

Lawrence Mackie's letters home during World War 2

transcribed and edited by his son Peter Mackie, July 2015

The letters in this collection were written by Lawrence Mackie, George's brother, during the Second World War. Lawrence enlisted with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, and after basic training and gaining his Commission he saw active service on a Motor Launch and Destroyer and took part in the D Day operations in Normandy.

The letters were passed from Lawrence's parents to my mother Elizabeth, and I have tried to sort and transcribe them in chronological order. This has not always been easy because some of the letters are undated and the writing has become illegible in places. Nevertheless they give a detailed account of naval life during those years, with full and sometimes very frank descriptions of their activities.

After the war Lawrence returned to his medical training at St John's College, Oxford, and then entered General Practice in Warwickshire.

Contact: George Mackie, mackie.geo_at_gmail.com

For Mackie family memoirs see <https://sites.google.com/view/mackiefamily/home>



Lawrence in 1939 as an undergraduate
At Oxford



Lawrence in 1944, skipper of ML 246

I am surprised you didn't get my letter. But I gave it to another bloke to post for me with one of his, and he may have forgotten to. Anyway, thank you Daddy for settling up my overdraft, and I will return the dog-whistle – which I found in my mac pocket when I got back here!

You will be pleased to learn that next Tuesday I should be home, all being well, complete with car, for a seven days leave, before going to Devonport Barracks.

Your not having received my last letter makes it rather difficult for me to remember just what news you have heard. But there is quite a lot to tell you anyway. In order of importance, and briefly, they are as follows: I have been recommended for a Sublieutenant's commission RNVR. The train disaster which you may have read about in the paper caused the death of three Raleigh men, and the injury of many others. I have learnt that after my seven days leave I go to sea almost immediately owing to my commission recommendation.

There were five blokes in my mess down for serious consideration for recommendation: - my Mess leader, Simpson, Lambert, an Edinburgh Univ. man, Chadwick, a Cambridge classic scholar, and

The train that crashed two or three miles south of Taunton was the one I should certainly have been travelling on had I spent that weekend with you – as I very nearly did. The friend who I came up with last time nearly persuaded me to come again, and as he did in fact go to Bristol he was himself on the train on the return journey, and could give us a detailed account of what happened. He narrowly escaped injury as he was standing just outside the lavatory door, and the coaches telescoped around him but left him unhurt. A chap standing two feet to his left was caught by the advancing framework of the next coach and was trapped. He saw a mutual friend of his and mine also trapped by the arm, with a headless corpse over him. It was two hours before his arm could be amputated and he released. And they couldn't shift the corpse till they had him out. The train was the 1.35 out of Bristol, the one I had travelled on a fortnight before – only then it was four hours late and Lambert and I had to sleep an uneasy slumber on a luggage wagon. It came into Bristol at 5.45 – the time it should have dumped us in Plymouth. So we were 3 hours late into the Raleigh, together with forty other Londoners and Bristolians. They didn't mind. Very much.

In spite of the weather air raids seem to increase in number. Three times in a night we have to stagger across the bitter field to the damp and dismal shelters, and try to sleep there with someone singing tunelessly on one side, and someone cursing vitriolically on the other, and an iron bar in the small of the back.

Looking forward to seeing you on Tuesday or Wednesday,

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From: LP Mackie OS Class, Collingwood, Exmouth Block, Royal Naval Barracks, Devonport

I came into Plymouth right on the stroke of midday, and got to the Drake here by a quarter past. I found that with the rejuvenated prop-shaft I could cruise comfortably at 40 mph and I did 50 once, and I could feel that there was plenty more speed still, but with the dicky steering it would have been unsafe to try it. There is still over a gallon of petrol in the tank, and so she must have done more than her 30 miles to the gallon. Unfortunately I missed a turning in Bristol in the black out, and by some means found myself well south of the Bridgewater Road – otherwise I might have made even better time. But still, one can't complain of an average of not much less than 30 mph. It turned out a lovely day on the moors as well, and so it was altogether a most satisfactory run. As seems to be my usual habit I picked up a soldier at Bridgewater and gave him a lift as far as Taunton.

As we don't have to report in until 7 o'clock in the morning when on evening liberty, I spent a night with Simpson and wife and mother-in-law in their little house in Bigbury-on-Sea (complete with faithful car, of course). He has a most wizard wife, and I sure wish I were in his shoes. They have adopted a perfectly sweet little girl (aet 3), called Winifred. Big blue optics and a circular apple red face. I was introduced to her as "Uncle Mac", and she commented sagely on the difference in shape between "Daddy" and "Uncle Mac".

It was very sweet of you to send the scarf so very promptly. It has been snowing and sleeting spasmodically for the last few days so I am very glad to have it. It is such a marvellously thick one, too. It came yesterday evening.

I only saw the willingness and the consideration, passing through bombed but still heroic London, in its awful agony, following the terrible days that preceded my visit there on my way here. The people were simply wonderful.

It is most annoying having one's tongue tied on service matters, because there would be so much of interest to tell you. But still, that will have to wait: or most of it will. But things are getting along pretty well from my point of view. I have got to know the other blokes on the Mess deck pretty well by now, and they all seem a very good lot, with only one or two exceptions. I can do wire splicing now fairly well – and I can do that knot with such a lovely name, the monkey's fist. It looks like a very large nob on the end of a rope. I'm quite proud of it.

I'm glad Mr Bullock has turned out so well in the ARP and I should think that you sure need good men in Bristol now.

[illegible]

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX 221252, Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

You will be surprised to hear that I am writing this letter seated comfortably in a hotel bedroom, just out of a long and luxurious bath and a very good meal. The fact is that one watch of the ship's company have 48 hours leave, and I am in a large city making merry with two shipmates. In fact we have vowed that tonight we will paint the town pink. We had a pretty rough passage down here, and travelled across country to get here. In fact last night I was seasick for the first time, But still, I wasn't very sick, as my other contemporaries were. So in spite of the fact that I thought I was a pretty lousy sailor, it seems that I can take it reasonably well after all.

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I remember I finished off the evening sitting in the hotel lounge discussing learnedly and most intelligently with two RAF officers the intricacies of TVs (Dive terminal velocities) and other such

abstruse subjects. We have twelve whiskeys during the period between 2.30 and 3.30 in that hotel lounge. John Haig's it was, dew and crystal of the misty mountains. And I remained precise, and kept up a nice argument to the end, though my companions grew a little misty towards the end. My optics were a little glazed, I think.

I had an awful hangover this morning.

Thank you for the literature. I received it just before I started the second part of this letter. I return some modern poetry. You've probably seen it, but I'm not going to risk your missing it. It's almost worthy of Guinness.

Ever so much love from Lawrence.

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28 Jan 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

Dear Mummy

Thank you for the seaboot stockings. Two of your letters arrived simultaneously yesterday. One in the parcel, dated 15th I think, and one separated dated about 22nd. I enclose a cheque for £1, for knitting parties. I note what you say about our mutual friend.

Still more news and letters from Christobel – about every 5 days a letter comes to pursue the old controversy about marriage – and yet still her argument refuses to consider the affair. No War Marriages is her point, and she certainly hangs onto it. I shall go nuts if this goes on any longer. So glad to hear that Richard's gone to his new school. I do hope he likes it there. I sent them a letter some days ago, but when it gets to VPC Owen'll be able to open it then and then send it on.

I heard from that dear old soul, Hermiony, who stayed next door to us at Boxmoor – do you remember how, 3 months ago, her wee little house in Dorsetshire received on its thatched roof a Jerry incendiary bomb? She's in digs now, staying with her cousin in Weymouth as a PG, with almost all her property paid for by insurance. It's sure a wonderful world!!

I hope Daddy is not overdoing things. He is having practically no sleep, I gather, and that fatigues one for long afterwards. And even if things ease up, still the effects may drag on. And each morning when first wakening the effects must be noticeable. That is so worrying me, especially as I personally have, well, at least enough, though not so regular hours. We often can get longer than normally we should. But oh! Mummy, this rotten, wicked thing, killing and destroying all that we have held beautiful, it is often as much as I can do to restrain myself. Beautiful cities laid in ashes: what a record for one madman!

[CODE – Doing fleet defense patrol work. (Take first letter of every 3rd word starting from "I hope Daddy")]

As regards John Owen's comments about the Eclipse – she's fairly busy, she's not very comfortable, and she's a very bad sea boat.

I'll write again soon.

You need only 1½ stamps to write to me. I've only just discovered!

Lawrence.

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12 Feb 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

Dear Parents

Thank you for your respective letters. I should point out to Daddy, re his remarks about the authorities deciding about a commission, that they decide after I have done 3 months on the lower deck, i.e. on April 2nd. If they like the look of me I go on to the King Arthur at Hove, and after completing a 10 weeks course then emerge with gold braid: I hope!

I'm very glad that you're both bearing up well under the strain. It must be awful now that things are so short. I hope the stories I hear about food and materials are exaggerated, for if they aren't, it would

We had a gift of 100 cigarettes each from the Overseas League a week or so ago. Everyone on my messdeck got their whack, though the cigarettes themselves, Martin's Navy Cut, are not very popular – perhaps because they lent themselves to such ribald names, “Martin's ill-condition powders” and so on and worse. But still, it is good to get tangible proof that the tobacco fund is doing its stuff efficiently. I read somewhere that some bright spark had tentatively suggested that that particular brand of cigarettes was not perhaps the best possible choice. But a cigarette is a cigarette to most of these chaps, and it's just the name that matters.

That reminds me. I'm successfully keeping at bay the creeping paralysis of the brain which His Majesty's Navy engenders by revising S.W. [Samson Wright] diligently. I completed insulin and carbohydrate metabolism with copious notes a week ago. I think I shall write an essay to myself on it, to make sure of passing next time. When we are in harbour there is generally quite a lot of time to spare, so I shall not neglect it.

If you are going to write to Hermiony, don't forget that her name ends in y and not in e; she had me on the carpet about it last time I wrote. She says it makes her name sound "different". What twaddle!

[illegible]

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

Regular, but (rather naturally) somewhat depleted sums are being paid in from the Chartered Bank. It should mount up nicely, as I shall not be drawing from it much. I was wondering, seriously, as I shall not be needing it for several months, whether you would like to take over the income? I know you

One last thing. Could I dare to ask you, in your busy time, if you could send me either my photograph album or else the photo of Joan in the armchair in my room at Oxford: in the ugly chair, you know the one. I'd rather have the whole album if you could send it!

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Thanks awfully for the photograph album, assorted gals [?] and woolly stockings. Any sort of woollies are most acceptable up here. If I can't use them there are always lots of boys with their tongues hanging for the stuff, less fortunately placed than myself.

21 Apr 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess H4, RN Barracks, Portsmouth

Dear Mummy

I left the Eclipse at Devonport yesterday, and with my two companions travelled up here during the afternoon. I learn that we shall have to wait about 10 days for the Fleet Selection Board, after which we may get a week's leave before going on to the King Arthur. You will be glad to hear that I had a particularly good recommendation from the Eclipse; better than the other two, and an officer (our particular guardian angel, the RNVR Sub-Lieut) told me that the captain said I was the best they'd ever had aboard the ship. This should stand me in good stead when I go before the Fleet Selection Board. I gather it is not difficult to pass; you have to drop a pretty hefty brick.

Baker (that's our guardian angel again) painted a pretty cheerful picture of Hove during the summer time. Tennis, swimming and lots of good cheer – about the only thing they seem to be particularly careful about is to see that you exhibit what is colloquially known as "O.L.Q", or Officer-like Qualities. This is largely a question of deportment and manners, and, more difficult, general tidiness! Still, that doesn't sound too formidable.

Barrack routine is very irksome after the Eclipse. I'd far rather spend my ten days to wait on her than I would here. In spite of the fact that this room is full of commission candidates and fairly stiff with Oxford accents and careful language. It sounds dreadful, but I miss the friendly oaths and quite meaningless swear words. The highly polished scintillating diamond doesn't seem to have quite the solidarity of its dowdy brother coal. But that is perhaps unfair. I've only been here a day.

I spent an evening in Plymouth before I left, and rang Leslie up. She sounded quite cheerful. I also saw Lowndes. He's lost £20's worth of equipment when the Aquarian and laboratory was bombed, and was inclined to be bitter. His superintendent lost everything, house, home, equipment, much of it priceless, as he had invented it himself. He's at Rugby now, you know, as senior biology master. He quite likes it I think, but waxes scornful and cynical about the housemasters. Unfortunately I couldn't get the car running, or make use of your most generous gift of petrol coupons. The licensing authorities returned a cheque I sent them because "it was made payable to the wrong authority", very belatedly, and when we got to Plymouth of course it was Saturday afternoon. Leslie said she was returning you the coupons.

