

H.M. Customs (Waterguard)

Demobbed in 1946, I landed a job with the Iraq Petroleum Company in Moorgate in the City. For five months I travelled daily from East Croydon to London Bridge dressed accordingly - I was a City Gent. Due to the trouble between the Jews and the Arabs the pipeline between Kirkuk and Haifa was closed and all I did was sign my salary cheques. Finally, although, the pay was exceptional, I decided that enough was enough and began to look around for something more interesting.

While in the Forces and towards the end of the War I sat two written examinations, one was for the Executive Grade in the Civil Service and the other was for H.M. Customs (Waterguard). I passed both but as I was in an Executive post being paid far more than the Civil Service offered, I surrendered the first choice. Then came Customs (Waterguard) and I recall saying to myself 'What the devil is that?' I called at the office of the Civil Service Commissioners and asked if they could give me any information, "Nothing to do with us, old boy go down to the Custom House in Lower Thames Street". I duly arrived, flunkies in red and blue directed me to the office of the ~~office of the~~ Waterguard Superintendent, London, Room 11, First Floor. I knocked and entered, the large room appeared to be untenanted and through the windows I could see Tower Bridge and London Bridge and all the mass of shipping in between on the Thames *PURSER*

A voice said, "Can I help you?". I turned and saw a close cropped, bullet-headed very big man dressed in a Naval uniform with two ^{*stripes & a cut*} stripes on his sleeve. This I learned quite quickly was Preventive Officer Charles WOODCOCK, the W/S's tiger. I also learned later that the only thing that moved up the Thames BETWEEN Southend on the North shore, Sheerness on the South side and Teddington Lock fifteen miles above London Bridge, without his knowledge, was the tide.

I told him my problem, how naive can one get!. He took me by the arm and led me over to the huge windows. Pointing to the Wharf immediately below Tower Bridge he said "That's Mark Brown's Wharf, the ship alongside is the LECH, a Pole, with eggs from Lublin, next is Hayes Wharf, that's the Royal Wharf, anything for the Palace goes in there, next is the Baltavis a Balty boat from Stettin, next is Ffennings Wharf with a Kraut from Hamburg with paper; this side at Adelaide House Wharf is a Spaniard, the Santa Maria with oranges. He went on, beyond Tower Bridge are Irongate Wharf, Reading Wharf and Butlers Wharf used continually by the General Steam Navigation boats trading to Antwerp twice a week. All these vessels have ship's crews and leaning over me threateningly he said, "AND THEY ARE ALL BLOODY SMUGGLERS' Gentlemen, I was hooked!

Subsequently I was called to interview, passed, and instructed to report to The Waterguard Superintendent, The Custom House, Room 11, First Floor. *John* Charlie WOODCOCK remembered me took down a few particulars and said Mr. PURSER will send for you when he wants to, meanwhile, he pointed out a floating pontoon on the river below the window with a 100 foot gangway from the shore. That he said ~~is~~ ^{*is*} the 'HARPY' which has gone up and down on the tide with the tide and been the office and Headquarters of Upper River Officers since 1904 replacing a hulk of the same name. You will go aboard and report to Mr. FLEET, The Chief Preventive Officer.

I boarded the HARPY. My knowledge of ships and shipping was abysmal, from the odd book such as 'Moby Dick'. The launch crews and Skippers were on the lower deck and I was directed above. I climbed the companion way - not a soul about and walked to the end where I saw a civilian in what was obviously an office. I told him I was 'Aylwin' reporting for duty for the first time. He said are you Reconstruction or Open Exam-I told him. He looked me up and down and said, "Why the hell can't you have a simple name for Chris' sake - Come and meet the C.P.O. *W. Purser*

I was angled into the CPOs Office. He was seated at a desk covered with cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes and bundles of nylon stockings. He was a little man with a bald head and outsize horn-rimmed spectacles. He shook my hand, welcomed me aboard and said "Do you play bridge? I said, 'Yes, Sir' and I was really beginning to like this job. He said, "Right, make the tea".

I was instructed to appear for duty 9 to 5 on the Harpy for the next week and Mr. WILLIS, the Clerical Officer showed me the signing on sheets. I was amazed at the number of signatures until it was explained to me that there were watches around the clock 8/4, 4/11 & Mdt/8. I realized that I was going to have to do the same and I wondered what my wife would say.

