



Canadian Merchant Navy Sr R/O Henry Hamor Gardner

The war could not have been fought without the steady flow of supplies transported to every theatre of war on merchant ships. Ask yourself: how did all the military personnel get to those war zones? How did they get their food, smokes, boots and clothing? How did all the military equipment get there? Everything from a carton of cigarettes to one thousand pound bombs was carried on merchant ships.

From the Foreword to 'East of Suez'.

Hamor was born in 1924 in Toronto, Ontario, after his father joined the Ontario Provincial Police Force. As the baby of the family, Hamor attended six elementary schools and two different high schools and he and his sisters coined a phrase for each first day at a new school; it became known as 'Stare Day'. He then worked for nine months at the Toronto shipyard prior to enrolling in a full time radio operators' course at the Radio College of Canada. Hamor graduated in December 1942 and joined the Montreal Merchant Navy Manning Pool. He then sailed as a radio operator for the Park Steamship Company Ltd, on board the *Tweedsmuir Park*, *Kelowna Park*, *Noranda Park* and *Willowdale Park*. A copy of his memoir 'East of Suez' is on loan to the Centre and covers the period November 1943 to May 1945. Here we are pleased to feature extracts from the memoir, which is an interesting and often entertaining look at life in the Canadian merchant navy:



Hamor Gardner's Suez shore leave pass

It was mid November 1943, when Buck Lassaline arrived back on board the *S/S Tweedsmuir Park* at Saint John, New Brunswick. I had returned the day before. We had been on leave for a couple of weeks after a rather rough trip to Hull, on the east coast of England. Jack Waines, our Chief Radio Operator had told me earlier that the word Karachi, had been seen on a large crate being lowered into number four hold. It had to be better than heading over to Blighty again, especially that time of year. We reflected on the horrendous Arctic storm that had decimated our convoy south of Iceland, on top of the U-boat alerts during a spell of good weather. We had thought we were old salts before experiencing that blow. We were sea sick for several days.

We were going to miss this North Atlantic winter. Those of us who had been home on leave were happy to be clear of land again. Except for Peter, the Lancashire lad; Captain Robinson, the mates and engineers were Yorkshiremen. All had been at sea since the beginning of the war and had their fill of dodging U-boat attacks. A trip to their home port in Britain was a rarity. Escorted by a couple of old, four stack destroyers from the moth-balled U.S. fleet, our convoy was soon across the Gulf of Maine and around Cape Cod. We ended up anchored at Hampstead Roads, off Norfolk, Virginia, awaiting the arrival of dozens of other ships to form up a convoy destined for Gibraltar.

The *Tweedsmuir Park* swung at her anchor for ten long days. There was no shore leave. Poker games went on almost continuously, many took to shooting craps, books were read avidly, and



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letters written to the folks and sweethearts back home. The waiting game finally ended. We were on our way. Crossing the Atlantic at that latitude is usually an enjoyable experience from a weather aspect. Our ship was just another one in a large convoy spread out from horizon to horizon. It is much like being in a huge crowd where you don't know anyone. You have the feeling of being alone, yet being in a throng.

We seldom knew what might be going on miles away on either side of the convoy where the escort vessels prowled. When the "karrump" of depth charges could be seen, heard and felt shaking the ship we didn't know if they were onto a submarine or a whale. Eighteen days after departing Hampstead Roads we were again at anchor, only this time in the lee of Gibraltar. In less than a day we were part of another convoy beginning a tricky run through the Mediterranean. Many of the ships in this convoy were destined for Italian or North African ports. Although the Italian campaign was well underway, the Mediterranean was still a bit dicey. A west bound convoy we passed lost two ships to aircraft in one attack. We had smoke screens laid down a couple of times. A few U-boats were still prowling around the Med, but what stirred up the gastric juices more than anything else was the threat of mines. That is what we were doing on Christmas Day, 1943. Playing follow the leader through a large mine field off the island of Malta. The known mine fields were bad enough, the unknown mine fields and drifting mines were a constant worry as we headed east for Port Said and the Suez Canal.

The *Tweedsmuir Park* needed bunkering at Port Said. Large coal barges were tied up three abreast on either side of our ship. Four extremely long squared timbers were hoisted into place, running from the central barges on either side up onto our port and starboard bulwarks where the bunker hatches were located. It was late in the afternoon when the bunkering began. Canvas and woven baskets were filled with coal, then hoisted onto the shoulders of men, women and a few children. They had dumped six hundred tons of coal into our bunkers by the time dawn broke through.

That prodigious output of work by the descendants of Egypt's pyramid builders may have been commonplace to them, but not to young, wide-eyed Canadians. Observing those workers made a lasting impression on me.

