 Spithead Review, and several broadcasts were made from VIGILANT with film crews following my father about. This made me particularly popular at school as my father had become something of a minor celebrity, especially in view of his conviction for piracy by a Vichy French naval court martial in 1941 - my father actually was a pirate! My father brought her home to Gravesend before resigning, and moving to the PLA at Gravesend. VIGILANT often took part in special operations in co-operation with the Investigation Branch. Many trips on VIGILANT were enjoyed by Inspector General of Waterguard, Johnny Kerr, who also became a firm friend of my father.

Christmas Day, probably in 1950, as my mother was serving Christmas Dinner, the phone rang, and it became clear that we would have to abandon the dinner and go to where VIGILANT was docked immediately. It was very exciting for my brother and myself, but, no doubt, a big disappointment for my mother, and a worry for my father. We went by car to one of the London Docks, I forget which but it was on the

north-side of the river, where VIGILANT was receiving an overhaul of some kind, and when we got there we found that VIGILANT had been sabotaged with a bag of cement dumped through the engine-room skylight into the bearings of her triple expansion steam-engine. Having inspected the damage my father arranged for the cement to be removed ASAP, and we returned home to a spoilt dinner.

On another occasion, when we were again having lunch at home in Rayleigh, Essex, there was a frantic knock at the back door, and when my father answered it, a man demanded to be driven to Danbury, Essex, immediately. Dad got the car-keys and drove the man to his destination, and when they arrived the man asked how much the fare was, and when Dad said 'no charge' it was revealed that the man thought Dad was a taxi driver, as he used to drive home from Tilbury wearing his uniform cap!

VIGILANT, which was a full ocean-going ship - the biggest vessel ever operated by HMC&E, sometimes used to keep an eye on fishing vessels by visiting their fishing grounds outside the territorial limit (North Sea, off of Iceland and Greenland, and the Newfoundland Banks), and noting those that were there. This enabled Waterguard officers to sometimes catch fishermen out over their duty-free claims. Sometimes, when VIGILANT was on patrol, and they met up with a fishing vessel, they would trade buckets of coal for buckets of fish. Some of this fish became fertiliser for Dad's renowned roses! On one occasion my Dad took VIGILANT to Stockholm in Sweden where they conferred with Swedish Customs, and were honoured guests.

Sometimes on a Sunday, my father used to take my brother and me to spend the day on VIGILANT. A launch of the launch service would be sent from Gravesend to pick us up from the west end of Tilbury landing stage, where we embarked the launch by going down some steps. On one such occasion my grandfather, Horace Kimber - Chief of the Investigation Branch of HMC&E - accompanied us to also spend the day on VIGILANT. My grandfather had a stern, if not fierce countenance, as some of you may know, but when he clambered down the steps he caught, and tore, the seat of his trousers on a nail. Dad, my brother and myself, spent the rest of the launch trip to VIGILANT trying to conceal our amusement at my grandfather's discomfort!

On another occasion the launch taking us back to Tilbury landing stage broke down, and we gradually drifted under the stern of the towering ORCADES, an Orient Line passenger ship, Tilbury - Australia, moored in Gravesend Reach, until, in the nick of time, with Dad frantically making a distress signal, we were rescued by a PLA harbour patrol launch, and unceremoniously towed to the landing stage.

The first my father, and we, his family, knew of the North Sea flood of 31 January - 1 February 1953, was when Dad drove us by car through Hadleigh to Leigh-on-Sea on Sunday the 1st, and it was obvious that Canvey was under water. We went home immediately and Dad got in touch with the Chairman of the Board to seek permission to take VIGILANT to sea to help. The Board refused, and VIGILANT had to remain at her mooring. On the Monday, VIGILANT left on a scheduled patrol, but as they proceeded down the Thames into the North Sea, they encountered large numbers of Southend-on-Sea Corporation deck chairs floating in the water. These were salvaged and distributed amongst the crew, and the de Neumann's long had a good supply of deck chairs at home!