

MORE ABOUT THE "CUSTOMS EVACUEES"

In the wartime Waterguard

AFTER A FEW months duty at the Clyde Emergency Anchorages, the Waterguard evacuees from London, under the supervision of Mr Morgan J. Griffiths, Wtgd. Surveyor, operated a reasonably efficient control of all the convoy shipping coming and going. It was not easy, because of the great length of coastline on the north side of the Clyde near the Tail of the Bank, and along both shores of the lochs, each several miles long. During the early months of 1941 the wailing of air-raid sirens began to disturb the night hours. From Norway, the German bombers searched for the torpedo factory at Gourcock, which was situated close to a built up area. In fact, considerably more damage was done to people's homes than to the factory. The bombing attacks grew in power and frequency, and on the nights of May 4 and 5 the Boche mounted a knock-out attack on the town of Greenock, dropping 450 tons of bombs on the shipyards and other industrial areas. This caused a mass exodus from the town, thousands of people fleeing to the heather hills, including myself, with my wife and two daughters. For two nights we did this, together with several other Waterguard officers and their families. The enemy dropped many land-mines by parachute, and having delayed action fuses, much damage was caused long after the bombers had left. Two or three days later, I was walking on to Princes Pier at 8 am. when I saw a small craft vanish in the midst of a huge explosion 400 yards from the pier. The six men aboard were disintegrated into fragments which could not be picked up. It was low tide, and the craft struck a landmine which lay beneath the surface in shallow water. That day, the CinC for the area issued instructions for all craft to keep to the deep water channels.

None of us knew where these were, and the steersmen didn't appear to know either. It took me many days when afloat, to get rid of the dread thought of sudden fragmentation.

In October, the Wtgd. Supt. Glasgow sent for me, and as a result I soon found myself in Bangor, Co. Down. One of the objects of the post was to curb Customs infringements by the RN stationed there. I soon discovered that 23 Wrens on the staff were regularly drawing $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of tobacco each fortnight. As, at that time, they were not eligible for a tobacco allowance, I forthwith informed the local CO that I was taking the necessary steps to stop the Wrens' allowance. From that moment onwards, any mention of my name to the naval staff was sufficient to call forth a torrent of foul language. If looks could have killed, I was a dead duck. However, time passed, and friendly overtures began to be made again by all and sundry, in the manner that Customs officers know well.

I had no office, and Mr David Wilson, Wtgd. Surveyor, Belfast, arranged that I should have part of a Nissen hut on Central Pier when it was built. The Navy wanted me to have the end looking shoreward, but I insisted on having the seaward end, with a window put in so that I would have a clear view of any landings on the pier from any craft. I had a job to get that little window, but in the end I managed it. In the meantime I succeeded in getting a payment of 12/6 per week for my landlady for the use of her front room as a Customs office. She was delighted. It was at Bangor that I first tasted porter, and at ninepence a pint it was jolly good stuff. Bangor lies at the mouth of the Belfast Lough and Carrickfergus about 8 miles away on the north side. Eight miles of open

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sea in the winter time is no joke, and as convoy assemblies increased I was continually afloat no matter how bad the weather. Many sea captains refused to go ashore in rough weather. Cases of accidental drowning were quite common, and on one occasion, I witnessed the end of four Bangor pilots (ex fishermen) 200 yards off the end of the pier. The pilots should have gone up the Lough into smoother water and taken the train from Belfast to Bangor. Two of the bodies were washed up at Portpatrick near Stranraer and the fourth was found within a few yards of a Bangor dance hall on the night a social function was in progress in aid of the pilots' widows.

I had no staff except two CPMS who were employed on their usual coastal duties. Being the Immigration Officer also attracted responsibilities, for quite frequently odd lots of passengers were landed having arrived from all parts of the world. Another occasional duty that fell to me was the appointment of a ship's captain in extreme circumstances, such as sudden death or illness. Such procedure became necessary in cases where the ship was in an outward bound convoy about to sail and the owners were unable to produce a new captain in time. In this event, I appointed the Chief Officer captain, endorsed the ship's log accordingly, duly authenticated by my signature and Customs stamp. I used to get a kick out of this.

What little time I had for recreation often found me aboard a fishing boat trawling for scallops, and in the open season I took part in salmon fishing with the use of a Seine net, a fascinating experience.

Early in 1944 two American battleships, *Arkansas* and *Texas*, with an escort of several destroyers, under the command of Rear Admiral Taylor, arrived off Bangor Bay. Both the capital ships had been sunk at Pearl Harbour in December, 1941, but had been refloated and made battleworthy. From my little window I had a commanding view of the buzz of activity which started immediately the fleet arrived.

Big cars were landed in the matter of minutes, and craft of all sizes began to ply to and from the fleet. Impeccably

dressed naval officers drove away on their business, and very soon loads of vegetables and other provisions arrived on the pier for shipment. I anxiously scrutinised my copy of "Foreign Government Vessels" but could find nothing to assist me in considering what Customs action if any was necessary. Commonsense told me that America was our principal ally and that every possible assistance should be given them. Three days later, the Admiral's executive officer, Commander's rank, called to see me. He explained that for three days he had toured the bonded warehouses in Belfast in order to get a dozen cases of whisky for the Admiral, but without success.

Could I assist in any way? It so happened that Mr Lett, the Higher Collector for N. Ireland, lived in Bangor, and on Sunday mornings he was in the habit of strolling down to my office for a chat. I knew at once that he would give ear to the Admiral's request, notwithstanding the absence of any permissive instructions in the Excise Officer's codes. Mr Lett at once gave the necessary instructions, and the following day the Admiral's EO called to tell me that the Admiral wished me to join him at dinner that evening, aboard the *Arkansas*. And so, I accepted the kind invitation, as well as the Admiral's thanks for the small part I played in getting the whisky. After dinner, a junior officer was deputed to show me round the ship. He took me to the candy storeroom where he estimated it contained no less than 500 tons of sweetmeat for the fleet. He said, "If an enemy torpedo hit us in the middle of this lot we would come to no harm."

That same night a fierce storm blew up, and a large naval picket boat weighing several tons, broke away from a battleship and was washed ashore not far from Central Pier. Soon after daylight a huge American army vehicle with lifting crane, picked up the picket boat, carried it round to the pier and neatly placed it in the water, the whole operation taking barely an hour. The co-operation between the American navy and army amazed me, and all done with such little fuss.

Before I finish, one amusing incident deserves a mention. During the storm a small coastal vessel loaded with chests of tea, foundered near a small seaside

village, and most of the cases were washed ashore. I was sent along to investigate, and on arrival in the village I went straight to the one and only grocer shop. "Sold any tea lately?" I said, and the grocer, giving me a furtive look replied, "Not bloody likely; and the way things are going

I don't expect to sell any for years." I told him who I was, and pointing through the window to a long row of cottages, he said, "You'll find all the tea you want in those cottages." I did. Fifty-three cases I managed to recover.

GEORGE COPPARD