All the time bunkering was going on, a lot of business was going on over the side of the ship. Dozens of bumboats were continuously jostling for good positions, especially around the stern. With New Years Eve looming large next day, and with no booze available on board, negotiations for Egyptian Rhum quickly took precedent over souvenirs. I wangled two bottles for a pair of torn pants I was going to toss overboard.

Next day we steamed through the northern section of the canal and anchored overnight in the Great Bitter Lakes. Out of Suez and south through the Red Sea, a rivalry developed in the stoke hole between the three watches. As a result of some loud mouthed bragging, bets were wagered about which watch could log the most knots. The betting was simple. The losing black gang had to buy a round of drinks next time ashore. Each time I had to go into the boiler room to get distilled water for our wet batteries, I marvelled at the stamina of those men.



At Port Said - L to R Jack Waines
Sr R/O, Hamor Gardner Jr R/O,
Armand (Buck) Lassaline Jr R/O



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Standing well out of their way, I would watch as they stoked those giant boilers with unending amounts of coal. An even worse job in my mind was that of the coal passer. Those poor devils knew no peace, there was no real respite for them except when they fell into their bunks, exhausted beyond belief. There was one passer to each watch, and his job was to keep the stokers well supplied with coal.

We proceeded south through the Red Sea, anchoring at the port of Aden for a few hours. It was primarily for the captain and Jack Waines to go ashore to be briefed by the Royal Navy about submarine activity in the Arabian Sea. Jack received instructions about keeping watch on certain frequencies to receive updated information.

Off we sailed alone through the placid waters of the Gulf of Aden, skirting the desolate appearing shores of southern Arabia. Further eastward we sailed past the foreboding cliffs of Muscat and Oman. Our relatively routine life on board ship ended when we arrived at Karachi, our first port of call where we were to discharge cargo.

We were outward bound for Bombay two days later. On our third day in port we were lined up to be vaccinated against smallpox. An epidemic was raging in central India. The only time Canadian merchant seamen were given "shots" against specific diseases was when their ship happened to in some foreign port where a preventable disease was on the rampage. These vaccinations did some good, but in many cases they were too late. After about a week's hunting, an oasis was found in the heart of an exclusive residential district of Bombay. It was an impressive looking establishment surrounded by a high brick wall. We were to learn this establishment was, under normal circumstances, the private domain of British army officers. With so many of those privileged few being engaged in more serious pursuits fighting a war in Burma, the rule was bent for us.

The truth of the matter likely lay in the fact that business was slow. Hidden speakers carried modern, western dance music continuously. If no guests were present upon our arrival, we never had long to wait for the young hostesses to appear togged out in a variety of appealing evening dresses. Dancing was free, almost. You were expected to treat your dancing partner to a drink or two. Whatever was in their drinks they were expensive. They may have been drinking coloured water.

It was correspondingly expensive to do more than dance or drink. A short time upstairs cost thirty rupees. If an all night stay was desired, it cost one hundred rupees. On a radio operator's pay of \$109.00 per month, I doubt if many Sparks made it up those wood panelled stairs to sample the mysteries above. We made three visits to Madam Susan's during our two-week stay in Bombay. She got to know us, and welcomed us like we were her own sons back home for a visit. There must have been something about Buck and I that brought out the motherly instinct in such women. Many fascinating hours were spent out on the verandah with Madam Susan. We discussed the world at large, but our own personal lives in particular. We enjoyed those quiet, interesting evenings with her, and also with her entourage.

During our stay at Bombay, the port sports director talked us into playing soccer against a team from a British merchant ship. Few of us had played soccer except for half-hearted attempts at high school. It sounded like fun, let's do it. We had no proper gear for playing any sport. We were a ragtag gang of odd balls when we tumbled off a bus at the designated playing field. The Brits were togged out in flashy uniforms, and obviously had been doing this sort of thing for some time. They had known ahead of time what to expect from a bunch of



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colonials. They accepted us as we were in our mix of work boots, running shoes, work a day shorts or long pants, and shirts of many styles and colours.

Introductions over, the local officials got the game underway. And what a game it was! We weren't used to racing all over the place after an illusive ball. We soon had an argument over the use of substitutes which is a no-no in soccer. We played on using subs, ignoring the referee's whistle. The Brits finally okayed the idea after seeing how out of shape we Canucks were when it came to playing their game. What a relief it was when the game came to an end. The score was somewhat lopsided in the Brits' favour.

That game was played on a Sunday. We managed to struggle through two more games, one on Wednesday evening and the third on Saturday. We lost again on Wednesday but we were getting better. By Saturday we were in various stages of pain with blistered feet and cramped muscles. My legs were so badly knotted with charley horses I couldn't run. Having tried different guys in goal, it was decided to give me a shot at that position hoping my legs would loosen up.

