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## They Watch Our Coasts Day and Night

### **WATERGUARDS**

Smuggling is increasing and the task of meeting this challenge falls upon the Preventive Branch of Customs and Excise which is now busy training recruits

A further upward leap in contraband goods is expected when the Commissioners of Customs and Excise issue their annual report next month. The reasons for the jump are many – the natural aftermath of the war, with all kinds of goods in short supply; vast traffic movements across the world; inflated values; and the ready market for watches, jewellery, silk stocking, cosmetics, perfumery, wines and currency.

And so a watch must be kept upon every inch of our coastline and upon the air over Britain by day and by night. Although the Waterguard Service proudly traces its history back through the centuries to 1671, it believes in keeping up to date. This year it has completed a vast reorganisation scheme, bringing the divisions into which the country is divided for customs purposes up to fifteen by the addition of new establishments at Harwich, Bristol, Salford and Belfast. It was partly because so many new aerodromes sprang up during the war that added plans were thought necessary.

There is no doubt that air traffic presents a big problem for the men of the Waterguard today. But they are tackling it with confidence, and their seizures have been both varied and spectacular. At an Essex airfield 1,000 bottles of champagne; at a Midland airport, 700 watches; at Croydon, smuggled banknotes worth £4,201 and bearer securities valued at £2,280.

New methods are being worked out to fight the smuggling menace. Established only a few months ago at Vintry House, Southwark Bridge, London, the Waterguard Training Centre is busily training recruits or giving refresher courses to some of its younger members who have just been released from the Services.

Instructors are all senior Waterguard men, Chief Preventive Officers of long service and practical experience. Their knowledge is being passed on scientifically to the men who will soon be pitting their wits against the smuggler of tomorrow. Early in their training, recruits are taken to the Customs Museum, City Gate House, Finsbury Square; and there past, present and future become blended as Waterguard men of tomorrow learn of the triumphs of the old Waterguard men – triumphs of patience, vigilance, alertness, diligence and resource.

It is an axiom of the Waterguard that there are new methods of concealment. In the Museum, the students see the many ingenious devices that have been tried out by smugglers. The fact that they now repose in the Museum is proof of their futility. These exhibits cannot be photographed because they might give a younger generation of smugglers ideas.

Later, students are given a taste of practical experience. They go to Tilbury and take a turn in handling passengers' baggage. It is impressed upon them that though they will one day be commissioned officers, armed with wide powers of search, they are also public servants whose responsibility it will be to help travellers through the irksome formality of "getting past the Customs" as speedily and as pleasantly as possible.

They also cruise in one of the Customs launches off Gravesend, which is the gateway to the Port of London. Perhaps, when a ship is brought to the official boarding station, the students may go aboard with a rummage crew.

A normal rummage crew consists of a Preventive Officer and three assistants who are empowered to search any part of a ship for contraband. At first sight, the task of searching a big steamer, with so many recesses where goods can be hidden, appears overwhelming. But years of experience, plus specialised training, have reduced the job to a fine art. The student notes that the old hands do not waste time in searching a ship from stem to stern. They go unerringly to certain points - the "whys" are imparted to the student later at the training centre.

The London Division of the Waterguard is an extensive one, taking in the Medway as well as the Thames and includes Heathrow, Croydon and Northolt airports besides numerous scattered airfields. Because much of his future duty will be concerned with air traffic, the student is taken to Heathrow, where a permanent Customs office has been established. There, he gets an insight into the rummaging of a modern airliner.

His instructors tell him that goods have been found in parts of aircraft which correspond to similar structural parts of ships; that airmen have been known to try wheezes that were favoured by sailors a hundred years ago. *It is just another example of past knowledge coming into play to meet present problems.*

Back in the training centre much book knowledge and scientific data is needed and then baggage examination tests are given, with an instructor acting as passenger and doing his best to outwit the students who have to search his luggage for contraband. The tricks that the instructor practises on such occasions are all based on known instances of smuggling.

Observation in Sherlock Holmes tradition led to a capture when two ships lay side by side, one a coastwise vessel, the other just in from the Continent. A rummage crew was approaching the Continental trader just as passengers came streaming off the other ship. A Preventive Officer noted that one of the passengers seemed to be screening his face with a handkerchief. He kept on as if he had noticed nothing and then, turning suddenly, saw that that man was not a passenger but a member of the crew. The man had tacked himself on to the passengers because he knew that, having come from the coastal vessel, they would not have to pass Customs. He was loaded with contraband.

Then observation led to a seizure of a very different kind when a Preventive Officer, studying a woman passenger in the baggage hall at a south coast port, was struck by the fact that her handsome fur coat appeared too big for her. "I know that if my wife bought anything as expensive as that she'd jolly well see that it fitted!" he thought, so he signalled to his assistant to pay extra attention to this passenger when she reached the desk. The assistant did so and the fact that the woman's luggage contained no clothing comparable in quantity to that fur coat confirmed suspicion. The woman proved to be a runner, employed to get the coat past the Customs.

The fruits of an interesting capture are now displayed to students at Vintry House. A Preventive Officer, strolling by the river, noticed that a baulk of timber did not flow with the ebbing tide. He found that the wood had been anchored to mark a submerged watertight canister, crammed with contraband.

Alertness on the part of another Preventive Officer led to the unmasking of a plot to smuggle perfume on a considerable scale. The smugglers had faked a suitcase with a false bottom and as the perfume was packed in very flat bottles he was able to stow away some dozens without appreciably altering the internal depth of the case. But he was very wily and left two bottles loose among his luggage to mask the aroma of his hidden hoard. Unluckily for him, he came up against an officer who realised that the perfume that arose when the case was opened was rather too strong to come from two small sealed bottles.

Psychology plays a big part in detection, which is why you often see Preventive Officers strolling about in a baggage hall, apparently idle, when their colleagues on the bench may be working at high pressure. Their trained eyes are studying the crowds, noting the reactions of certain passengers; for even veteran smugglers have been known to give themselves away by gestures or mannerisms, by being over-fussy, over-genial or just a little too talkative.

All these things, and many more, the students learn on their way through the training centre. And when they set forth, eager to put their knowledge into practice, another session begins and newly enrolled pupils, gathered for their initiation, gain their first insight as an instructor tells them " The Waterguard Service is continuous ....."

*In the magazine three weeks later, two letters were published which read as follows:*

'Your article on the Customs and Excise Waterguards, showed clearly and exactly the methods employed by the men who defeat the smugglers. But . . . I was an engineer on foreign-going tankers for many years and I seemed unusually to be the unfortunate one to accompany them on their inspection of the ship.

I had to open every pump case from fo'c'sle to stern gland, and replace them afterwards. I've sometimes been a day late going on leave. Pity they couldn't have done the job themselves.' – *R.G.Thomson, 7 Pittodsie Place, Aberdeen.*

'The article on the "Waterguards" did not mention the "sword" which they use when searching a ship. This is a long pointed steel rod with a groove in it. It is used for probing bags of grain, sugar etc. The groove catches a sample of lose tobacco or similar contraband which might be hidden.' – *C.Hill, 10 Pendine Road, Ely, Cardiff.*