After about a week spent mostly making tea for the POs and gleaning what was going on from anyone who would talk to me, the Rummage PO took pity on me when he said "Right, AYLWIN you're with me to-day, keep with the other APOs, don't touch any ships instruments and get to know the feel of a ship. We went by launch and boarded a Dutch scoot called the Orangepolder. The three APOs disappeared below like lightning and I wandered up and down the deck very gingerly and when tired of that and gaining a bit of courage I stepped into a saloon with a table in the centre covered with dirty cups. There was a cupboard on the bulkhead full of packets of tea and sugar and condensed milk tins, and at the back a cocoa tin. I don't know what made me do it but I picked it up and shook it - it rattled and on opening it I found a brand new watch. Pleading for help from a well known deity I put the watch back into the cocoa tin and replaced the tin in the cupboard.. I left the saloon stepping out into the alleyway and bumped into the PO.. I spluttered out my tale and led him to the cocoa tin. It was empty! The PO acted immediately and opened the only door leading out of the saloon. to reveal the cabin of a very confused cook-steward with his hands up. Two things happened then, first I witnessed my first seizure of smuggled goods i.e. one watch and secondly, had earned myself £3.6.8 a reward of double the duty involved!!

The tale flashed around the watch house and after that I never forgot to take possession of the goods!!

In due course I collected my uniform proper and entered into the normal range of duties as an APO on a river station mostly as a fourth hand in a rummage crew but learning as I went. Then one day I was listed for the Waterguard Training Centre and for three months knowledge was pumped into me by dedicated tutors. I ate and slept preventive work, the law, regulations, Court procedures, etc. There was a large model of a ship the ss HALIZONES which came apart and I and hundreds of others over the years learned the name and location of every part and pipe, space and tank hold and cofferdam. To have been through the Waterguard Training Centre was an accolade talked about in every watchhouse from Wick to Penzance.

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This was 1941. Suddenly the limited range of smuggling attempts confined mostly to shipping began to expand. One day Northolt and London Airport began to function. Airports opened up everywhere Lympne, Lydd Manston, Wartime Airfields began flying cargoes and passengers. At Dover, The Eastern Car Terminal was on the drawing board and a car carrier the Mv Halladale a converted Navy corvette was able to carry twelve cars providing the ^{crane} crane to put them on board was working and the documentation for the cars was to hand from the AA. ^{the cars first by hand of General & Inspector} I was on detached duty at Dover that Summer and on one occasion Gerry Lord the boss of the AA came in and asked if I could do him a favour. He said he had an irate passenger who had been shut out from the Halladale. He said he had an important appointment in Paris and was demanding to see someone about it. In those days this was a frequent occurrence and the sight of a uniform frequently did the trick. I said OK wheel him in. A Gentleman wearing a large Teddy-bear coat and waving a American passport hove into view and he was very much out of sorts. He was a very big man who smelled like a parfume boutique. He was powdered and painted, mascara and LIPSTICK BANGLED AND BERINGED AND HE SPOKE LIKE THAT TOO. I explained the position quite carefully to him that there was no possibility of him sailing that day, but I ^{would} will take full particulars and ensure he would be aboard the next day. I reached for his passport and saw the wicked gleam in Gerry Lords eye. It was none other than Charles Atlas of 'Have a body like mine in 10 days'

Dover had two train ferries to Dunkirk which had been converted or adapted rather to take cars on the upper deck. The proud and famous ss Invicta remained the same, she carried the worlds rich and famous between Dover & Calais and the Golden Arrow carried them ^{from} Dover to Victoria Station shepherded by Admiral White, Thomas Cooks representative. I was on the keyside at Dover when eight crowned heads landed from the Invicta bound for London and the wedding of Prince Phillip and Elizabeth. I think you may count but three to-day.

The Customs goes back into the mists of time. In 1115 there are records of the collection of four pence on wool fells exported to France, but as I have only 20 ~~minutes~~ ^{seconds} before you start stamping your feet let me ~~go~~ ^{come} back to 1891. A politician named GOSCHEN declared in the house that "Rummaging of vessels was the first line of defence of the Customs Revenue and Waterguard Officers could only be properly supervised by officers who had the experience themselves. In those days it was common for a lad to join the Service through political patronage as an Extraman, become an established Boatman in a seaport after 5 or 6 years to be re-graded as a Preventive man 12 years later and Preventive Officer after a further six. Preventive Officer was the career grade but only after 20/25 years service. Ranks above that were normally allocated to established gentry.