How we won that last game goodness only knows. Maybe the Brits felt sorry for us. I did make some good saves, but most of the credit belonged to a gang of young kids who crowded around the back of the goal net. They knew their soccer, and heeding their advice, I was stopping shots from all angles. They cheered the crazy Canucks when the final whistle blew. We treated them to sweets from one of the many vendors spotted around the park. The Brits were good sports, although they may have looked upon the three games as practice rather than competition. The week had turned out to be a lot of fun, once our aches and pains subsided.

With ship's business done in Bombay, the *Tweedsmuir Park* set sail for Calcutta. The leg to Colombo was one of the rare times we steamed in convoy while out east. Our naval escort consisted of two seagoing, Indian Navy tugs. We hoped they had a few depth bombs on board if push came to shove.

Canadian merchant ships did not sail unarmed. In fact, ships like the *Tweedsmuir* were very well armed. Each ship carried ten, Royal Canadian Navy gunners. We had large guns mounted fore and aft. Browning machine guns were located on the second deck on either side of the bridge. We had a vicious weapon on the afterdeck. It was a rocket launcher. It was designed to fire five rockets at a time. When these small rockets were fired, they trailed fine steel wire for hundreds of yards in the hope of snaring a dive bomber or perhaps an aircraft wanting to launch a torpedo.

Nothing untoward happened as we steamed south in so far as subs were concerned. The convoy dispersed as it neared Ceylon (Sri Lanka), when most of the ships headed for Colombo. We kept on toward the south of the island.

Almost every night, when radio signals carried tremendous distances, we would pick up war time distress signals . . . SSSS SSSS SSSS. The transmitting operators sometimes had time to give the ship's position, some were thousands of miles away in the Indian Ocean. It was something else altogether when such signals originated from ships in the Bay of Bengal or Arabian Sea. There were few, if any, naval patrols, and no air patrols except near Ceylon. If a ship had been hit somewhere ahead, we could only cross our fingers, lower the cumbersome torpedo nets, and sail on pretty lady, sail on.



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Dragging those steel nets through the water suspended from booms stretching out on either side, did provide a measure of safety from torpedoes. They also cut a ship's speed down at least two knots. Park ships were rated as ten knot vessels, in reality it was more like nine. A decision to lower the torpedo nets was never taken lightly. It was a slow and difficult job for the deck crew.

While sailing on our own in those waters, we often sighted a drifting lifeboat or life raft. It never was taken for granted they were empty, even when no sign of life could be seen through binoculars. Depending on reported sub activity, we would steer out of our way to bring the boat or raft alongside to see if it was empty. Each time this occurred it left us wondering what had happened to the men who had been in them, and to their ships.

Eleven days after leaving Bombay we sighted the approaches to the mouth of the Hooghly River, one of the main tributaries of the mighty Ganges River. After a wait of more than one hour, a pilot boat came alongside and a Hooghly River pilot climbed aboard to con our ship up the ninety-mile run to Calcutta. Ocean vessels usually tied up at the Kiddepore Docks. After considerable pushing, shoving and other manoeuvres by harbour tugs, our starboard side was warped up to the crumbling concrete dock. The mates made sure all rat guards were securely in place on each of our hawsers, not wanting any of those super Calcutta beasts on board.

The ruckus of docking was hardly completed when the port doctor made his way to the skipper's office. He and his assistants wanted to conduct a "short arm" inspection of the crew before any of them were permitted ashore. The crew was lined up and duly examined, no venereal disease was found.

Dysentery paid us a visit. For the best part of a week I did not stray far from my bunk. I would no sooner lie down in a state of utter exhaustion when I would have to struggle to my feet, and stagger to the head located on the far side of the ship from our cabin. The port doctor tried talking me into going to the hospital. I managed to dodge that suggestion. I had visions of being left at Calcutta. We had discharged our cargo of war materials, and taken on more crates of tea and bales of jute. We took our leave of the Kiddepore Docks, and soon were downbound in the grip of the Hooghly River's current. We were outward bound for Canada.

It took the best part of six days for the *Tweedsmuir* to reach Colombo. Once again we were dock side, only in a much better looking harbour than Calcutta. Colombo has one of the prettiest harbours to be found anywhere. It looks like it is more or less man made, being completely enclosed on the west side by an impressive concrete breakwater.

Once clear of the harbour security gate the heart of the city was only a few hundred yards away. A walk up the main street led past many interesting stores including several dispensing jewelry. Although I did not know beans about gems, I did end up purchasing a few from Dean Ismail Sons. I managed to keep the receipt for my one and only dive into the gem market. It reads: 1 Garnet - 12 rupees; 1 Tourmaline - 8 rupees; 1 Topaz - 6 rupees and 1 Ruby -16 rupees. A total of 42 rupees, \$14.00 Canadian at the time. It turned out to be a good investment.