Not an hour after we docked I got one letter from you and another from Leslie delivered by hand, which startled me considerably. I thought you must be mind readers. But I reckoned without the mysterious Maclean (Lt Commdr RN), who apparently divulged our arrival to Leslie. He must have known while we were up in Reykjarvic [sic], before our own Captain knew, to have written you and received a reply. I hope you got the Easter egg, by the way. I had "A happy Easter" written on it in Icelandic, and may have had a motto inside in the same language. I reckoned that had we been stuck up there for a long while, you would have discovered where I was by this means. Still, "all's well that ends well".

Ian Simpson, who you may remember I knew at the Raleigh and at Devonport, has not arrived from his Escort vessel yet. But there are several others I knew there. And most surprising, a man, who I used to know at Marlborough, who used to learn biology, and who used to sit next to me during Lowndes's lectures. He has gone on with zoology, and was at Oxford, though I never met him up there. Another chap I've just met this morning I knew well at Weymouth; was one of Port Julian sailing club, in fact. We've been doing "Furniture Party" all today. That is two of us in each of a fleet of lorries furniture moving from houses bombed out and unsafe to safer ones. The job is finished quite early, and as we are not allowed to enter barracks again before a certain time, the use of the morning or afternoon can profitably be spent in pubs or tea shops or respectively. In other words it's a pretty good job. We've done two complete removals during today.

Henderson, one of the three Eclipse musketeers, lucky blighter that he is, has seen the board today, a week earlier than he should. It makes me green with jealousy. Only luck, too. There happened to be two men wanted, and volunteers were called for. He was on the spot. If I hadn't been miles away in the suburbs collecting bombed sofas I'd have gone for it like a shot.

I am nearly headless. I inadvertently walked in front of the 3" gun when it fired. I only just ducked in time. I have no eyebrows now. We nearly hit Jerry though. So 'twas worth the shock. He had the impudence to shop four bombs on us when we were on our way to refit at Devonport all alone. He came down to 20 ft above our forecastle.

Now I must close. Love from Lawrence.

25 Apr 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess H4, RN Barracks, Portsmouth

Dear Mummy and Daddy

Thank you both very much for two very nice letters. Especially Daddy's one cheering me up at Reykjavic. It brings the fragrance of spring even to this sordid Mess. And that's saying something. I'm surprised at what you say about Leslie. I told you I was coming here, and she said she'd send the petrol coupons back to you as they'd be useless for me. So I don't understand how it was she got the impression I'd be able to get back home. I'm very sorry, because you must have been worried about my not turning up – what with Plymouth blitzes and so on.

Well, my Board should come off some time at the beginning of next week. By Wednesday, anyway, I hope. They've just started failing people. I hope I'm not unlucky. If it's on Tuesday I shall go to Hove on Friday without the possibility of leave. If it's on Wednesday I shall go on the Friday after, with leave. A whole week of it. How much hangs on a day!

Furniture removing again today. We had a house bombed on March 10th and left undisturbed since then, with food left decomposing on the kitchen table, stinking foully. It was a miserable little house in a very poor quarter. They must have been very poor, but I noticed the man who owned it found a florin somewhere to give the lorry driver. We found time to snoop out for a couple of rapid ones, and that made up for a lot of smells and plaster in the hair.

They're still pulling corpses out of the barracks sick bay, bombed last Thursday. I was digging there myself yesterday when one was uncovered. Very unpleasant. There must be quite twenty in there, of which about three quarters have now been found. Only one was alive, and he died, poor fellow, in the ambulance. The one they pulled out today was a fire watcher, and his whistle, torch, and tin hat were found beside him – and not five yards away buried with him under the rubble a breakfast cup, not even cracked!

This Mess, 4H, entirely composed of CW ratings (prospective officers), as is the rest of this very large room, is hopeless confusion. Chief Petty Officer Branch, bless his little soul (damn his eyes) has a wonderful job trying to straighten us out. He is the Barrack ground PO of one's dreams, and combines a voice of surpassing volume with a devastating repartee. When coming back from sea, the object of every CW seems to be to do as little work and as much dodging as he can possibly do without quite getting caught. And to combat that a certain amount of staff work is required by the blokes who have to organise the work. It really boils down to what is practically a competition between the CWs to see who can do least. Perhaps it's not a very good commentary on prospective officers.

Enclosed some odd drawings of one or two things one noticed last month. You might be interested. The one at the bottom in was an American destroyer looks like.

Very much love from Lawrence.

26 April 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, JX221252, Mess H4, RN Barracks, Portsmouth

Dear Mummy

Thank you for your postcard. I do hope you can manage to come down here. But I'm afraid not on Tuesday. Either Monday or Wednesday are my two evenings off. We get from 4.30 in the evening until 7.30 the next morning. On Wednesday I should be able to tell you the result of the Fleet Selection Board. Tuesday I'm afraid I am duty watch, but maybe I could get a substitute, if it is the only day you could manage.

I've just sent a letter off.

[Note added by MEHM. His friend had a splinter right through his head and his jaw was blown off!
And L couldn't help him.]

9 May 1941

From: C/R LP Mackie JX 221252, Class B, Nelson Division, HMS King Arthur (L), Shoreham-by-Sea
Dear Mummy

You see my address above. Notice two things about it: the letter "L" in brackets after the name "HMS King Arthur", and secondly that the name "LANCING" is not mentioned: the postal address is 'SHOREHAM-BY-SEA'. It is a perfectly marvellous place; we are treated like gentlemen instead of being treated like wild beasts. Lancing College you may know, and you will probably recollect the lovely Sussex country all around it. But it's just exactly like going back to school. The echoing corridors, the smell of stale ink spilt on the same musty desks. The only difference is that the chap behind the desk now wears a uniform.

I caught the 8.28 from Victoria all right. I particularly didn't disturb you. I couldn't hear any movement in your room and I deduced that after such a late night and the train journey before you were making up for a bit of lost sleep. But most important of all I must thank you both very deeply for the way you put yourselves out, broke up all your plans, and took such pains to give me a good time. I met a fellow some time ago who said to me in a bored voice "What, do you still write home? I've given that up years ago". He must be lacking something that would make him into a far happier man. Perhaps the poor chap didn't miss it because he had never known it.

I hope Mummy didn't have a hangover after her Vin Rouge.

Probably the next time I write I'll be able to tell you a whole lot more about the plae.

Love from Lawrence.

6 June 1941

From: HMS King Alfred (Naval Establishments, Lancing), Shoreham-by-Sea [printed heading]

Dear Mummy and Daddy

Thank you both very much for letters. I think I should point out though that the sum which is involved in the settlement which you have seen works out at present standing a little below the sum we agreed on, but I think that it is very likely to pick up a bit. Anyway, they are good practically gilt edged stock, so I don't think they'll fall any more.

Yes, the King did inspect us, and that photo you may have seen in the Evening Standard didn't miss my handsome gob by very far. He looks older than most of the photographs one sees of him. The Duke of Gloucester came down some weeks earlier, too, but he looks as though the gin bottle had left its mark. The King came around the classrooms afterwards and had a talk with our instructor as we were doing our navigation. He seems a very nice fellow.

As regards leave. We have weekends off from Saturday midday till early Monday morning, which means Sunday night. I can't come up by car, because I can't raise the petrol, but some time (I can't say when) I'll be up by train. It's so terribly difficult to plan in advance, because of the amount of work they stuff into us and the necessity of reading over notes etc over the weekends, and revising. I had hoped to get back over Whitsun weekend because there was a rumour that they were giving us an extra day, but that proved as it seems usual a false one, so I went to tea with my divisional officer instead and spent the rest of it with my head studiously over my books.

Thank you Daddy for kind thoughts about revolvers, and I will certainly bear it in mind. I don't know what the position is yet. I don't think we have to have them.

As you say, we were all very interested about the Bismarck, and the Hood. There were about a hundred blokes on the Hood who were due to come here, and whose friends here are bewailing their loss. The man who sleeps in the next bed to me (an Old Malburian, incidentally) served his three months aboard her. He would have still been there had he not had the luck to be one the only three

out of the hundred who got away early. They managed this by continually seeing their divisional officer on the Hood and making his like so unpleasant generally that in the end out of sheer self defence he sent them away to bury their heads in the KA here. So they consider themselves very well out of it and very lucky to be so. She always looked to me a veritable pillar of unsinkability as she steamed so majestically through the Atlantic rollers, with her destroyer escort bobbing and bucketing around her. But the greatest tragedy of all is the thousand brave souls lost when she sank. I hear that not long before she was sunk they had sacrificed a lot of the horizontal armour plating over her magazine for extra lightness and speed and the unlucky shell from the Bismarck found this very spot. But still, we had a very fine revenge, so that is one consolation.

My friend Tony Lovell and I had quite a bad motor bike smash about ten days ago. He went right underneath a heavy lorry and ended up half underneath the back wheel, and I ended up underneath its running board with no injuries but a badly scraped knee. His boot prevented his foot from being crushed, as it would have undoubtedly been if the lorry had travelled another six inches without pulling up. I thought he was killed. It was a very narrow shave. In my case the aftereffects of the anti-tetanus serum were much worse than the actual accident, as I spent many tortured and wakeful nights scratching the spots that the injection gave me, and ended up by nearly fainting one morning in the bathroom. The doctor took my blood pressure (118 mm Hg), noticed the position of my apex beat, and gave me a shot of adrenaline, which gave me food for much thought. He followed this up with a dose of bismuth b.d. and why he should add this I can't think. There's nothing wrong with my tummy.

Tom Powell's ship, the Salopian, was sunk a few days ago; you may have noticed it in the paper. So I wrote hastily to his mother, sympathising and asking if she had had any news. I received a prompt reply this morning to say that he was safe and that there had been only two casualties. He is over in Canada now, so I expect the Salopian was sunk escorting convoys over the Atlantic and back. He won't get to Hove until I leave, I'm afraid.

Ian Simpson has only just got back, so I hear from his wife and a letter from him. So he won't be here for a week or two. He was on an escort vessel, you may recall. I seem to have got here earlier than most of my contemporaries, and most of the fellows here have been in the service a whole lot longer than I have – most of them over a year. So I can count myself fortunate to have got this far so quickly. The whole process seems a much slower one than in the army, when men get their commission within two or three months of joining. Of course you must remember that the rank we get when we get our commission is actually higher than the one they get – a Sub-Lieutenant RNVR being one jump above 2nd Lieutenant, HM Army.

It's only two weeks now till our division goes on to the last lap of 4 weeks at the King Alfred, Hove. We have a few preliminary exams here before we go, and then after the 4 weeks there, if we're lucky, we get our commissions and spend a further two weeks as grey-legged officers (so called because we wear grey flannel trousers). After that we may go anywhere. Some fellows have been sent straight away to take sole charge of a drifter or other small ship, or second-in-command of a minesweeping trawler or other small ship, others less lucky get stuck on a shore job. I want to get an MTB or a destroyer though in the latter I should still be a very small fish. But you never know what you'll get, though the Admiralty certainly does its best to see that you get what you ask for, especially if you come out high in the passing out lists. These lists determine your seniority as well as a better chance of getting what you want, and are compiled from your examination results and from your "OLQs", or Officer-like Qualities. These letters will be found graven into every King Alfred Officer's heart when he dies, so much are they stressed and accentuated here and at Hove. We don't know much about how they are judged, but they certainly take into account punctuality, bearing, power of command, dress, and appearances. The Divisional officers here are very canny gentlemen, and not much slips past them, and I think on them rests a great deal of the onus of dealing out OLQs. After all, they've been specially selected by the Admiralty for the job, so they should be pretty good. This is our Divisional officer's first spell of more than two months ashore in fifteen years at sea, in the Merchant service and Royal Navy. So he knows his onions!

Ever so much love from Lawrence.

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Thank you very much for sending the snaps and that letter from Gerhardt. He must be having a rotten time out there, poor lad. I'm very glad indeed to hear that Daddy has at last had his deafness seen to. But I'm afraid it may mean another course of treatment, with the discomfort and all that entails. But it's better that way, than going on not knowing just what everything means.

As regards the photos, I've written that list out for you, but for your own interest here are some additional notes. No 4 shows the type my ship is. There are minor differences, but look what beautiful lines she has: see no 5. Notice the tremendous flare on her bow – makes for speed. Nos 8, 9 and 10 show a very much smaller type called HDML – Harbour Defence Motor Launches. They are not so fast, and have no funnel. Notice the circular wind screen wipers on both types. No 6 is taken just forward of the wheelhouse (you can just see the WWs), notice the carling [?] floats and the depth charges. No 7 was taken on the bridge and you can just see two voice pipes behind Mac's great grinning gib. Dick Ligat [?] is peeping over Mac's left shoulder. The dyspeptic looking gentleman on the left is just what he looks like.