GOSCHEN killed this and forever after promotion for all grades was by merit written examination and interview. *here were no more 2000 in 1946*

When I joined my salary was £249 per annum, overtime was paid at the rate of 1/- per hour over 8 hrs. Sunday attendance drew time and a quarter. Offices were called to a Promotion Board by recommendation every 5 years or as stipulated by the Board. If and when you attained PO-ship you then had two chances for promotion to CPD - no more!

In 1946 there were 110 CPOs 900 POs & 500 APOs *5000*

In 1965 there were 136 CPOs 1400 POs & 1000 APOs *2500*

In 1975 there were 200 CPOs 1800 POs & 1000 APOs *3000*

Times were changing, the War was over I will give you an example of how quickly. I was stationed on the Harpy in 1950 when I was sent to Croydon Airport on a relief duty for sickness. While there the the Police phoned to say a private A/c had been seen to land in a field near Reigate and a Constable was standing by. I checked with the Tower and the A/c was overdue. I phoned the Police said that I was on my way and that neither the A/c or the passengers should be allowed to leave. I took the official car and in due course arrived at the field. It was reasonably flat with a black tarpaulin sheeted barn in one corner. This we used to complete the formalities. The A/c was a private Dove. I cleared it for health, it had flown in from Le Touquet. The pilot and owner was Prince Birabongse of Siam, *see RAB by 5/10/50* the lady a Brazilian girl I changed hats, put on my Immigration one, stamped their passports cleared the contents of the plane and their baggage and told them they could go. That, Gentlemen, is now Gatwick Airport.

Over the years terminology has changed. From Tide waiters to Riding Officers Boatmen to Revenuemen. Smugglers and Wreckers in Cornwall & Devon and along the South Coast. Brandy for the parson, baccy for the Clerk and tea. A Riding Officer named CHATER at RYE was murdered by smugglers and thrown down a dry well and eight years later nine men were hung by Judge Jeffreys, the Hanging Judge at the BODMIN Assizes. Regiments of soldiers from Dover Castle were used by the Revenue Officers for rafting. This was a process used by the Frenchies and the Smugglers *after dark & off shore just before high water* whereby they fastened the contraband to baulks of timber which were lowered into the sea and weighted *so that* they floated just below the surface *the tide took the goods into the beach* the soldiers waded off shore for the purpose of *recovery of goods* 'rafting'. Remember too, please at this time *it was called rafting* that a voyage by sea rarely *went* further than the Wash on the East Coast and Bristol on the West. Ships were few with about 200 tons the biggest.

Incidentally, when Samuel Pepys re-organised the Royal Navy the rank distinctions were taken from the Revenue Service. The Waterguard up to 1974 were the Kings or Queens-men and it was a proud day when officers received their commissions which gave them the widest powers to enter and seize any smuggled goods for the Crown. They could seize goods and fine on the spot, powers that to-day are only available to traffic wardens and *such*.

After my training at the School I was minuted for a year on a Station Rummage Crew. There were two Station Rummage Crews on the River that worked independently of each other. Off the river in the Dock Stations West India Dock, Regents Canal Dock Victoria Dock and KGV all had their own Rummage Crews. It was quite normal for up to 15-20 ships ^{to come} ~~came~~ up-river on the tide. All ships from foreign were required to fly a yellow flag at the foremast which meant literally that I am healthy and have no sickness on board. Each vessel was boarded by the Waterguard and the Master specifically questioned. If satisfied they were allowed to proceed, if not, they were directed to a special anchorage to await the port Medical Officer..

As well as the Station Rummage Crews, there were Mobile Rummage Crews. These were the élite, selected for their proved seizure records. They were led by a very senior and experienced PO. Their hours of duty did not matter they were paid TWO HOURS OVERTIME A DAY AND FED THEMSELVES. Every APO worked with the hope of being selected for the Mobile Crew. They had a fast car and a roving commission anywhere in the London Division. *Rewards were great. £8/00 a call in of 5 pounds.*

While I was on the Harpy Station Crew I was very lucky and ^{made} many seizures. *£1 for a pound of opium.*

Notably, a seizure on the M/v Theems in regent Canal Dock at 3.30 am. The Dock was a very small enclosed dock with lock gates onto the river, that is it could only be entered or sailed from at 1 hour before high water. We knew RCD very well, it was a step out of the dock onto the Commercial Road and I wish I could have a pound for every time I have sheltered in the Gents Toilet in Aldgate with a brick wrapped in brown paper waiting for the 'big boy' to come and collect whatever it was that our informant told us he was expecting, mostly watches, of course. But I digress, we boarded the Theems at 3.30 in the morning. The lock Gates had a huge leak and as the ship was tied up to the quay the loss of water caused her to tilt sufficiently so that the filthy water in the bilges of the engine room, tilted also and I saw the edge of something which should not have been there.