A favourite spot to visit was the Crossroads Club. This service-oriented club was run by the American Red Cross. You could enjoy a pleasant evening dancing and taking part in other fun activities. I was there one evening when they had a pie eating contest. I always thought that I was a fairly good pie eater, but I was no match for the other contestants. I started laughing so much at all the antics going on that I couldn't eat worth a darn.



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We enjoyed our brief stay at Colombo. In fact, many of us were a tad sorry to see the last of our cargo being loaded. Those thoughts soon dissipated when we were under way.

Our run to Aden went off smoothly despite the warnings given by the powers that be about submarine activity in the Arabian Sea. There still were a few distress signals coming through the ether during night watches, but thankfully, none in our neck of the woods.

We made a brief stop at Aden when the old man and Jack went ashore to check in with the Royal Navy blokes. Captain Robinson received orders to call at Port Sudan to pick up a small amount of cargo. On the return voyages from India, the managing companies of Canadian Park ships could arrange their own cargoes and therefore visits were made to a few odd ports. Outbound voyages from Canada were another matter. Those cargoes were exclusively war related.

A few days later we were berthed at Port Sudan on the west coast of the Red Sea. Our ship was a bit of a novelty. We were told that the *Tweedsmuir Park* was the first Canadian flag ship to call there.

The next port of call was Jidda, Saudi Arabia, then the Suez Canal, before docking at Port Said.

Within a few hours of our arrival a convoy of British army trucks appeared. They were lined up in neat rows on the dock waiting to be hoisted aboard one by one. We were going to have the company of a bunch of British army "Desert Rats." There were army vehicles of every description, from jeeps to five ton jobs.

Hoisting them aboard one at a time using our jumbo booms, and accommodating them on our limited deck space turned into an interesting operation. Each vehicle had to be securely fastened to deck lugs using steel cables and turnbuckles. There was little or no room left on deck by the time they squeezed the last of the lorries on board. Along with every truck came their crews; at least thirty Tommies would be sailing to Algiers with us.

With our coal bunkers topped off we finally got underway. The British soldiers were lined up along the railings to watch the proceedings. They were happy to be heading west after spending years in the North African desert. They reasoned that Algiers would at least seem nearer to home. The arrangement was for the soldiers to sleep in their vehicles and use their own rations . . . the best laid plans of mice and men!

The relatively calm Mediterranean began acting up on our first day out from Port Said. When the ship started doing a bit of pitching and rolling, many of the Tommies wished they were back on the shifting sands of the Sahara.

Our gunners were required to stand extra lookout watches on that run. The captain wanted a pair of eyes up on monkey island, to back up the seaman's in the crows nest. It was mine country and once again pulses quickened at the prospect of our steel plates brushing against a mine's innocent looking spines.

By the second day at sea the Tommies who wanted to eat were wolfing down ship's grub. The chief steward did not mind, he was keeping tabs on it and would send in the appropriate itemized account for the company to sort out with the military brass. We bid adieu to our soldier buddies. They were to stay around Algiers for a while before heading for Italy. They were a well-fed lot as they drove away in their lorries with their own rations still intact. It was



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around that time when reality began to sink in. The chief steward and local ship's chandler could not locate many ship's stores, at any price.

We steamed merrily along to Gibraltar with a group of ships destined to become the nucleus of an Atlantic convoy. The numbers increased substantially while we were swinging at anchor overnight in the shadow of Gibraltar's famous rock. Shortly after first light, we were on our way west across the Atlantic under the guardianship of the United States Navy.

We were at sea and had to make do with what food we had on board. We learned to appreciate that rice could fill the aching void even when excess pounds were slipping off our frames. We were nineteen days steaming from Gibraltar to Saint John. The meals really took a nose dive during the final week. I lost a good ten pounds crossing the pond on that trip.

When our convoy was approaching the United States, Captain Robinson had us signal the Commodore's ship with the Aldis lamp. The skipper wanted permission for our ship to break off with the vessels bound for New York so that we pick up some grub. Our predicament was emphasized in the message. The Commodore's reply? No. Proceed to destination.

We arrived at Saint John two days later. It was early evening and we had to lie at anchor for the night. The word of our plight was relayed to the ship's agent who had a crate of eggs and a dozen loaves of bread sent out by launch.

Many of us paid off the *Tweedsmuir Park* next day, to disappear to the far corners of Canada on leave after our seven-month jaunt. Buck and I shared the train journey to Toronto. We stopped over at Montreal for one day to re-register at the Merchant Navy Manning Pool. Buck continued on to the family farm near Goderich to resume chasing the local girls.