Well, we are settling down a bit now, and things seem to be straightening themselves out. The only thing I'm worrying about now is charts. They've all got to be corrected by the time we start on our long journey. And I'm only about half way through them. But I've more or less only just lately had time to get down to them, as we've been so awfully busy.

It's a marvellous show, this ML service. As I told you, it's run almost entirely by RNVR officers, and of all our crew, there are very few active Service ratings. Most of them are young HOs who've never been to sea before. They were very sick. But the whole show seems so young and invigorating. The officers are young, and have such fresh ideas and ideals, the discipline would seem lax on a bigger ship, but officers [and] men have to work together to be successful, so they must understand each other. We met another ML at sea some days ago, and our Captain knew their Captain. So we hove to some distance from one another, and the Captains conversed, elbows on the guard rail, pipe in mouth. The crew also gossiped with their opposite numbers. The stokers popped their heads out of the engine room hatches and snatched a hasty cup of tea. And after five minutes we got under way, and proceeded to our respective destinations. It is all so very nice and informal. Can you imagine a couple of destroyers doing that at sea?

Last night we had an awful time. The Captain was ashore, and we were at anchor with a whole lot of other MLs and various kinds of shipping. There was rather a strong wind blowing, against the tide, and we were swinging most uncomfortably close to some other ships. So I thought we'd better shift. We got under way and I spotted a nice looking mooring buoy which nobody seemed to have noticed since the ship that was using it had sailed the day before. We went up to the buoy and got it on board easily enough, but then the wind and the tide started to take effect and the upshot of the whole matter was that we carried the damn thing away altogether. So I decided on moving upstream and dropping my hook well clear of most of the shipping. Luckily nobody seems to mind about it very much, thank God, and I think 2" tarred sisal is a very poor rope to attach a buoy to its mooring wire with. And we seem to have quite a decent berth here just now. I only hope I don't meet the navigating officer. He won't like me very much. But I only had half the crew on board to do all this with, so perhaps it wasn't too bad after all.

Well, enough of all this shop talk. We're having lovely weather here – almost too hot if anything, in fact tonight I'm writing this in my shirtsleeves with the fan on. I wonder what it's like down your way? My love to Daddy, and tell him to have his polypi pickled, and to get well soon.

Lawrence

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14 Oct 1941

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

I'm afraid there is rather a hold up in the mail situation just now. As we are still wandering about the coast at the moment our mail is not arriving properly and none of us have had any for over a fortnight – and don't expect any for another ten days.

Well, you see from those photos what an ML like this one looks like. Pretty shapely sort of creature, isn't she? In my next reel I should have some pretty good snaps taken at sea. MLs at war, as you might say. We have been doing a pretty strenuous lot of sea time just lately, and I've had many good opportunities, as my camera is usually by my side on the bridge.

It's a fine thing to have a good crew on these ships. Our boys are shaping mighty well, and apart from the incident mentioned above I've had no trouble with them at all. They don't seem to be the type of fellows who are likely to let you down. Unfortunately we are losing our Coxswain – one of the best hands – for one of lower rate and far less experience, and a great deal of the morale of the ship's company depends upon the character of the Coxswain. Ours is good, so we have excellent morale; such a difference from HMS Eclipse! Our steward here for the wardroom – who combines that function with being Sparks and Signaller – suddenly appeared today from a night's leave, spent I suspect with his wife, with a nice ashtray as a present to us. He is a North Countryman, and told me in his funny thick embarrassed way, that he thought we'd like it as we were using saucers owing to a scarcity of the former commodity. He didn't think it "looked nice". And it cost him 2/6 – a whole day's pay. A little thing like that pleases one more than you'd expect – and puts you in a good mood for a long time. Norrie (my Captain) and I went up to the town last night and saw the "Yeoman of the Guard" with the D'Oyly Carte players. I haven't seen this since Weymouth days with Granny when I was much touched by Jack Point's death, and have remembered that ever since. But it aroused some very happy memories. The jailor (and assistant tormenter) Wilfred Shadbolt, and Sergeant Meryll's daughter, Phoebe, were both played exceptionally well, but I didn't think so much of Colonel Fairfax. I think that playing the hero must be very difficult. Maybe people expect perfection.

Yrs, Lawrence.

From: HMML 305

We are lying at anchor now, with high hills all around, and a thin drizzle and keen wind. It makes you thankful for a nice warm wardroom to go to. We are in company with three other MLs, and we made a fine sight as we steamed in, in line ahead, to drop anchor in this sheltered little bay. Yesterday we had winds of such violence that eddies off the mountain tops raised great waterspouts of spray to a surprising height. It was a fine sight, but made handling the ship somewhat tricky – especially the line squalls, which look like lines of spray about two feet high moving rapidly across the surface of the water. When it hits the ship, it causes her to keel right over like a sailing ship. That is because we have such a lot of fluboard [?].

We were lying at anchor off the coast some time ago waiting for a certain post to open, when I saw a couple of mines go up, put off by two sweepers. Although they must have been two miles away, the column of water looked very high and you could feel the pressure wave hitting the ship. I take off my

hat to those minesweeper boys. They have to be at it day in and day out, in all weathers, sweeping the convoy channels in some of the most exposed places around the British Isles. It makes life in cruisers and battleships look soft by comparison.

We have a fine ship's company in this ship. They seem more contented than in other ships I've seen. And they're a tough lot of blighters, too. An enormous Irishman – reminiscent of one I used to know on the 'Eclipse'. A couple of husky North Countrymen, and an Active Service rating from Boston Lincs, who knows Louth quite well. One of our stokers was frankly a Glasgow Arab in private life, and is in all ways a most live wire. I'm afraid we shall be losing him soon, though, for he's too good for a Stoker 2nd class, and we hope to get him to the leading rate of a Motor Mechanic, as he shows a very considerable aptitude that way. We have only one dud, and I'm keen on getting him into the signals branch. He'd be better there than as a seaman. He used to be clerk to a shipping company, and knows shorthand. But as an upper deck worker he is useless. Coordination of hand and mind is at fault, I suspect. He doesn't know anything about Morse or semaphore, but is getting on fine with flags. He's a simple minded soul, but very willing. He used to get a bad time on the mess deck, "kicked to death" as the Coxswain put it, but he's pulling his socks up now, I think.

Sorry to bore you with all these service matters, but they rather fill my mind just now.

Sorry not to have written for so long. We've been pretty busy just lately, what with one thing and another, and I haven't had much spare time on hand. I only get your mail spasmodically, too, though it should be better in future I think. We had three complete weeks without any mail at all not long ago.

I have started a Post Office Savings Bank account up here, and find it is more convenient if I suddenly run short. Though as things are at the moment I am definitely on the make. There's very little to spend money on anyway, and pay seems to roll in fairly regularly.

I am very lucky in having a very fine Captain, with whom I get on excellently. There can be no room for any differences of opinion in a small ship like this where only two officers are carried, and we understand each other perfectly. I should have liked to have known him in civilian life.

Perhaps a bit of shut eye is indicated now. I'm feeling pretty sleepy , and Norrie is hogging it right opposite, so I shall follow his example. Goodbye for now.

Love from Lawrence.

24 Nov 1941

From: HMML 305

Well, here we are again, on passage; hence my not receiving any of your letters for some time, and I don't suppose you have had any of mine. I had a fine long letter from Tom Powell [note added by MEHM – ex-Oxford friend now RN] the other day. He's back in England again after travelling around the western continent and refitting in an American base. He went through the Panama canal, but didn't dilate on its architectural marvels; what impressed him more was that at last he could get enough fresh water to wash himself in.

Did you read about that East Coast flotilla sinking a couple of E boats and chasing the others off home? They are pretty busy up there now, and deserve a bit of a scrap after much monotonous patrolling. I know that chaps that did the job, and they are a pretty useful crowd. It just shows what one ships [sic] will do if they catch a glimpse of an E boat that isn't her stern a couple of miles off. [Note added by MEHM – I think he has left out a word- can't make sense out of this.]

Gales and suchlike are rather cramping one's style just now. There is one raging this minute, and I can hear it howling from the cosy seclusion of this wardroom where I sit writing. I shouldn't be surprised if we get wet feet tonight, because with two concrete barges and two other ships we make five ships hanging rather precariously to a buoy in the middle of an open anchorage with the wind fair sizzling around. Numerous other gentlemen, tugs, trawlers, drifters and the like, are feverishly letting out more cable in the vicinity, trusting to God and their anchors that they don't drag. Sorry about all this shop, but as I'm the only officer aboard things rather run in one's mind.

On the subject of tugs, have you noticed what amusing names they are given? I have a tome here presented me by the Lords of the Admiralty, and it gives a selection for you. Some names are descriptive, and others just venerable, as you will see; Frisky, Swarthy, Jaunty, Pert, and the Frenchman, Attentif. Then the frankly abusive, Tyke and Camel, and the Alligator and the Crocodile.

On the subject of stars, I have been learning much about these lately, as it is necessary to know them for ocean navigation. One fine night when there was no moon I got my little star book out and found that I could identify an astonishing number of constellations, and name the stars in them. I wonder who first named them. "Alpheratz, Thuban, Altair, Aldebaran, Denebola." These seem to awaken echoes in many tongues. I think French, German, English, Arabic, Latin, must all be represented. My book has several plates showing the various animals and beings outlined about the constellations; seeing them this way helps to identify them in the sky. In practice, I'm afraid, observations would only be taken in twilight, when all but the brightest would be invisible. So I think much is a waste of time, but all the same adds considerable interest. Looking at modern navigation manuals one wonders how old time mariners found their way about, with rough and ready sextants, inaccurate charts, and incomplete mathematical tables to help them. Surely they must have been very brave men and fine seamen.

Yesterday it rained and snowed and blew like Hades from the nor'east. It was very pleasant to sit over the paraffin stove down here and gossip, and hear the rain tapping on the deck, and the wind making strange noises above us. I pity the poor blighters at sea yesterday.

It is certainly an odd thing, this March weather. It was lovely until a few days ago, with the sun scintillating on the snow on the hills, and the blackbirds hopping and chinking about the hedges, and then the glass suddenly dropped, the sky darkened, and you couldn't put your nose outside without getting drenched and frozen at the same time – all of you – not your nose only. I can imagine you two sitting over your fire at home. Daddy on the right, reading the BMJ, and you on the left, with the crossword on your knee, and the spectacles on your nose, snoring gently (tho' you'd never admit to being asleep). Perhaps "breathing quietly" might be more ladylike in the sentence above. Choose what you like.

We have a Socialist, I think I told you, in this flotilla. He also fancies his letter writing, keeps carbon copies of each letter, and reads people extracts when he can get the better natured to listen (of which company I was fool enough to be a member last night). He certainly has a flair for a heart-wringing journalistic style reminiscent of Godfrey Winn, but rather, I should have thought, out of place in a letter; e.g. "The convoy huddled together as darkness fell, like a flock of sheep for warmth, but actually to keep contact in the inky blackness." And "As I came up from the dim light of the chart table I felt the inky void enclose me, where sense of direction was the only sense to guide you." Or something like that. I may be maligning him, as I am quoting from memory, but that was the general effect. What troubles me is that I have an uneasy feeling that many of my letters have touched that style; of course when he read them I adopted an attitude of knowing nonchalance, and criticised benignly. Some call that a defensive reflex. Others, being darned patronising.

You will perceive (being an acute observer) from the foregoing 3½ pages of talking, that I have nothing to say except that I am well and happy, and that I hope you are too. And with that, the sun being over the yardarm and the whisky bottle winking expectantly from the sideboard, I will close. (I said CLOSE, not DOSE.)

Very much love from Lawrence

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Telegram dated 18 Mar 1942

SUB-LT MACKIE 3 GL

RETURN IMMEDIATELY = COMMANDING OFFICER + +

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19 Mar 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

Wasn't it annoying about that spot of leave? Anyway, it can't be helped. And, you never know, anything might happen. Trying to make Bristol in such a short time; hitch hiking and what not, made a very pleasant break from ship's routine. Do you know I had 7 lifts in 140 miles? I believe I told you 6 only, but since I have checked it over. And the interesting people you meet! And what a difference was the dreary train journey back; starting at ten past three and not getting in until a quarter to eight. The only relieving feature was a very nice WAAF girl in the same compartment who was very interesting to talk to and good company. She had just come back from a day or two in London, and was very impressed how much the same it was, with good plays to see and plenty of good food to eat. All in hurry and bustle now here. People running around in small circles generally. It seems however that we had a false alarm yesterday, and now no one quite knows what is happening. We have everything all ready on our ship now, with a few small exceptions, and I don't think we need to worry. It is like packing for a holiday you are going on: there are sure to be one or two things we remember we have forgotten as soon as we get under weigh.