A Rummage APO always carried a powerful torch (mostly stolen from American tanker at Shellhaven) a burglars jemmy (officially ^{issued} ~~issued~~ *a steel hammer*) and a mirror fixed on an extending frame. In the bilge was a package wrapped in oiled waterproof silk about 9" x 4½" x 1½". I thoroughly rummaged the rest of the engine room without result and then gave the Waterguard shout of ROI. This goes back into the mists of time when Waterguard officers needed assistance or to identify themselves in the hours of darkness and it meant 'help' and in short order the P.O. finished the noggin he was having with the Master, appeared on the scene. When we unwrapped the package it revealed £4000 in notes. You will recall that all you were allowed to take out with you was £25. This developed into the infamous Max Intrator case. The Engineer was carrying this money to be spent by the rich in Paris or the South of France. It finished up in the Old Bailey as did several Society folk - there were no BarclayCards in those days!!

At the end of my years minute on the Station Rummage Crew I found to my joy that I was minuted to the Mobile. After three months rewards were always paid out far behind, I remember going home and showering my wife with pound notes. It was a good job, my salary went nowhere.

When Travellers from abroad who did not wish to be bothered with baggage ~~they~~ could go into a Railway Station and register it through to London. The Railways took it into charge and delivered it to the ship and it travelled up to London in a sealed luggage ^{accompanied by an APO} van into Platform 14 of Victoria Station where it was then cleared by the owner at the Baggage Bench or put down into the Bge Warehouse under Platform 17 to be cleared at a later date.

The scene was set. A charming young lady presented her suitcase to me for clearance. When I asked her where she had been she replied "Paris, dearie" A bell rang in my left ear! I gave her the full question "Do you understand that you must declare all items obtained abroad, ^{or during the voyage,} no matter how large or small the quantity, whether for yourself or any other person. She replied 'Yes, dearie ~~What have you to declare then please.~~ She replied, I have 200 cigarettes and a bottle of Gin" I pinched myself to make sure I was awake and asked to see her passport. She was a barmaid and I, was looking for the present. She hadn't been to Paris for her health. I teased her on Have you not bought anything in Paris? No, she said I couldn't afford it. Just open this case for me please. She said, You want me to open it? Yes, please Miss. She coloured up and took a long time to open it and I saw immediately that I had found the present. It was the suitcase and everything in it!! The model costumes and dresses and lingerie were all brand new and the lingerie was exquisite and all assembled with French stitching. I decided that I would let her pay the duty but I would find out the full extent of what she had before I did. So I questioned her further but she didn't turn a hair.

Now in those days we didn't habve any Women Search Officers and when necessaary we either employed the Southern Railway Carriage Cleaner or talked the passenger ^{into} ~~to~~ producing any articles carried on the person herself. So, I challenged her person. She denied having anything on her. I said, there is a Womens Search Room over there. I am going to lead you to it and when you are inside I want you to remove any undeclared goods from your person and plaxce them on the table. When you have done so knock the door and I'll come in. I waited for the knock which came and I walked in. She stood there completely ^{'STRIPPERS'} naked and I saw the jewellery on the table. I said, "Thank you, Miss. Get dressed please, and I left, raced back to the Bench picked up her ~~her~~ suitcase, signalled a taxi from the rank and when she came out I said where to Miss and paid her fare. I hoped that was the nearest I would ever get to headlines in the Evening Standard ^{to embarrass the Board was sudden death}"

Well, I think I might have whetted your appetites. You will have seen the photographs of the car. You will know that there is a much more serious side to things in general. If you would like me to give another talk in the future perhaps you would let our respected Secretary know - he won't mind. The Chusan came into Southampton ^{initially} ~~I believe~~ and I never got that ~~far away~~ ^{near to him}.

Thank you very much for listening!!

Any questions ??