It was mid September 1944, when I checked in at the Merchant Navy Manning Pool in Montreal. When called up by the Manning Pool, I never knew what kind of ship I would be assigned to, or where it may happen to be. This time I didn't have far to go to find my new ship. The newly constructed 10,000 ton dry cargo vessel, *S/S Noranda Park*, was lying at the Dominion Vickers Shipyard in Montreal waiting for the balance of her crew to be signed on. I had the heady title of Chief Radio Officer for a second time. I had sailed as Chief Sparks earlier that summer on the ill fated, 4700 ton, *S/S Kelowna Park*. I boarded the *Kelowna Park* at the builder's yard at Pictou, Nova Scotia. Within a month the *Kelowna Park* was hard aground with her back broken. While climbing up the *Noranda Park's* gangway with my gear, I hoped for better times while sailing on this new ship.

After checking in with Captain Patchell, I soon was chin-wagging with my two junior operators. They were first trippers, whereas I was an old sea dog, one month past my twentieth birthday.

Joe McVeigh was from Orillia. He was in his mid twenties, and his six-foot build suggested he was no stranger to physical work. Tom Horn hailed from east Toronto. He had a medium to stocky build and a ready smile. I was relieved at the prospect of having two juniors who were



Tom Horn, Jr R/O from *Noranda Park* who took the photos.



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enthusiastic and endowed with common sense. All of the senior mates and engineers, as well as the captain, were from the United Kingdom. They were long time employees of the Cunard White Star Line that been designated as the ship's operating company by the Park Steamship Company, a Crown corporation.

The fifth, or deck engineer, was a Canadian from Toronto. His name was Jim Baxter, and little did I know at the time how Jim was destined to play an important role in my future. I met his youngest sister Patricia in 1945. We were married in September, 1946.

There was plenty of work for the three of us to do while the ship was being loaded. Tom and Joe soon learned there were many little things about operating a ship's radio room not taught in school.

I drilled them on the tricks of raising and lowering the main and emergency aerials. The wet battery locker was another unknown even though they had been taught the basics of maintaining batteries. I enjoyed introducing them to the noise and heat of the engine and boiler rooms while showing them where to get distilled water for our wet batteries. Although the *Noranda Park* had oil fired boilers, the stokers still were a breed of men unto themselves. We also had a thorough inventory of tubes, spare parts, log books, tools to bring up to snuff before we sailed. Rumours about our destination began to fly thick and fast as our Plimsoll marks sank deeper into the murky waters of the St. Lawrence River. No doubt Captain Patchell knew well in advance, we only found out the day before our scheduled departure from Montreal. We were headed for India. We were loaded to the hilt, including a full deck cargo, with everything from small arms, ammunition, bombs, tanks, trucks, crated aircraft to food, all destined for the Burma front.

The majority of the ships in our convoy were destined for a run across to the United Kingdom in a larger convoy. These ships anchored in Halifax harbour. We were in and out of Halifax in a matter of hours, and on our way south alone. Due to reported U-boat activity off New York we headed into the Gulf of Maine en route to the Cape Cod Canal.

From the south end of the canal we headed for New York City via Long Island Sound. We were moored at one of the most remote spots imaginable. Getting to Manhattan involved a commuter train trip, a ride on an elevated railroad and finally a few miles on the Big Apple's infamous subway. In retrospect, I realize we were ordered to tie up at that isolated location because of the volatile nature of a sizeable portion of our cargo.

During our eight-day stay in New York City, I attended a convoy conference with Captain Patchell. These conferences were attended by the captains and senior radiomen from every merchant ship destined to sail in a particular convoy. This conference was under the auspices of the United States Navy. It was interesting to meet with your counterparts from other ships and exchange information about one thing or another. We Sparks were issued a new set of code books for deciphering messages. We were given a lot of other information pertaining to weather report transmissions, and details about communicating within the convoy by visual signals. For reasons which I did not find out about until a few weeks later, our ship was issued a new U.S. Army walkie-talkie radio. The unit was a novelty to us. The radio code books and other secret communication information we had on board ship were kept locked in a perforated metal box in the radio room. The USN officer briefing us ended up his spiel with a touch of dry, Yankee humour by saying, "And don't forget to throw your code boxes overboard before abandoning ship."



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We sailed from New York on October 21st in a fairly large convoy. The Commodore of the convoy was a USN admiral. Convoy commodores sailed in merchant ships that were designated as such during pre-sailing conferences. Typically, such a ship would be relatively new and able to provide suitable accommodation for the commodore and his staff. This command ship normally sailed at the head of the central column of ships in a convoy.