We are lying here alongside the hulk of the first iron-clad man-of-war ever to be built. She was chiefly a sailing ship, but had a tall thin funnel she could raise and a propeller she could drop from the well-deck. Unfortunately her hull is all that is left, but you can still see the graceful prow where the

Several of my friends were away on Sunday and saw a very good bull fight. They killed six bulls, and all the pomp and ceremony was not impaired by war time. One only required a passport and civilian clothes to get across the border.

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I must say I feel very fit at the moment, and except for a slight infection of the starboard ear caused through bathing, have had no trouble of any sort. The bathing situation is rather tricky, because owing to the high temperature of the water all sorts of fungi and miniature seaweeds take the opportunity of growing on you if you don't dry yourself – and you very often see a sinister triangular fin cruising about

a uniform grey and white. Perhaps that is due to the light reflected off them – green or blue. On the way down are burnt shaded stern lights and that seemed to attract them and we used to find several on the quarterdeck every morning and eat them for supper in the evening. They taste like mackerel and one of them makes a very good meal. Now that we no longer wear stern lights the engineroom water outlet attracts them and one jumped clear into the Coxswain's cabin which is just above the phosphorescent glitter caused by the outlet. Once we saw a shoal of them all taking off together, and astern of them a school of dolphins jumping clear of the water trying frantically to escape from a swordfish, which you could see breaking surface now and then. We see quite a number of sharks cruising around the harbour here, and they occasionally eat some unfortunate, but they say you aren't so attractive if you wear a bathing slip ...

It is interesting to read back in the old ship's log books, and to see where the ship has been and what she has done since Norrie and I commissioned her. She doesn't bear many scars from her adventures, and she looks very little different to the time when I first saw her at Leigh-on-Sea – a little less smart perhaps, and the paintwork far from perfect, but whole and functional in spite of steaming at least twelve thousand miles. It is quite a record to look back on. And, you know, now that we have arrived here we are doing work which MLs back in England would have a fit about if they had to do it. Trips equivalent to going from Liverpool to Iceland in these 112 foot ships – and further. Back home if we did more than 24 hours at sea we were wrapped in cotton wool and coached beforehand as to what we were to do. Now 7 days out is the normal trip, and we are sent out on them at 3 or 4 hours' notice to fuel, store, and water ship. Although it is Corvette's work, instead of five or six officers as they have, we have two and a crew of eleven, so watchkeeping at sea is rather hard. However, although the work is hard it is good, and you have a sense of achievement – something tangible in the shape of fat merchantmen loaded well down finishing their trip to somewhere. That is why I am so happy.

Being past midnight I must be away and get my head down, so my love to Mother and to yourself, and I hope to see you here some time. Lawrence.

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25 Jul 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

Well, here we are for a few days in paradise; but we shall, alas, be returning to our dull and rainy base in two short days. The sun shines here, we have had no rain, and there is an RAF mess to which we are invited as honorary members, where the hospitality is proverbial, the food like manna after the long days at sea that we have just finished, and the RAF officers delightful varied company after being cooped up with one man for a week, and eating dog biscuits for breakfast. Which sentence is involved, but still doesn't convey all that I mean it to.

We were tied up by eleven o'clock in the morning, and when one's chores were finished I went ashore to this mess. If a little thing like that makes any difference to them, they have the most profound gratitude of one very junior Naval officer. I had a most interesting talk with their 2½ ring doctor there, who was RAFVR and had just qualified from Mary's before the war, and went straight into the RAF. An altogether delightful man. I'm hoping to go sailing with him in his native canoe tomorrow.

Talking of doctors, one of my friends – No 1 on 296, John Dowting, got a bad go of malaria two days out, running a temperature of 104, and his captain was on watch almost continuously until they got into harbour. He's at the hospital here now, lucky dog, and will soon be enjoying it.

We have lovely moonlit nights now, with the southern cross just visible in the evening (it is well up in the sky later on in the year) and just in the last few days our old friend Orion has been visible in the morning, but lying on his side instead of upright as at home. The planet Saturn is visible quite bright and near Orion, and Venus, the morning star, looks like a parachute flare it is so bright. What is it it says in the Bible "I raise my eyes unto the Heavens"? I can understand that now as I never did before, and when you are all alone in a very small ship in a very large ocean they seem friendly, the stars, and very close – especially when you can call them by their names – Arabic, Greek, and showing how far into the past they have been recognised and called by names. Who could think of more beautiful names than DENEbola and MIAPLacidus, or could proclaim their antiquity more

than RAS ALHAGUE or ACHERNAR? The derivation of some of the names is quite beyond me, but I am no linguist. There is one interesting one, Alphard, which I believe means “the lonely, or solitary, star”. It was later called (by the Romans) “Cor Hydrae”, or the heart of the Hydra, because it is the brightest star in the constellation Hydra, and near the middle of it. The former is more usually used nowadays, but I always like to think of it as the latter, and always call it so when working with it. Very clearly now you can see what is technically known as the one “Extragalactic Nebula” visible to the naked eye. It is another universe like our own, but situated outside it, and containing about the same number of stars. There are many other such nebulae, but you require a telescope to see the others. That gives one an idea of the immensity of space.

I always seem to fall into the trap of letting my thoughts wander in my letters to you. But I think you prefer that to my talking a very curtailed sort of shop (curtailed because of the censor), or discussing my friends, which is vicious anyway, and probably wouldn't interest you in the least. You see, my personal activities are so very ordinary, work keeping the ship clean and efficient, poring over detective novels (such is the way my brain is decomposing), and so on.

Since writing this last paragraph I have just finished painting the wardroom hatch a delicate shade of light grey in keeping with our station, with the duty watch doing to rest of the upper deck fittings. The others have all pushed off ashore in the dinghy to sample the delights of the town, and though we are not supposed to work during the afternoon, they seemed keen on getting the ship to look smart. So I thought I'd better show a cooperative spirit and lead them on. So Lawrence wielded his brush vigorously.

We have a very happy crew. One of the happiest in the flotilla, I reckon. And this place does them a lot of good after that base of ours, where they all stay aboard and look at each others' ugly faces because there is nothing for them to go ashore for. Naturally anyone would get fed up in a place like that. I really am the lucky one to have a CO and a crew like I have. There is not one of them I would wish out of the ship. It depends a great deal on the Coxswain, and other ships less fortunate have a pretty grim time of it. And us with a mutineer lately out of the glass house as the back-bone of the upper deck!

Guess who I met in our base port! Your old friend Hermiony again (not Christobel!). She is a VAD. Perhaps you'll know where it is from this.

The food here seems reasonably good – so far, that is. At sea, even when out days on end, the cook manages to provide something nice, except of course on the very long trips when we usually finish up on dog biscuits! I suppose I should finish up with some platitude, but I can't think one up.

Very much love from Lawrence.

8 Aug 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

What a mail I find waiting for me; two letters and a postcard from you, dated respectively June 21st, 27th and 16th, and one from Daddy dated July 1st: this is on return from the “paradise” I referred to in my last letter. I’m awfully worried to hear of Daddy’s illness, but your letters happily were so arranged that I read of his recovery before his illness, so that spared me some: but I hope there is no recurring. I remember his telling me of the attack he had in India, and apparently it was a very painful affair indeed – and must have been this time for him to use morphine. And I can imagine you dashing around the house not sparing yourself, and with acid words for the sluggards.

No, I haven't fallen out with Norrie yet: except on a small matter of the times when it is suitable to eat tinned pears. We sat at the table and barked at each other for a quarter of an hour and then forgot about it. But it was bad weather then and we had been way out at sea for several days and were distinctly irritable. I don't remember writing any particularly cheerless letter by the way, but there are times when the most sunny disposition gets despondent, and this is the climate to induce it (that'll be a couple of mixed metaphors, I think). It rained so hard today that we had to lift the dinghy out of the water to prevent its getting waterlogged. You hear it fairly roaring on the deck overhead, and it is astonishing how wet you get if you so much as poke your head out of the hatch! ...

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3 Sept 1942

From: Sub-Lieut LP Mackie, c/o Fleet Mail Office, Freetown

Dear Mummy

You see how I have evaded the censor. Be careful not to mention the name of my ship in the same breath – otherwise we'll both be run in. A letter from you, and one from Daddy were waiting here for me when I got back; both dated July 12th, together with one from Joan Page dated July 20th! They will probably have arrived at the same time, and been waiting here for me. What worries me most is that you have had no letter from me since the air mail card from Bathurst, and it looks as if the return mail takes far longer than the outgoing from England. I'll try and send a cable tomorrow to tell you I haven't got malaria.

Now that we have finished with subterfuge you can see why I complain (or DRIP, as we say) about the climate. It is the rainy season – but thank goodness we spent the last fortnight in Takoradi where it was drier, the intermediate or "little dry season". We haven't been able to wangle our way to Lagos yet, which is the Mecca of all the blokes here, it being dry and cool and civilised. You will be amused to imagine our little ships ploughing the twelve hundred odd miles to Takoradi and back as a routine trip – usually six days out and three days in, the last fortnight being due to engine trouble. As a matter of fact we ran into a (comparatively) mild tornado on our way back this time, and we got very wet. I noticed a thing I've read about in books but never seen before, which used to cause a superstitious terror in old-time seamen, a ball of fire at the masthead – electrical in origin, I believe. Ours was a very little ball, as Owen would have said, but what it lost in size it made up in company, for there were five altogether – one at the top of the mast, one at each yard arm, one on the jack staff, and one on the muzzle of the gun. Quite a surprising sight. And the next morning there was a typical tornado dawn, most lurid and chromatic and frenzied, and "head scratch" clouds – so:- [wiggly lines drawn]. But I am afraid tornados are not what they were; it didn't blow harder than force 6 or 7, but the visibility was zero (you couldn't see the outline of the mast from the bridge) and it rained like Hades.

It is now time to put that last paragraph out of its misery and embark on a new one. You've been out here yourself so I won't describe the country side for you, I couldn't anyway. I can satisfy your mind on the subject of malaria at any rate, as although three of our officers have already fallen foul of it I am as yet untouched – by that or even the slightest malady. I fear I am horribly healthy. Do you know TWO mornings in succession I got up at 6 o'clock and ran up and down the breakwater at Tak! People were very sceptical when I told them, for they think I am torpid in the early morning. Oh – the 6 o'clock mentioned three lines above is a.m., not p.m.

At the end of our last trip, Norrie being still below decks in his scratcher, I was creaming up the harbour at* knots, having only just looked upon the dawn when it was red (aforementioned). I forgot to blow my little whistle in salute to a real warship that we were passing. You ask Rupert if you don't believe how peevish the RN get if they don't hear you whistle at them. Coming events cast their shadows. A 3 ringer I met cast a very malignant optic at me as I passed him ashore later. I fear he was the man I forgot to whistle to. I fear I shall be in gurrum pain (for Daddy to translate).

Yours with love and thinking about you, Lawrence.

PS Joan Page's faultlessly typed letter will not go unanswered.

* Fill in as you think fit, and divide by three!

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We are lying in Bathurst anchorage as I write this, on a short visit. I contacted the BOAC station superintendent this morning, a Mr Curtis, and he and his wife are coming aboard tomorrow for a gin with us. Daddy will probably know him. A couple of friends and I visited the Airways establishment outside the town this afternoon and bathed at the beach nearby in water as warm as I have never known it before, and practised surf riding without a board. The surf was just right and the company very congenial ...

But here I see I am talking most selfishly about myself, and not painting for you the pictures which have still not lost their strangeness and interest for me. But this had better wait for another opportunity: as you see, space is strictly limited.

Yours very affectionately, Lawrence

Dear Mother

We have done one short forty-eight hour run since I last wrote, but have not returned to Freetown, so have had no mail from you for several weeks. The trip was quite uneventful but for one mild tornado the first afternoon out, and a suspected submarine the second, but which unfortunately came to nothing. We are possibly taking two Army Majors with us next trip (friends of Norrie's) and so the Pongos will get an idea what it is like at sea in these ships. They say they have good stomachs, but I wonder ... You have to be busy all the time not to notice the uncomfortable motion. Luckily the roll is a quick sharp one, and not the long stomach-wrenching heave of a bigger ship. But even so in our last job some big merchantmen were pitching so that you could see their forefoot and several feet of keel abaft it.

I am thinking of writing a pamphlet on tropical disease for the information of the COs of this flotilla, as they naturally take an interest in this. Something like a list of diseases commonly occurring divided into locality, causes, symptoms, and frequency of occurrence. I could précis it out of some book here.

Love, Lawrence

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3 Oct 1942

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown
Dear Mother

I hope you are still addressing the letters you write me "The number of the Ship, c/o GPO, London". I only use the one above to head my letters with, as it means I can be freer in what I say. Letters addressed so do not arrive so promptly or so surely as letters addressed the other way.

We are very busy now, and I find very little time to write. Also we are so seldom at Freetown we have very irregular mail from home, so I am rather behind hand with news from you.

