

# CHALLENGE TO SMUGGLERS

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In a classroom at Vintry House, overlooking the Thames, a score or so young men in navy-blue battledress listen tenaciously to the instructor, a bald man with shrewd eyes and two and a half rings of official gold braid on his cuffs. The classroom is part of the school for Waterguards recently set up by H.M. Commissioners of Customs and Excise to combat the post-war smuggling wave.

'Waterguards' (the traditional name for Preventive Officers) are those non-committal and needle-eyed men behind the Customs counter who chalk your baggage, after rummaging it, if need be, when you come ashore at Folkestone or land at Croydon, or at any other sea or airport. Another branch of the same service, equipped with launches, is empowered to board ships in harbour, roadstead or estuary and to levy tolls on dutiable goods declared by passengers and crews.

Its officers are adept at spotting and rummaging places on shipboard where contraband may be conveniently secreted. That is why the walls of the classroom at Vintry House are hung with diagrams showing cross-sections of liners and merchantmen, exposing the honeycomb of their inner structure from keel to bridge.

All Passengers are mentally divided by the Waterguard into three groups: the Whites (obvious innocents), the Grays (doubtfuls) and the Blacks (obviously bad eggs). The Blacks have their bags searched as a matter of course; the Grays, just to make sure.

## BLACK, WHITE OR GRAY.

"You'll have to deal with all sorts of people," says the instructor. "You watch them coming through into the baggage hall, and you weigh them up. You say to yourself, "Now that middle-aged man over there - is he a Black or a White, or a Gray?" You notice he's shifty about the eyes. He's fiddling with his tie. You decided he's probably a Black. Most certainly he's a Gray. You search his bags accordingly.

"Only recently I took some trainees to Heath Row aerodrome. We watched passengers lining up at the counters. Some of the Blacks gave themselves away at a glance. It couldn't have been plainer if they'd carried placards saying, 'I'm a smuggler - search me and you'll find the stuff.' You are dealing with types. Study your types carefully!"

The instructor continued: "Here are a few more points. First, about baggage keys. If a passenger can't open his case and says he's lost the key - don't always be suspicious. Keys do get mislaid, you know.

Privacy's another important thing. There are always porters waiting around in the baggage hall. Don't let them peep and pry while you're going through somebody's bags. Use tact and consideration.

"Don't crow. If you come across wrist watches concealed in cigarette packets, remain calm. Don't produce them with a triumphant flourish. You're not a conjuror producing a rabbit from a hat, remember!

"When searching baggage, be courteous. And be neat. Don't turn a woman's suitcase into a salad. How would your wife like it? Or your sweetheart? Now, any questions?"

One of the class, a boy from Tyneside with service ribbons, says: "We are supposed, aren't we, to hand each passenger a notice giving a list of dutiable goods, so that he'll know what he has to declare? What if the passenger slings the notice back at you, saying he has no intention of reading it? What if he refuses to open his bags at your request?"

"That sort of thing just doesn't happen, my lad. But let's suppose it does. Let's assume that you're up against a peppery colonel. If he refuses to comply with your request, don't argue, don't get excited. Just ignore him and deal with somebody else. Leave him to cool down and think it over. Until he has done what is necessary his bags simply won't be cleared. When he realises this, he comes to heel pretty quickly.

#### THE BOBBING DRIFTWOOD.

In another classroom I was shown a remarkable selection of modern pieces from the 'Smuggling Museum'.

Here was a buoyancy tank from a life raft, with a lid that could be unscrewed. A Waterguard aboard a ship in harbour looked over the side and noticed a piece of driftwood bobbing up and down near the hull. The tide was ebbing and other pieces of driftwood were floating away on the tide, but this particular piece remained. He fished it up with a boathook and found a cable attached to it. Connected to the cable was the submerged buoyancy tank, packed with bottles of liqueur. The plan had been to haul up the tank at night, long after the Waterguards had left the ship, and get it ashore to Black Market agents.

And what were these four strips of wood with rectangular cavities cut in their thickness? The instructor explained. They came from the base of a Chinese sailor's sea-chest. The cavities could not be seen in the ordinary way, but a suspicious Waterguard discovered that the chest could be easily dismantled. Thus it was that the cavities came to light. Each contained a packet of opium, aggregate weight one pound seven ounces, and worth £200 on the illicit market.

#### TIN OF 'ASPARAGUS'.

Food tins are favoured smuggling vehicle. A visitor from France brought with her two cylindrical cans of asparagus. Why two? It struck the Waterguard as odd. As a result of his investigation one of the cans, now in two pieces, became a cherished museum piece. The passenger had steamed off the label, cut the can open, eaten the asparagus, and had then filled the can with a roll of bearer bonds, afterwards re-soldering the can and replacing the label!