Mid to late autumn must be the best time to sail across the Atlantic at that particular latitude. By then the hurricane season is almost past. Other than a few days of rolling seas we couldn't have ordered better weather. Like all first trippers to the tropics, Tom and Joe spent a good deal of their time between watches up in the bow. Playful dolphins were the fascination at the bow during the day.

Radio operators handled all of the visual light signals using either a hand-held Aldis lamp, or the large blinker light located up on the top bridge known as monkey island. About one week out of New York I was called to the bridge when the Commodore's ship started blinking us. The signalmen who sailed with the Commodore wanted to check out our recently acquired walkie-talkie. Having done a few practice drills on our own, it didn't take very long until we were on the air. We exchanged a few words and the test was over. I still had no idea why our ship was issued the walkie-talkie unit.

Lady luck continued to smile on us. Eighteen days after departing New York, we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar. We were barely into the Mediterranean when the Commodore's ship blinked us.

Up on monkey island, I gave him the go ahead. The message ordered us to break away from the convoy at a certain time and proceed to Oran. Our ship was to be the commodore's vessel through the Mediterranean. At Oran we were to pick up the British Commodore and his staff. What a let down when I showed the message to Captain Patchell. He gave it a cursory glance and said he had been expecting it. He had been given these instructions during the convoy conference back in New York. He was proving to be a tight lipped captain. Why we had been issued a walkie-talkie was no longer a mystery.



Eastbound Mediterranean convoy,
taken from *S/S Noranda Park*.

Our anchor had hardly reached the bottom of Oran harbour when a deeply loaded launch came alongside. Up our Jacob's ladder scrambled Rear Admiral Benson, Royal Navy, followed quickly by the rest of his staff. The Royal Navy radiomen took over our radio room. They had a lot of their own portable radio equipment. We were told to take a break. If they needed us for anything, they would give us a shout. We didn't need to be told a second time. Although attacks by aircraft and submarines were becoming infrequent at that time, they still posed a danger to ships in slow moving convoys. The threat of unknown mine fields was minimal, but this was offset by the increasing number of drifting mines. Hundreds of these deadly spheres were breaking free of their rusting mooring cables to drift aimlessly around the Med. The lookouts didn't dare nod on their watches.

We got to know Admiral Benson quite well. When he could manage it, he ate with us at our table. We enjoyed his company, and hearing about his experiences during his years of service in the Royal Navy. I had envisaged an admiral in the Royal Navy as being a stuffed shirt and



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full of his own importance. Admiral Benson was just the opposite. He was a down to earth sort of man. We were sorry to see him depart at Port Said. On the other hand, we were happy to see the Royal Navy radio operators vacate our radio shack.

There was no shore leave at Port Said. We steamed through the southern end of the Great Bitter Lakes next day. We lay at anchor off the port of Suez for half a day while the skipper did some business shore side with naval types. Underway again, we were soon out of the Gulf of Suez and into the Red Sea for a five days run to Aden.

The sea treated us well. The land far to the west did not. For the best part of one day we sailed through a whistling sand storm roaring out of wastes of the Sahara Desert. The air was filled with fine particles of grit which all but obliterated the sun. It was an eerie feeling to be in the grip of a sand storm while sailing down the middle of the Red Sea. It was around noon on November 24, 1944 when our ship dropped the hook into the waters of Aden harbour for an overnight stay.

The Royal Navy was in charge of all nautical matters pertaining to the war. They wanted to see the captain and radio operator. Leaving Tom on board, Joe and I accompanied the skipper ashore in a naval launch. We were given explicit instructions about communicating with Aden every second night. The times of our transmissions and the radio frequencies to be used were staggered. The navy brass was concerned about reported submarine activity in the Arabian Sea and wanted to keep close tabs on us.

There was no convoy system. We were to sail on our own to Bombay and take our chances using long, zig-zag course changes hoping to elude any submarine endeavouring to get an accurate bearing on our ship.

Away we steamed for Bombay and seven days of absolutely perfect weather with each day a duplicate of its predecessor. One lazy afternoon I was shooting the breeze with Aldo Contenti, the lead naval gunner, and a few of his cronies. We were sitting on the starboard side of number four hatch staring out at the placid Arabian Sea. All of a sudden we all did double take when an immense, grey, glistening shape emerged from out of the deep about a quarter mile away. It was a beautiful blue whale, up to fill its gargantuan lungs with air. It was an unforgettable sight. Speaking about it afterwards we agreed that for a fraction of a second after the whale hove into view, every one of us had thought it was a surfacing submarine.