The navigation grows on me. The idea of deciding where you are on the surface of our little earth by inspecting the position of celestial bodies is one that I have never ceased to wonder at. Saturn and Jupiter, planets like our own, names I have remembered from Grannie's teaching at Weymouth, Canopus and Achernar, stars I used to read of as being "Southern hemisphere stars never visible in Britain". It seems almost sacrilege to use these wonders of the heavens, to bend these actually enormous bodies to our own purposes. Perhaps, however, seamen on the planet Saturn are all the while using us to help them in their travels about their world. How insignificant we must look from there! It is monstrous the lack of interest most people show in the universe around them. They have only to pick up a pair of field glasses to look outside our universe entirely, outside the billions of stars which comprise our particular "star city", and see another entirely different one, a fabulous distance away, a twist of revolving sparkling dust, its very shape betraying its speed of motion.

Ever since reading of the atomic theory of Dalton with its systems of atoms and structures of molecules, and the later works describing the "balls of energy", the electrons, and the "balls of mass", the neutrons, it occurred to me how similar was the infinitely greater system of the universe, and space. I had not suggested this to anyone for fear of ridicule, but found a few weeks ago that the same idea had occurred to my friend Bruce Webb. He suggested that the star systems comprised a matter vast and beyond our conception, a matter which God weighed in the palm of his hand. If only it would hold water it would give rise to all sorts of possibilities in philosophy, the only science to touch it, but I fear it would not. It is only too easy to find holes in it.

I have tried to make some of our crew interested in such matters, but it is astonishing how incurious they are. This applies generally and not only in the instance. Anything they cannot grasp they put aside and entirely lose interest in. Their average topic of conversation is beer and women – how close to Mother Earth they keep! I hate to seem snobbish, but I suppose one has to have a fair amount of education before one becomes inquisitive. They accept the result without questioning the means, and this applies to everything; beer, women, and the rest.

I am very anxious to get started on my pamphlet on TD, but haven't been long enough in one place to borrow a book. So no progress can yet be reported.

We are lying in Takoradi harbour at the moment, and I have just learnt that the daughter of one of our crew is so dangerously ill back in England that it is doubted if she will live unless she sees her father. It may interest you to hear the story as it reflects very well on the Navy. A few weeks ago we received a letter from the Chief Constable of his home town asking if he could be given compassionate leave to see his daughter (aet 4) who was then taken ill. Armed with this letter we took him up to see our immediate boss, who cabled home there and then to enquire how our man's daughter was faring, the Chief Constable's letter having taken weeks en route. Within forty-eight hours our Captain-in-Charge was able to tell us that the girl was out of danger and that her father was not urgently wanted. So far so good – and very good already, I think. Now, some weeks later, a priority wireless signal arrives, passed by the Rear Admiral West Africa, who had added his request for the immediate release of this man, saying that the girl had had a relapse and that her father was urgently needed. (He is an AB, by the way.)

I went to the base personally at seven thirty this evening, and by nine thirty an aeroplane had been specially arranged to take the AB to Freetown, and this is being serviced preparatory to taking him off, as I write this letter. From Freetown he will be sent with all dispatch to his home and the bedside of his daughter. I should perhaps point out that all the communications involved in this affair except the first, the letter from the Chief Constable, were originated by or passed through operational Naval units, and I think this shows how important the Navy holds the individual well-being of its ratings. And the provision of the aeroplane just rounds off the whole matter.

Humanity like this does a great deal to make up for all that we see around at present.

The mythical Hydra, I believe, has seven heads, and when Hercules went out to cut them off he found that they grew again. If he stuffed the gory stumps with a firebrand he sealed them effectively, and so he destroyed the Hydra.

The merchant ship lies 300 yds from the barrier, and the native surf boats ply to and from over the sand bar. They come from the village loaded with palm kernels which the merchant ship takes aboard with her derricks and then back again empty over the bar for another load. The paddles flash in

Letter writing in the forenoon I always find a drudge, but one feels it one's duty in these dog days on patrol where three officers make the work so easy. It is rather a case of "though the dull brain perplexes and retards", one must keep it active. The most productive time I find is in the evening – that is when I do it most – but 'tis good to exercise.

I had the pleasure of lunching with the port Medical Officer of Takoradi last time I was in, a Dr Townsend. Also invited were two other Naval officers, and a civilian and the Army security officer. The worthy doctor put on a remarkably good West African curry with all its accessories, and after it we reclined in his comfortable chairs and assisted digestion with coffee and brandies. He is an interesting and interested man and claims he would have gone in for the Navy had his eyesight not barred him. He is still keen on it in all its aspects especially the technical side, the seamanship and navigation. He has a sextant and a balcony that looks over the sea, and spends a lot of his time experimenting with it. We compared notes and both learned something. Unfortunately it is difficult to lead him up to the subject of the colony, the administration and the native problems, as I believe he violently disagrees with the government policy, but like a wise man keeps his mouth shut in these difficult days.

We now have a native steward aboard and rather injudiciously chose him from an island tribe in Sierra Leone. Consequently the poor blighter is miserably seasick and can do little work at sea. He is very good in harbour and has obviously been trained well, but demands rather a high price for the total amount of work we get out of him. If one gets one of the coastal wogs of the fishing type they are usually all right and can take the motion. It has been rather worse than usual this trip, so we're still hoping he may improve when the weather does.

This swell is making my writing very odd I fear, and I hope you understand this is the cause of it and not a shaky hand!

17 Apr 1943

It was interesting to meet the French residents at the capital of the French Ivory Coast, Abidjan, when we called there a week or so back, and to try to gauge their feeling. There are plenty of portraits of Petain stuck about the place, and it is obvious they still have a great deal of respect for the old man, but they also, though not invariably, are distinctly pro-British and anti-German. I think the latter is due to the fact that they have had access to more of the facts than their countrymen at home, but are still loath to discredit a great personality and hero. It would be a parallel case if we were asked to believe that General Smuts was in German pay. We were everywhere treated with the utmost courtesy and the townspeople could not do enough for our men, but I have no doubt that there were a number who could not agree with us so politely kept out of our way. We had the good fortune to stay there sufficiently long to give me a night ashore in the town, and I could not but be favourably impressed with it in contrast to the British possessions I have visited. The general impression seems to be that since French officials are appointed more or less for a lifetime and take their wives and families with them, they make a point of seeing that the place is fit to live in, and something that their sons can look back on with pleasure when they return to France. The natives seem busier and happier, and the town more carefully laid out. That is, however, only the impression I got after a 24 hours stay, but it would be interesting to see if it tallies with your experiences on the coast.

Did you read Luce's "Open Letter to Britain", published in "Life", I think? Is this one of the "Prods" Wendell Wilkie has promised our General Staff? I think that the British generals know all the facts of the case and will move most efficiently when they see fit (as witness the N African affair). I am sure all this second front agitation is most ill-advised and unnecessary. Perhaps it is a good sign that the country has that sort of aggressive feeling, but I hope they don't push those who are in the know. It is good to read of the success of our arms in N Africa and the Russian victories, and to read Mr Churchill's rousing speeches and caustic wit in Parliament, and I find all this in your "Times Weekly Edition" which arrives with but few losses. The Beveridge Report seems to have aroused much feeling in the country, and The Times seems unusually impartial in discussing it. Having been able to find nothing but the broadest indications as to its actual composition, I hold no views on it myself.

This afternoon I went into Accra by surf boat, propelled thither by the lusty and completely naked niggers, with an enormous Coxswain (his badge of office being a loincloth) towering above me standing in the stern sheets. This last was really a remarkably fine physical specimen, about 6 ft 8 in in height, incredibly ugly with his features defaced by tribal scars and other disfigurements, and if you looked up at him over your shoulder he grinned most hideously. The others made a weird gurgling noise as they worked their trident paddles. The surf was running pretty high on the return journey, and it was quite hair-raising at times. I didn't have more time than a couple of hours in Accra itself on official business, and I was sorry not to have been able to see more of it.

and at sea – for instance the grilling that Portsmouth barracks had. We were tired but happy, instead of bored and fed up. And we had no time to grouse.

Reliefs are as far off as ever. And the rainy season continues with unabated ferocity. That is why I want to get up to Leicester Peak before I break somebody's neck!

Bruce's schemes also continue. He is now working in on a handbook for the benefit of any newcomers there may be here, and I have contributed a small article. I don't know what the response will be like amongst the other officers as regards contributions, and unless it is good the whole thing will be a washout which will just about break poor Bruce's heart!

Au revoir and I'm hoping to be home sometime before Christmas! Lawrence

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[Note - the next five letters predate the second part of the above letter]

1 Jun 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

I prop the back of the canvas chair against the bunk, place the small table carefully between my knees, and lean well forward on it; now the bunk stops me from falling backwards, the six legs of the table and myself bite into the pile of the carpet and stop me sliding forwards. So I arrange myself to write you, as we roll at anchor off Cape Palmas, Liberia. I then look carefully around to see that there is no ash tray to go skittering across the polished table to discharge its contents on the floor, and no books in the bookshelf in such a position that they could conceivably break loose and conk me on the napper. Now I am ready.

Although the date of my relief is only seventeen days ahead, I am not optimistic that I shall be relieved on time. There is a rumour, you see, that we are being asked to take commands and stay out here another three or more months. Two of our old gang of 1st Lieutenants, Bill Marshall and Dennis Davidson, have just got them, being the most senior and both having two rings because they are over 25. I must say that if I am given the choice (though I think it's more likely to be an order than a choice!) I shall probably choose to come home, because I am not sufficiently ambitious to wish to take over a second hand ship out here which has already done at least two years' sea service without a refit. We are on our way home to Freetown now "to be relieved", but as far as we are concerned the end of the phrase has an interrogative twist-up!

We haven't been back for so long that for two months we've had no mail, and we are reckoning on a big bundle waiting for us. We've had rotten weather during the last week, groping our way up the coast in blinding rainstorms unable to see ½ mile away, culminating in yesterday night, when we didn't dare approach the coast for the powerful currents and had to stand off all night waiting for dawn. Now we've got our anchor well and truly stuck into the mud, I'm glad to say, but the heavy surf is making us roll terribly. It is very spectacular on the coast – bluff rocky headlands with spray breaking clear over them, and the greenery and little houses visible amongst the trees. We are seeing more flying fishes as we steer west and north and leave the worst weather. I believe they have trouble flying in a strong wind.

Poor Ray, our No 2, had to be temporarily transferred to another ship, and now we have the most awful blighter to take his place. I can scarcely bear to live in this enclosed space with him. I'm rather sorry for him really because he came out with our lot from England but has been harried from ship to ship and has been ashore a lot of the time because nobody can stand him for long. 24 hours has proved 24 too long for me. I told Norrie I'd leave the ship at Freetown if he didn't, and I have the vanity to hope this threat will make Norrie agitate to have him taken off. The trouble is what to do with him. No one will take him. And his name is Marvell! What a Marvell. On his last ship he had suppurating foot rot and boils at the same time!

8 June

The day after I wrote the preceding paragraphs I retired to bed with a splitting headache, temp 103.5°F, muscle aches, fever, and all the signs of a fat dose of malaria. And how the ship rolled. For four miserable days I sweated and shivered alternately under a mountain of blankets in a crazily rolling ship, and then my temperature went down and at the same time we weighed anchor and away to Freetown. We are still on the way and today for the first time I am up and cutting my quinine down to 10 grains/day. I'm taking the afternoon watch and so relieving the strain on the other officers. I feel fit as a flea now, and can congratulate myself, I think, on a very mild attack. Norrie has been amazingly kind and considerate, and was not going to let me do the afternoon, but as he was up all last night he wasn't in any too good a trim for argument!

The weather is simply appalling. You have to have the lights in the wardroom on during the days as the grey light that filters through the portholes is not enough even to read by, and there is a continual drip, drip, drip, from a leak in the wardroom hatch. You can see ghostly shapes of other nearby ships occasionally, but usually they are obscured by a curtain of rain. At night, needless to say, you can see nothing, and just have to live in hope that nothing is going to ram you.

We've been at sea now 10 or 11 days (I've lost count of the exact number) and shall be at least another. So you can understand we're running a bit short of stores. We're getting a little tired of corned dog, tinned M and V rations, and the like. The cook suddenly produced yesterday pancakes for breakfast and a delicious cake for tea, to celebrate the fact, I suppose, that we once more had our nose turned to the northward. Anyway the change was very welcome. As a matter of fact he is a little too fond of the tin opener usually.

Here's to the hope I shall be seeing you soon – perhaps, who can tell?, even before you see this letter. Before I leave I'll wire you not to write any more letters, so until you get the wire keep the old pen cracking!

Very much love from a very fit Lawrence.