Here was a soldier's metal water bottle, with fabric cover. Remove the cover and you see the bottom has been cut away and fitted with a lid. "That," explains the instructor, "was

used for smuggling revolvers." Here was the bodybelt, originally packed with sovereigns which were seized on their way *out* of this country. (It is often overlooked that Waterguards are Excise as well as Customs officers, which means that they have to keep an eye not only on incoming traffic but also on outward bound commodities whose export is either banned or dutiable). Next to the bottle was a ship's lifebelt, which was found to be stuffed with cigarette packages instead of cork.

Suitcases with false bottoms, or false sides, are numerous. Some of them, remarkably neat jobs, are said to have been made for Resistance workers. They duped the Gestapo - but not H.M. Commissioners.

### TELL TALE SCREWS.

The most ingenious trick piece is a full-sized valise with the usual metal pins at the underneath corners. At least, they look like pins. Actually they are screws. When the screws are removed the false bottom is partly freed. A false lining has to be lifted before the bottom can be raised and the smuggled goods exposed. When intercepted at Folkestone this particular valise contained scores of watches. Other suitcase fakes have been used for smuggling in perfume, the cartons containing it sometimes fixed with glue to prevent tell-tale shiftings and noises.

There are also a set of illuminating diagrams. One shows the cross section of a service plane with which a non-English crew touched down from Italy at a Home Counties airfield, its nose stuffed with silk head squares and other Black Market tit-bits. Another shows a two-seater car with a false back to its boot. The false back opened when the driver pulled on a wire leading to the dashboard. It was this over-ingenuous pull-wire which gave the game away. A Waterguard, noticing it, uncovered a load of cloth which, but for his vigilance, would have been landed and driven away by a confederate stevedore.

Post-war circumstances revived the need for sea patrols in acute form. Officials speak of converted landing craft, of motor launches and other small vessels suitable for beaching, which are shuttled by Black Market agents between lonely coastal points on either side of the Channel and North Sea.

They are said to run at night without lights and their outward cargoes are cocoa beans, coffee beans and other food stuffs on which excise duty has not been paid. Inward contraband is the usual range - silks, wines, liqueurs, watches, cameras, binoculars, etc. The Waterguards are bent on putting an end to these and other current forms of evasion. Accordingly, H.M. Commissioners have provided them with a patrol vessel which is already carrying out missions in British coastal waters under radio direction from Customs Headquarters.

One hundred and forty-three tons nett, it was built to Admiralty specification and commissioned in 1943 as the minesweeper "Benbecula". On her bridge are two searchlights and radar is to be installed as well. Between them, these aids should make it possible to pick up unlighted smuggling craft at night. If the smuggling craft happen to have a high turn of speed, it can be chased in a speed boat. Owing to its shallow draught, this speed boat will be useful for nosing about in remote creeks and inlets.

The other day I went with this new patrol vessel from Gravesend to the estuary forts

of the Nore, and back. Waterguards and crew alike were very much on the alert. Every craft that came in sight, from row-boats up, was raked with binoculars and discussed out of mouth-corners, with narrowed eyes.

Actually, we encountered nothing which called for 'rummage', and the Waterguards did not conceal their disappointment. By way of consoling themselves they showed me various devices they use - the little mirror and torch useful for looking into crannies and around corners inaccessible to the unaided eye; the jemmy which pries up engine room plates; the tuck-stick, or giant skewer, which is inserted into bales of wool, mountains of bunker coal and the like. The tuck-stick, by the way, is delicately manipulated. The Waterguards do not lunge about with it like pig-stickers. Immediately the point comes in contact with any foreign object concealed in wool or coal, the searcher has all the evidence he needs. Bunker coal readily gives the smuggler's secret away. A slope of coal under which something has been concealed never looks right. The surface is fatally disturbed.

#### SMUGGLING INCREASING.

The increase in smuggling since the war is a matter of lively concern to H.M. Commissioners. Before 1939 it was considered a serious matter if seizures of contraband exceeded six thousand cases in a year. By 1945-6 (March 31 to April 1) the figures had jumped to over sixteen thousand. The figures for 1946-47 are not out yet, but it is known there has been a further substantial increase both in seizures and fines. The causes are obvious. Goods are in short supply - and Black Market prices are tempting.

Those who are exasperated by long waits at Customs counters, followed possibly by a rummage of their bags, should reflect that the Waterguard is the first line of defence against internal offences which, if unchecked, would quickly become an economic and social menace.