Our position reports to Aden went off without a hitch. Those naval operators were on their toes. We only had to transmit their call sign once, followed by our own secret call sign, to be given the go ahead. Approaching Bombay, the mates began asking questions about things I knew precious little about. They asked about lighthouses, pilot boats, harbour marker buoys and other matters pertaining to conning a ship into the confines of the Bombay harbour. The bits and pieces I dredged up from my scant memory weren't of much help to them.

My knowledge of Bombay was in demand from the captain on down for the first few days. Where was the best place to get a drink? Where could you get a good meal? Where there any



Aft gun *Noranda Park*, left Derrick Smith, Bosun, 3rd from right Aldo Contenti, Chief DEMS, RCNVR



good theatres in town? Where was the best place to meet ladies of night? (How would I know that?) Was there a good place to go swimming?

I let Tom and Joe have all the shore leave they wanted. They took full advantage of that freedom to make out like real tourists. They toured many of the city markets and learned to haggle like professionals. Joe and Tom found many bargains. Their shared locker space began to fill up. I escorted a few of the crew to take in the wonders of Madam Susan's establishment. The evening was enjoyably expensive. The hour I spent chatting with Madam Susan is fondly remembered. It was the last time I was to see her.

Meanwhile, the stevedores had been busy. They had unloaded a goodly portion of our destructive cargo and replaced it with tons of benign stuff like jute and tea. We sailed along down the west coast of India. We stopped for a few hours at Colombo where the skipper was briefed by the naval authorities about what was going on in the Bay of Bengal.

There was no shore leave at Colombo. Our luck was still holding. There were no reports indicating submarine sightings or ships having been sunk to the north. The all too familiar SSSS signal was heard almost nightly from ships in trouble hundreds of miles away in other waters to the south, west or east of our ship.

We arrived at Calcutta around noon on Christmas Day. After some tight maneuvering with the assistance of a couple of harbour tugs, we were snuggled up to the crumbling concrete dock immediately ahead of the *Riverdale Park*, more or less a sister ship to the *Noranda*.

They weren't going to begin unloading until Boxing Day. When the usual port shenanigans were out of the way, the crew settled down to enjoy the day. True to tradition, the cooks and stewards managed to provide a great turkey dinner for all hands. We expected Captain Patchell to unwind a trifle and make a Christmas toast with some real liquid refreshment. We should have known better. He made the toast with apple juice.

Immediately after dinner, we picked up on a rumour about booze flowing like water on the *Riverdale Park*. It wasn't too long before we were spread out in the junior radio operators' cabin on the *Riverdale* enjoying their hospitality. The evening took on a rosy glow but Boxing Day morning wasn't quite so rosy for many!

Similar to our Bombay arrangement, I let Joe and Tom have all the shore leave they wanted. They made the most of it by visiting here, there and everywhere in the city.

We were berthed at the Kiddepore Docks over New Years. By January 3, 1945, we had discharged all of the destructive hardware destined for the Burma front. We had taken on the usual cargo consisting of jute, tea and many other odds and



Colombo Harbour Jan 1945, *HMS Indefatigable*.



Derrick Smith, Bosun, in Calcutta.



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sods of Indian products. We were homeward bound and glad to see the last of the Kiddepore Docks. We were three days south of the mouth of the Hooghly River, when Joe became sick. When he asked to be relieved from standing his watch we knew there was something seriously wrong with him. Joe's fever worsened as the ship inched southward. He slipped in and out of consciousness, and was in dreadful shape a few days later when we rounded the southern tip of Ceylon. Upon our arrival at Colombo, an urgent request for a doctor was relayed to the port authorities via visual signal.

Sadly Joe died from smallpox after being transferred to hospital. The remainder of the crew began fifteen days quarantine on board ship.

The quarantine was lifted on the sixteenth day and we proceeded to a long delayed berth. It was a welcome relief for all hands to be allowed ashore. Those of us closer to Joe didn't feel like celebrating. Tom and I tried to visit Joe's grave but we couldn't get through the red tape.

Our unforgettable stay at beautiful Colombo finally ended. The eight day trip to Aden was a blur to Tom and me, as we adjusted to the prospect of standing six and six watches until we arrived back in Canada.

On February 15, 1945 the *Noranda Park* pulled away from Port Said with a grumbling crew. The engineers had no success in locating the cause of our diminished speed. The problem had been getting progressively worse since leaving Colombo. We were dashing along at a speed a little above eight knots. On that eight day trip from Port Said to Algiers we sighted and destroyed three mines that had been seen glinting innocently in the bright sunlight. Each sighting was reported to Alexandria Radio giving its location and whether it had been blown up. We in turn received information relayed through Alex Radio about mine sightings made by other ships. There was no radar on merchant ships at that time. It was all down to human eyes, keeping your fingers crossed and a few well directed prayers especially at night and during bad weather.