22 Jun 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

Relief from the station seems as far off as ever, and we are all getting tired of the west coast and its mosquitoes and humid heat. Now that our 12 months is up we have no definite date to look forward to, and all we can do is to compare our lot with that of the flotilla who preceded us. They did as much as 2 months over time, and two of them did 6 months too long. In addition to this is the extra month the First Lieutenants are threatened with as command experience, so if I see you before Christmas I shall be lucky.

This is a scrappy letter written on my knee in hast as there is much to do as we are preparing for a visit to a real neutral port where we have to show the flag and be a really smart ship. So we are frantically painting the upperworks and as fast as we paint the hot sun blisters it and it all falls off again! But these little things are just sent to annoy us!

We've been meeting a lot of Merchant Service officers just lately and have been particularly struck but their amazing nonchalance. These chaps who gaily steam across the Atlantic with ten thousand tons of fuel in the capacious belly of their craft and can talk of nothing when they get in but the way their antirrhinums are doing, and the health their baby is favoured with. They do not mention the ship that was tinfished within 400 yards of them and sprayed them with exploding ammunition as she blew up. You hear nothing of that until you see the confidential convoy reports.

One master I met tonight in peacetime commands a coaster carrying general cargo between Newcastle and Tilbury, Methyl [sic] and the south, and if ever he was out of sight of England's meadows he thought he had been far. Now he's taken the same ship to Murmansk and back, has fought his way into a precariously held Tripoli, and today he does not know if he may be sent to America tomorrow. But does he mention it? Bless my soul, he doesn't, he's far more interested in a suggestive story or the carbuncle his wife's mother had two weeks ago, and is long since cured. Thus

Well, I must dash off now, as I have much to do. Lawrence

Dear Mother

Bruce is a remarkable man and one whom I very much admire. His weakness now seems to be his ruthlessness and lack of human sympathy. He seems to be driven by an overpowering belief that, since all is not right with the world and the war, it is his personal responsibility to rectify the faults he sees without fear or favour: an ideal admirable in principle but dangerous in execution. He says, and rightly, that he has nothing to lose, being an unmarried Sub-Lieutenant with a good job waiting for him and a technical training that will ensure his future should he fail in his self-appointed task. Until now I have been helping him to the full extent of my less numerous talents. But since a certain remark of his a couple of days ago I am beginning to wonder if he is not arguing basically wrongly. "I will not spare anybody", he said, "whom I find negligent or inefficient. It is my duty to show up the inefficient and their weaknesses and to see that they are eradicated." This again sounds fine in theory, but I jib at aiding the compilation of reports which may mean the ruin of friends whose confidence up till now I have enjoyed.

Perhaps I can explain Bruce's apparent lack of feeling. He is lately recovered from an attack of malaria which masked what was almost a nervous breakdown. He had been gradually becoming more and more dissatisfied with his lot aboard his ships – as it was true that he was wasted there. The captain of the ship whom he had a great respect for had become later in his rather biased mind something of an idol with feet of clay, for he was not up to Bruce's hotheaded schemes and brilliant ideas. Bruce is unfortunately vain and naturally cocksure, and he resented the fact that he had not had promotion more rapidly than others, and that certain good work he did was not officially recognised. In other words he was what they would call a "malcontent" in the "News of the World". The schemes

is no work available in these boats that I would fit – except on this coast – and that I have had my belly full of (excuse the strong words).

I have just lighted one of the cigars that we got from our frightfully hush-hush neutral port; and I feel quite like a bloated plutocrat. They're not terribly good cigars, as they burn most unevenly, but they stop me smoking cigarettes for about 40 mins, which is a Good Thing. The cigarette craze will have to stop before I get back home or I shall be bankrupt in a fortnight! Perhaps I can give you a picture of what we are doing this minute, now that we are all more or less confined to the ship because of the rain. Norrie is lying on his bunk just about two foot to my right as I sit at this table. Ray is the other side of the wardroom playing his bamboo pipe, clothed just in a violet maroon coloured sarong up on the bunk with his legs tucked under him. In case you don't know what a sarong is, it is what Dorothy Lamour wears, and looks somewhat like this: and this is how you put it on, as seen from above [diagram inserted here]. Anyway, that's what Ray is wearing. And Norrie is whistling terribly tunelessly with Ray's accompaniment. The fans are all going full blast, and Norrie and I are just wearing shorts and nothing else. They keep interrupting me by asking provoking questions about who I am writing to, so I told them and asked Ray's collaboration in the preparations of the diagrams on the previous page explaining how to fit the sarong – should you be interested! It really is a very happy little company, but first thing in the morning the wardroom looks less interesting, and you begin to yearn for the great fields and haystacks of England (or in Norrie's case, Scotland). He's trying to explain to me the intricacies of the "Dashing White Sergeant" dance. Have you ever heard of it – or "Strip the Willow"? I've heard of neither, and Norrie's explanation of these complicated dances leaves me as ignorant as before. Connected thought seems impossible with all this conversation flying around! That is the explanation for this last most odd paragraph.

Have I told you about the Omega wrist watch I bought at the same place as the cigars? It cost the equivalent of £8:10:0, and worth every penny of it. It has worked perfectly up to now – and you know how seldom I can persuade watches to function when I wear them! It gains almost exactly 10 seconds per day, and Omega watches have the reputation of have a very regular daily rate.

Ray and I went up onto the upper deck just now and found that it had stopped raining and that although heavy clouds still rolled overhead it was quite light because of the nearly full moon, So we made complete fools of ourselves doing a late night final bout of PT after which I had a wash-down and emptied several buckets of cool salt water over my head. I felt like a hundred pounds after that so we carried a couple of chairs up and sat and talked of many things from how to tell whether the moon was waxing or waning to what we were going to do after the war. He is an actuary in peace time, and I have been most interested to hear the details of what I thought was an obsolete profession. Apparently it is concerned with the calculations involved with risks etc in insurance companies, and consists for the most part with that (to my mind) driest of all subjects, statistics. He seems to enjoy it, and since he manages our wardroom accounts with the greatest of efficiency, who am I to complain? I thought actuaries were only things you saw on the official headings of solicitors' notepaper "Solicitors, Notaries and Actuaries"; ranking with beadles and other such time-expired functionaries. It seems there are plenty of them sculling about, however, for I've met at least three already in my peregrinations.

How is Joan Page these days? I've written to her once or twice, and so has she, and we get on fine in writing. She seems very keen on tennis and hockey and these things, and promises me a game of whatever is in season when I get home. By the bye there's no sign of this yet. She seems an awfully nice sort of person too, though it is funny that I should say this only having met her in person once or twice. Though I think people are often much more revealing in the letters they write than in what they say when they are face to face with you. Sort of long-distance telepathy! I hope I shall be able to see plenty of her when I get back. I hope also Daddy will organise suitable holidays for her!

Time creeps on and I must to bed – and my pen shows signs of running out, so au revoir and ever so much love from Lawrence.

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21 Jul 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

Thank goodness here I am at last at Leicester Peak rest camp. I intend to spend a week in this lovely place on the top of the mountain to try and get fit again, adjust my very displaced mental balance, and generally freshen up myself. Nearly two years aboard the ship continuously with one short leave at home and one of three days out here was definitely affecting me badly – making me morose and ill-tempered, out of sorts mentally and physically.

The chief virtue of this place is its complete solitude and quiet. There is only one other officer up here, and he and I met for the first time this morning. The meals are regular and exceptionally good, and the atmosphere most bracing. It makes you eat like a dragon and sleep like a log. There are absolutely no awful parties and no wearing social life. And there's nothing to do but eat, sleep, walk around the mountains, read, and write. So thank goodness for Leicester Peak and peace and quiet!

My companion up here seems to fit in with everything nicely. He seems very quiet but interesting and sympathetic to talk to. Poor fellow, he's been out here 22 months (being shore based they're supposed to do 18 months instead of our 12), and is recuperating from rather a bad bout of malaria which makes him rather washed out. The camp was originally for people recuperating from various diseases but lately any officer who could be spared from his ship has been encouraged to come. Norrie had a spell up here himself before I came. Geoff (as it appears my companion's name is) works in the barracks, and is so bored and fed up by being in Freetown all this time that he thinks he got malaria none too soon!

I left the ship at half past seven this morning feeling utterly fed up with everything, and making a fool of myself as I went by being unpleasant to everyone I could see, and travelled up here in a gut-shaking old van which negotiated the awful gradients and rocks in the roadway with miraculous skill, and honestly, the moment I picked up my bag and started to walk up the steep and twisting path to the camp, the clean cool mountain air cleared my lungs and my brain and I felt happy and carefree again in a moment. I can't describe the feeling of "away from it all" that I had. I was in the house by half past ten. The camp consists of two portions – one for us and one for the ratings, and was originally a mission house. The furniture is all pretty crude but succeeds in being very comfortable while failing to look particularly nice. And the walls are embellished with exceedingly good crayon drawings of ballet dancers and other seductive looking girls not put there by the missionaries but by an RN convalescent! We wear any old thing (I'm in blue slacks and a sports shirt at the moment). There is no electric light as the motor has broken down, and will remain broken down for months I am told for lack of spare parts, and we use romantic looking oil lamps.

It's quarter to nine as I sit writing this by the light of my oil lantern, and quite dark outside and a chorus of crickets and frogs croaking in the jungle just in front of me. I walked up to the actual peak before lunch and sat on the stone that marked the top of the mountain and pondered on how good it was to be alive. As it is just the beginning of the rainy season there is tremendous activity in the insect and animal life. Huge shiny-brown centipedes like this [sketch inserted here] creep about, and you can see their legs grouping together in a sort of wave motion as they walk along. The natives say that if they lose or damage one leg they are quite immobilised! All sorts and sizes of ants as well, huge black ones and tiny black ones, and large brown ones. I saw one amazing effort by the black ones in the way of a complete tunnel built of earth across the road. The tunnel was complete except where breaches had been made by passing footsteps (I suppose). The breaches were protected by black ants, larger in size than the others, who stood with their heads poking out and a huge pair of pincers on guard. The large ants also could be seen marshalling the traffic and controlling the smaller ones moving up and down the tunnel, and rounding up stragglers who had lost their way. The whole thing was a triumph of organisation. A thing that I did notice though was that although the smaller ants were definitely moving in one of two different streams at the tunnel, the larger ones lost a lot of energy rushing aimlessly to and fro. I suppose since they can't see they have actually to cover all the ground so as to protect their convoy.

During the evening I wandered down to Leicester village and met the local parson, a wonderful old native clad in a much patched combination suit and wearing gold rimmed glasses. He spoke better English than most Englishmen and had most original and sensible views on the war in Europe and the U boat war around here. How he gets his news in the Godforsaken little village is

beyond me unless he has a wireless. He asked me to go to a service in his little ramshackle church on Sunday and I promised him I would. The natives I believe look very well all dressed up to the nines of a Sunday morning, and the parson was really a dear old boy. I remember in Lagos I tried to get into a church service but was crowded out. That is the only time I've been to church on this coast I think.

The Petty Officer steward who runs this place has just been in and had a chat. He tells me he was on Russian convoys for some time but was torpedoed and spent a quarter of an hour in the icy water before being rescued by a trawler. He then went into combined operations in the Channel and was at Dieppe, and had tremendously interesting stories to tell. Now he has a well earned rustication up here. He was in all these things as a steward but said he spent more time on his 4" guns than handing plates around!

All sorts of odd insects have come in, attracted by the light, and promenade over my picture of the centipede on the other page as it reflects the light. Strange sausage shaped flies and one with something like an uncomfortably large sting in its behind. Last night at the base I saw some hawk moths (oleander I think) that would have maddened me with acquisitive passion at Marlborough! They bumbled their torpedo shaped bodies and rakish wings against the light bulb. I couldn't have caught one anyway if I'd wished.

I'm afraid my handwriting deteriorates as my pen speeds trying to keep up with my thoughts. I hope it's legible. I fear not always.

There are several monkeys about here too. Round faces with a fringe, long legs, and a very long tail the same diameter all the way down. They peer around the trunks at you in a disconcertingly human way, then leap into the tree and chatter derisively. They also caught a green mamba snake the other day in a forked stick, and tried to catch a normous hairy spider but were I expect too scared to make more than formal efforts. Taken by and large my animal friends up here are an uncomfortable lot. Even the centipedes sting!

That will be I think enough for tonight, for I mustn't stint my sleep!

23 July

It has been raining more or less continuously since last I wrote, so I haven't had much opportunity to get out and about. So I've just stayed indoors and read and slept as I felt inclined. Yesterday afternoon I had a most welcome diversion. As I descended from my bedroom for tea after my post-prandial slumbers and came into the lounge rubbing my eyes, who should I see sitting at our tea table two fair damsels in colourful afternoon frocks. Geoff was out entertaining his lady friend, so there was no explanation of their presence from him. They were immediately full of apologies for their intrusion, and said that they were wandering about on the mountain feeling very dry and wanting tea, when they came to the doorway and saw three places and all sorts of appetising things on the table and hunger overcame them. So in they came and asked the native steward if they could tuck in. He rather surprisingly asked them if they had been upstairs naturally thinking they were my guests, a question which apparently rather shocked them. Anyway we all had tea and afterwards adjourned to the veranda upstairs where we spent a most amusing hour talking and laughing and so on, much to the incredulous amusement of Geoff and his girl friend who by this time had returned and were (presumably) necking in the porch. After that I accompanied them down the hill halfway home, and they promised to come and see me again on Monday if the weather was at all possible. One's name was Mary, and the other Julie, two names I cannot think to better (save perhaps Joan). Julie was the younger and the prettier of the two, but Mary had the stronger personality, and they were obviously great friends. So I do hope they manage to come on Monday.

I rang up the base today to see if anything was brewing, but apparently we are still out of action. Nobody seemed to be available in the base, but eventually I got hold of the No 1 on one of the other ships who told me all I wanted to know.

For the first time they have the electric light working up here. They worked on the little generator all day and filtered the petrol to extract the water, so we are up late (2230!) after playing a game or two of snooker with the two POs who run this place. Chief Petty Officer Smith, who is the big cheese, is rather a strange man with peculiar looking eyes. He was rather badly shot up some time ago, and is a bit shell shocked. He has catered for battleships, depot ships, and shore bases before he came here where he will do 18 months on the mountain. As both he and the PO steward I was telling you about have had bad times with bombs and fighting there seems to be good reason for their being here – though both of them seem sorely puzzled, not to say indignant. I also had a glass of beer tonight,

breaking my alcohol rule – though a single glass of beer can do me no harm! The other half of the bottle went to George the steward.

They plan a sort of 8 course bean feast for us on Sunday night when we invite them and the white SBA to dine with us. We also plan (Geoff and I) to walk down to the hospital on Sunday afternoon and have tea with some of the nurses Geoff knows. So we shall have quite a lot of excitement in our quiet lives!

Geoff's girl friend was telling me about what curious patients they have in the Army hospital where she is a nurse. Quite a lot of them are mental cases – overflows from the mental hospital itself, which just goes to show that the coast is enough to drive quite a lot of people nuts. She pointed out, however, that many of them were slightly dippy before they were sent out here, and Sierra Leone just precipitated things! Mary and Julie were also nurses, by the way, but they had only been here some three or four weeks so were still fairly enthusiastic about it. May they never be disillusioned!

What a damp place it is! Aye dripping on the corrugated iron sheds outside. Its rhythmical tapping wafts you to sleep at night and wakes you in the morning; though the luxury of a lie-in till 0830 will be long remembered. And the food! Oooh!

Geoff was telling me about himself today. His history in the Navy is as follows: training camp at Skegness, writer at Portsmouth barracks, officer ashore in Freetown. Never been to sea since he's been in. What a life!

25 July

Quite a full day today. This morning Geoff and I went to the little church in Gloucester village and were treated to a very good and impassioned (though a little incoherent) sermon by the pastor. The singing particularly impressed me, as the congregation obviously enjoyed every note of it, which the poor bloke on the harmonium was faint but pursuing gamely. In particular the two basses in the choir carried all before them, and their majestic cadences could always be heard above the sopranos of which most of the congregation consisted. All the young ladies of the village were there in their party frocks, and some of the young gentlemen in sombre suits. How the people manage to buy and keep these dresses and suits on their pitifully small income I do not know, as I've been in some of their houses and know what awful conditions they live in. The pastor delivered some sharp rebukes for unpaid pew rents (one outstanding for 2 years) but said their maintenance fund stood at £68 and he hoped it would be £100 by the end of the month of August. Fancy these poor people being able to produce this amount! I'm giving the pastor a couple of quid to encourage him, when I see him tomorrow. His sermon was a masterpiece. His queer English phrases gained a strange dignity because of his obvious sincerity, and the congregation had their eyes on him for the whole 40 minutes it lasted. The little kids in their grey shorts and school jackets were the only ones who wriggled (shades of Owen!).

This afternoon we walked down to the hospital and had tea with the nurses there (Mary and Julie). The latter, I find, was Barts trained, and she is a very nice girl. I sat in the little office behind her ward and chatted pleasantly of this and that for an hour or more, and finished by lending her my beautiful Omega watch to take her patients' temperatures [sic] by. She will return it when she comes up to see me tomorrow. On the way back we met a whole crowd of my friends who had been on a walk, including Norrie and Bruce Webb, and heard the disquieting news that our gin drinking SO is coming up tomorrow to share my last 3 days with me. I'm afraid I dropped quite a brick for when he told me I said "Oh" in a tone which could not be misunderstood, and he answered "Surely it's not as bad as all that?". So that's spoilt my prospects, I think – if they weren't spoilt before!

27 July

Well, I'm back on the ship again, a day or two too soon. The circumstances of my recall were really – shall I say romantic? – or perhaps dramatic. You see, as I told you, I had invited Julie to tea on Monday, and at 2 o'clock I set off down the mountain side in my best bib and tucker to meet her and escort her up to Leicester Park for tea, with a bit of a walk maybe to fill up the time. As I neared a bend on the steep narrow road I saw her coming, saw her hesitate and then stand aside as a Naval car going full belt swept past her. It stopped, and she and I and the car converged together as a menacing figure

28 Aug 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

I'm afraid it's an awful long time since I wrote you last, but so much seems to have happened that when you hear it all I'm sure you'll excuse the hiatus. It all started about three weeks ago when the first reliefs for our flotilla arrived and the question arose as to whether Norrie was going to be one of the lucky ones or not. You see, less than eight reliefs had arrived and as eight were due and Norrie was junior ship it seemed probable that he poor blighter would have to stay and await the second bunch (which hasn't arrived yet!). In the end they worked it so that the First Lieutenant of a ship that is out of action at the time should relieve me and that I should relieve Norrie as commanding officer. So that is what they did, and N is on his way home now to paint Glasgow red. It seems extraordinary not to see his powerful frame stretched on the bunk sleeping or dozing, but as yet I am glad to say has made little difference to the ship's routine. Norrie has been my counsellor and friend for two years now, and he leaves a gap proportionate to the extent of my friendship for him.

The officer who has relieved me as No 1 is a chap by the name of Stan Daly, and he seems enthusiastic and efficient. He had a raw deal on this last ship where he took over from a slacker who left things in a scandalous state, and has had to kick against the pricks all the way, with a rather poor CO and a depleted ship's company, and the ship itself badly knocked about by my mishandling. He's "digging out" here properly and has even stimulated me to paint the wardroom out (which involves extremes of discomfort for at least five days). We're in the middle of it all now. Having bluffed Norrie into thinking I was efficient for two years, it has been a little revealing to have to explain to Stan all my methods and systems; almost humiliating at times! But still, I know I have a happy and clean and efficient ship – which is more than he left!

We have been changing engines during the last couple of weeks, so I have not had an operational trip with my new command as yet; but I am glad of the rest, so that I can see how the new officer gets on with the ship's company, and find my own legs as Captain. Taking over lie this from 1st Lieutenant is always difficult because in the latter position you have to know and have too much to do with the messdecks to be able to retire into the (from the troops' point of view) respected obscurity of the CO's position. Knowing you so well, they can't regard you as the Olympian you should be. However, I haven't much longer to do, so I hope the ship will hold together until I leave her! Just a few operational trips and then hie for Gloucestershire and the green, green fields.

To add to my mental excitement I met a girl – a sister in the QAIMNS to be exact – who took up much of my thoughts in spite of the fact that she plainly has her heart set on another sailor now in harbour but usually many miles away. Merchant service bloke. I have nearly finished the course of – mad infatuation – steady regard – self denial – and the whole gamut, and were she free I think I should have married her – proposed, at any rate. Now this beastly merchant packet has come in and she used my ship as a sort of signalling station to morse loving messages across the water. It makes me wander around with rather a dazed look and develop an unpleasant temper at times, but disillusionment is now nearly complete. I have just the same regard for her, but realise that I have no chance against the professional. Her whole affair with this man started as usual on the boat deck when she was taking passage on his ship to this station. She's terribly serious about it all, but I shall be surprised if he is. I fear she may hit the gin bottle or something if she finds that he's not when she visits him tomorrow. She is 26, but very young for her age and impulsive. Too naïve and warm-heated, the cynic would say. I call it just niceness.

So you can see that my life now is a perpetual sort of struggle between Julie and my new command, and at the moment the latter is winning because of this beastly 3rd Officer Price, the wallah on the merchant packet. So before I develop schizophrenia or neurosis or delirium tremens or something, 3 Goldney Avenue is definitely indicated. So thinks your puzzled LPM. In the earlier stages I went so far as to suggest to the CO of the base that I might volunteer for another 6 months on the coast, but have now reconsidered this because (a) if Julie in retrospect is as good as Julie is in prospect (after 12 months away from female society) it means that my affection for her is not (as my friends go out of their way to tell me) illusory, and that when she come home I can meet her again with a clear conscience and because (b) 6 more months of mental indecision would make me a doddering old man.

11 Sep 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

At last we have managed to get to this port, the one which in all our year's commission we have never visited before. You can probably guess where it is. It is a typical dockyard city and a perfect harbour for operating our type of ship – and such a change after uncivilised (relatively) Freetown. Things are going happily with me – the ship is working well, my two officers are most keen and enthusiastic, and the ship's company happier than it's been for many a month – in spite of one bad hat whose leave I had to stop for 12 days. The problem of punishments is an intricate one: by KR and AI (our bible) a Sub-Lieutenant in command is allowed to give not more than 1 day's "No 16", which consists of an hour's extra work. All other offences are supposed to be sent ashore to the officer of at least of Lieutenant's rank who can give weightier punishment. This is of course almost unworkable because (a) we are often in a port where no such suitable officer is available, and (b) if there is he would be annoyed if he was continually plagued with trivial offences which still warranted more than 1 day's "no 16". So the way I work it, and I believe my colleagues who are in a similar position do the same, is to say to the offender: "I am not entitled to award you the punishment you deserve. I can send you ashore to the base authority to be dealt with as he sees fit. To avoid unnecessary trouble and a probably much heavier punishment, are you prepared to take what I will give you unofficially?". They all say "Yes" for they know which side their bread is buttered. So I gaily punish as a most senior officer, and nobody worries. It is all so stupid really, for if they give a sub. an Admiralty appointed command (as mine is) surely they consider him competent to deal with defaulters (for all his youthfulness!).

The punishment I actually quoted is the only one I have had to deal with yet. AS a matter of fact he could have been sent to prison for his crime, but 12 days' leave stopped in this port will sorely irk his soul. And I do not believe in having an Active Service Rating, whose livelihood is the Navy, doing a punishment which would leave a black mark against him all his career unless I thought he was a really vicious type. I think he was just trying to get away with it – "only an RNVR Subby – what can he do?".

It is a fascinating job, this. To have the lives and souls of 13 men and 2 officers in the palm of your hand when half the time you are at sea away from advice or assistance from your superiors. That is where it differs so widely from the Army where normally the Lieutenant in charge of a platoon can see his Colonel any time or at least pick up the telephone and speak to him. In the Army detached service seems to be the exception, whereas with us it is the rule. It is really quite a terrifying responsibility for one so young and inexperienced if you start worrying about it. I don't. But it is good to get it off the chest by writing it down and using my long-suffering parents as a sort of confessional box! It gives me a sort of unpleasant inverted pleasure (of which I am heartily ashamed) to think that while at Marlborough they would neither give me a prefectship nor a stripe in the OTC, now they trust me with £25,000 worth of the King's property and a dozen or so lives. How egotistical that sounds! But I don't mean it so. Perhaps the Navy is less particular in its delegation of authority than Marlborough was.

12 Sept

Half our troops have gone off on a sort of propaganda church parade, which marches through the streets of the town to its church. It is designed to impress the locals with the invincibility and smartness of the British Navy. It takes place every Sunday and is I am told very effective.

Isn't it wonderful news about the armistice in Italy? It will make all the subject races in Europe restless now, and doubtless the rats will desert the sinking ship soon enough. The news was received in this port with tremendous applause and flags were all flying. Warships blowing off their sirens, and all the ships dressed. The Naval Patrol had its hands full too! What with the Russians advancing on nearby all their fronts and preludes to invasion in north France, Germany will need all her sons on the battlefronts. It must be a terrible fight for them in Italy. Hated and abused whenever they are seen, it is a great wonder that in their adversity their fighting morale is as stiff as ever. One can't help respecting so fanatical a devotion to one cause. How right Churchill was when he said, on the occasion of Montgomery's advance in Libya, that we had seen the end of the beginning. We had the news of the

surrender while we were at sea, and one of the ships signalled us “Have received news of the surrender of Italy. Drink ye deep!” When we got in we found that besides Italy’s surrender it happened to be the 2nd anniversary of the ship’s commission, so I sent a bottle of whisky forward. The troops all went to sleep forward that afternoon!