We were in port for six days, then with the hatches battened down for the last time, we took our leave of Algiers and embarked on the last leg of our journey.

We made an overnight stop at Oran before proceeding to Gibraltar with a few other ships. At Gibraltar we stopped only long enough to pick up a Canadian DEMS officer who had been put ashore from another ship a few weeks earlier for a stay in the hospital. We upped anchor and joined a large number of ships destined to become a west bound convoy. It was March 5, 1945. We were heading home!



Aden Harbour L to R Tom Mooney, Donkeyman; Fred Mitchell, 4th Eng; Jim Baxter, 5th Eng; Hamor Gardner, Sr R/O



View of Algiers Harbour from *Noranda Park*



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The convoy was rated at nine knots. During the first night it became clear to us that we were in a spot of bother. We couldn't keep up. We were doing our best. We were pounding away at our top speed which obviously wasn't good enough.

Around sunset a final signal was flashed to us from the rear escort vessel that had been keeping tabs on us. We were ordered to drop out of the convoy and proceed to Horta in the Azores and await further instructions.

We arrived off the town of Horta on the island of Fayal, on March 9th for what we figured would be for the first and last time.

Unfortunately it would take 2 further attempts, including meeting the full force of a frightening storm, before the *Noranda Park* joined a slower convoy.

Early next morning we sighted a small convoy heading west at a leisurely speed of seven and a half knots. Most of the ships were pre-war tramps that had somehow survived the war to that point. We didn't care. They all looked good to us. We flashed a "thank you" to our escort tug. We weren't jealous of its crew. They were heading back to Horta.

The following days were relatively uneventful except for the many zig-zag courses we had to steer when suspect sonar readings were picked up by the shepherding naval ships. Everything went smoothly until we were enveloped by an infamous Grand Bank's fog. That night we were creeping along through fog so thick it could have been cut into wedges and served on platters. Every ship had their navigation lights on which was a very rare happening during blacked out, wartime voyages. We were simply following the small stern light of the ship ahead and keeping a wary eye out for all other ships to port and starboard. It was about 2230 hours on that foggy night when I was blasted out of my chair in the shack by a crashing Morse code signal from the Commodore's vessel.

All ships emergency turn starboard forty-five degrees.

To say that all hell broke loose would be putting it mildly. Out of the dripping darkness loomed ship after ship of a fast, east bound convoy. Night lamps were blinking everywhere with blaring horns and piercing whistles sounding from every direction. Due to some quirk of fate which often holds a guiding hand over confused seamen, those lines of east and west bound ships meshed together like clockwork. The scene was like Christmas. There were red, green and white lights seeping through the curtain of fog, gradually becoming more distinct only to fade from view as ship after ship passed each other in total confusion. For a short eternity all of the captains and mates on watch that night must have aged appreciably. Then, it was over. Our little convoy was alone again. It took until daylight to get all the ships sorted out and looking like a respectable convoy again. We were left to guess how such a screw up could have happened. The naval brass kept such secrets to themselves. It was nothing short of a miracle there were no collisions, especially to our seemingly ill-fated vessel.

Our ship broke away from that mini convoy off Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. We steamed into the turbulent waters of the Bay of Fundy and were safely berthed at Saint John less than forty-eight hours after leaving Halifax.

I was not sorry to get paid off the *Noranda Park* the following day. The war in Europe ended the day after I arrived home from my voyage to India on the *Noranda Park*. It was a day of very mixed emotions for me. I took in all the hoopla down around the city hall where thousands of people were letting go and celebrating the end of war in Europe.



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For some reason it all seemed wrong to me. I thought it should have been a time for quiet reflection. In retrospect, I realize that I had not adjusted to being home. It usually took upwards of two weeks to become used to shore life after being on a ship for months on end. In reality I was home, but in my heart I was still thousands of miles away, somewhere East of Suez.

Post-war, Hamor (his nickname is Hank) married Patricia in September 1946 and has two sons, Edward and Douglas. He has never lost his fascination for the sea and has passed this on to Ed, who also sailed as a radio operator for many years, while son Doug served as the RSM of the Lord Strathcona Horse Regiment. Hamor worked on marine radio beacon/light stations and coast stations until 1959 when he was promoted to the radio inspection office at London, Ontario. He then enjoyed a successful career in the administration of radio regulations. After early retirement Hamor sailed on two other ships as a 'Sparks', a chemical tanker and a bulk carrier, saying 'those were very brief flings trying to resurrect my misspent youth! I had been in the comfortable pew of blissful married life for too many years'. He and Pat are still very active, enjoying hiking and gardening.