The tone of this port is surprising. They like us but they certainly dislike the Yanks. I think the latter try talking to them about fighting which the locals dislike because they have been fighting in this war as long as we have, and their feelings on the subject run far deeper than the Yanks. It is a matter of fact. New World forthrightness goes down well nowhere. The British, however, who seldom relate their experiences or air their views on fighting, are regarded as brothers-in-arms even if there is plenty of "what do the British mean by interfering with the toilet of "La France" as she dresses herself again after her period of invalidism". Anyway as far as we are concerned the officials are the soul of courtesy and helpfulness or so one gathers from their gestures! The British matelots had a tremendous reception at the parade some weeks ago on THE DAY as the locals call it. They had more applause, I think, than did all the other detachments together. They certainly admire our fighting men, while suspecting the intention of our politicians.

14 Sept

What with one thing and another I was rather interrupted in the first half of this letter. We had petrol reported in our bilges which terrified us considerably, as you can imagine what an explosion would follow if the vapour ignited from cigarette or galley fire. Fortunately we got the stuff clear all right in one night, and were able to come back to our jetty the next morning by 10 o'clock.

Mysterious letters have been arriving addressed to the ship to ordinary seamen whose names we have never heard of. It looks as if reliefs for our ship's company have arrived in the Service if not in West Africa. Our troops are all overjoyed about it.

Au revoir – and I hope my relief doesn't take so long as I expect.

Lots of love, Lawrence.

[illegible]

8 Oct 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

Thank you so much for the two air mail letter cards, dated 7th and 17th September respectively, which reached me yesterday. Thank you even more for your kind and understanding comments about Julie Goodall. It is comforting to know that there is sympathy at home after all Norrie's cynicism (half humorous, but none the less painful for that). Unfortunately I haven't a photo of her to hand available. Up here in Dakar I have plenty of opportunity to think over the problem, for which I couldn't ever marry her in West Africa I should like to when we get home. She has another 8 months or so to do out here, but thereafter her movements are as uncertain as mine will be. In the meantime we are keeping in touch by mail. I would I were back in Freetown, yet I am glad I am not just now. It's like that. Fascination. Your remarks about inconstancy are untrue in Dakar at any rate – that city of temptations.

I enclose some photos taken when Norrie left the ship. I've name the photos on the back – even the group of the ship's company as you may recognise some names from past references. It will also enable you to recognise your son, whose dissipated aspect is due more to the effect of the climate on the film than on him (I hope).

This is my third attempt to write this letter. Having lost the fountain pen I have had so long and become so attached to, I bought this French effort, which is quite inferior and seriously impedes my writing as well as inking my fingers thoroughly and maliciously. My two previous attempts were torn up because either the pen or my originality (under the influence of the pen) ran dry. [In fact his writing seems more legible with this pen – Ed.]

I am convalescent after a heavy midday meal up town, this evening. Omelette, chicken, and other delights. Hence my ridiculous way of writing. Food has a curious effect on the mind, after the

I have just been dealing with one of my crew who managed to overstay his all night leave by 83 hours! Poor boy, he says he got bombed out in London, and has “ringing in his ears and fits of terrible depression”. Whether this is true or not I wouldn’t like to say, but it certainly sounds like some sort of neurosis. He may be scared about staying on the ship, of course, and he may be trying to work his ticket, though he put up a pretty good show of nattering imbecility when he saw the Barrack Commander today (inexorable Naval discipline had carried the case that far). The boy (he’s only 20 and an ordinary seaman) may get away with it if the MO is in a kind frame of mind; but he’s not very easy to get around. He was attached to the 8th Army in N Africa and knows very well what a leadswinger looks like.

20 May 1944

From: ML 246

Dear Mummy

How I envy you at Mark now! The spring must look lovely in the garden and in the orchard. Now a little rain to make up for the previous drought, and we'll have the traditional April sun smiling in rain drops on the spring flowers. We should have had it last month of course, but things seem to have been reversed. All I have here is gaunt piles of blasted masonry and dandelions growing in desolate piles of rubble. Still there are parks with glowing chestnut trees white and pink if you choose to walk far enough to see them.

It's a desolate picture indeed at half-past nine of an evening; beer runs out early and the only decent pub has been commandeered; so all the more do I envy you at Mark with the Packhorse Inn next door!

One of my men managed to get so drunk that he passed out altogether and didn't get back to the ship until six o'clock in the morning, and I nearly forgot myself so much as to ask him where he found that much when he was brought before me. I think it was a question of a weak head more than any unusual quantity of beer, though. And the cream of the joke was that the next morning the poor fellow couldn't remember where he'd been himself, the coxswain tells me. So (perhaps fortunately) this valuable piece of intelligence was withheld from the rest of the crew.

My operational boss is a delightful fellow, a Commander Struben, RN. At first sight he appears an ordinary "dugout" of about 45. But though this is so he is not really an ordinary one, as I will relate. We have got to know one another pretty well now, as he usually come out in me with his staff on ops, and the other day he told me what he was doing before the war as we had our dinner together in the wardroom on the way back from an exercise.

He used to own a trading schooner manned by Kanakas in the Pacific islands (I forget which group exactly) and sail around with cargoes of gold and pearls from island to island and nuts and food and other things like that. What a life! It's the sort of life that people write novels about, who've never been there. He made a lot of money out of it, but as he said it was no good for a married man, so when he got married he came back to England and settled down just before the War. He's a seaman to his fingertips after all these bottom-polishers who sit around ashore here in offices.

Have you read "The Pompadour" by Margaret Trower? I've just finished it now, a wizard book which gives a good description of 18th century France before the revolution with its splendours and squalors, as well as excellent portraits of Louis XV, the Marquise de P herself, of course, Voltaire, and many other prominent men in court in this brilliant over-civilisation. It is curious to compare it with modern times, or even contemporary times in England. In France the Court was full of artists, in England and Germany it was Generals and professional politicians. The whole book rather tends to favour and sympathise with La Pompadour, perhaps unduly. She was certainly a very great woman.

I've lost my fountain pen. You see me using this one of the No 1's, which makes my writing very odd.

If we're in harbour tomorrow, I'm planning to spend the afternoon ashore somewhere in the country. It's fresh air we're after. You can probably guess where I shall be going: where I told you I went before. Brownie and I'll go together, I suspect.

A letter arrived from Julie today. Very affectionate.

L.

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13 Jun 1944

From: "same as usual"

Dear Daddy,

This is our seventh day off the beaches, and our eighth away from England. We sailed with the first group of landing craft to leave England, and were the first wave to touch down on enemy soil. And we belonged to the centre British force. So you can see by my blatant boasting how in the forefront we have been: and very proud of it I am. There were no casualties in my ship at all, and the only damage done to her has been due to weather and my clumsiness in handling her after sleepless nights. The weather really was bloody for the first couple of days, and on the way over, there were only two or three in my ship's company who were not seasick. And then off the beaches I went so close in that we touched bottom, so lightly though that no damage was done, and in towing a disabled landing craft fouled my screws with the towing hawser. It was amazing how little opposition we saw on our beach, considering how Rommel had boosted his Atlantic wall; and I hear the same story from other beaches – just a few inevitable casualties from machine gun and mortar fire, and that is all.

The passage over was an amazing and awe-inspiring sight. Such an armada has never before left our coasts; from Falmouth to the Thames they came, all steering south. Being the leading group we could look back on it, and just see mistily to east and west other groups sailing south parallel to us. From the air the continuous drone of "tornados" and "lightnings" escorting us. Cruisers and other fleet units visible sometimes far out on our flanks. And then as we approached the Normandy coast during the night of D-1/D day the vivid orange bursts and concussions of the saturation bombers sent in ahead of us could be seen on the horizon. An inquisitive Jerry dropped some "Christmas tree" flares over my group, but I don't think he spotted anything for there was a heavy sea running and you couldn't see much for all the full moon. My craft was scheduled to touch down at 0720, and shortly before that the destroyers and support craft opened up to cover us with all they had, aiming at the beach and pillboxes on it over open sights.

All D day we were frantically busy, and of course the next night nuisance bombers, so you can imagine that I was a bit tired on D+1 forenoon. The ship's company were magnificent, and were only sorry that there wasn't more action against surface craft that they could get their teeth into. The excitement before we actually sailed was terrific; of course I knew all about it some time before we went, but as soon as I briefed my officers the ship had to be sealed, a sentry posted in the gangway, and rigid orders forbidding anyone to come aboard or to go ashore. Then I gave the crew a pep talk, told them what we were doing, and gave them a bottle of beer each from the wardroom supply – quite illegal, of course, but also quite a good thing, I think. Then we just had to wait to hear whether it was on, or not. I went aboard the ship we were lying alongside that night, and talked with her captain (she was a kind of large landing craft) and some Army officers of what we were to do, how we were to do it, and all the thousands of things one does talk about in these circumstances. And above all we talked of the super colossal party we would have after it was all finished, and how we would all be carried back to our ships insensible. But it looks as if the edge will be off the party when we do get back, for we started early in the morning of the 5th, and it is now the thirteenth, and there is no sign of our being relieved. I don't even know when or even if this letter will reach you. It's quite pleasant now here, actually, though a bit boring fiddling about in the anchorage.

It's an amazing sight, this anchorage: chock-a-block with shipping, with landing craft darting to and fro amongst the majestic liners and freighters discharging their cargos. It's like a great city, with organisation much the same, water, food, fuel, and a hundred and one necessities taken care of by different ships specially brought out for the purpose. And a constant movement of big ships, convoys arriving, convoys going, with their attendant destroyers and corvettes busily chasing up stragglers and leading newcomers to their berths. There has been a strange lack of enterprise up till now on Jerry's part in his attempts to disorganise the anchorage. Perhaps he'll stage a big scale attack for which he's saving up his forces – or perhaps he just hasn't got the material. At all events the life of this great pulsating organism is very strong at the present time.

What affects us mostly in the weather, so when you read in the newspapers that "the weather off the beaches was worse today" think of us poor sailors!

The gentle contours and wooded slopes of the pleasant Brittany coast look very attractive as we lie here at anchor a mile off shore. The houses look a bit knocked about though, but I'd like to get on dry land again and stretch my legs and drink French wine and maybe chuck a French girl under the chin again! That is a very long mile, though, and I don't see us getting ashore for a long

things. Though God knows heart trouble is no joke. It has, however, the fortunate side in that it will compel your graceful retirement to Mark.

I hope you will excuse this most informal writing paper [*naval message proforma* – Ed] – all I have in the ship at the moment – and hope it won't make my handwriting quite illegible. As you can see, its proper use is for taking down wireless messages.

The news of the capture of Caen has just come through to us. We could very nearly see [*next few words cut out from paper, presumably to obscure their location – Ed*] from where we were at anchor – an artillery barrage like summer lightning flickering in the southern sky, and formations of heavy bombers droning overhead with their loads of high explosive; you could see the German flak and searchlights as well – searchlight beams criss-crossing in the bombers' path, and starry shell bursts amongst them. Rather a fine spectacle in the bright moon light. It is high time Caen fell, too, for it has entirely held up our progress on this flank. But for it we should have taken Le Havre by now.

I have just been aboard one of our big dépôt ships for a conference, and it is a never-failing pleasure to be able to walk on thick carpets and to be able to imagine oneself for a few hours in a sumptuous London hotel. I am sure the chaps who live in them only see the sea once or twice a day – during their evening constitutional on deck. It's just like living ashore near a seaside resort. And if they get their pants wet they're scared stiff of pneumonia. But perhaps I'm being ungenerous; they can't help the jobs they get, poor blighters. And I am all the more ungenerous when I remember that I was invited down their wardroom for a gin by the very decent 2½ ring doctor they have there – Pickering by name, but no relation to the famous Thomas's man. And the liquor they had! 'Twas like peacetime. As you see, my scorn is definitely tainted by envy!

But still, I've had had Pickering down here since and repaid his hospitality.

The weather is blowing up again foully today, strong winds from the west, so we shall have an uneasy night.

So cheer up and get well quickly, Daddy, and we'll have a return game of golf when I get back and you get better!

Love, Lawrence.

17 Jul 1944

[Note – FPM died on 15 July 1944, but news of this had evidently not reached LPM before he wrote this letter – Ed]

From: ML 246

Dear Daddy

We got back from the British Assault Area today, and I found waiting for me a very welcome letter from you. You sounded cheery and optimistic. I hope to have a fairly decent dollop of leave in the fairly near future, which will recompense us for our exertions over the last three months. I need not say how much I am looking forward to spending a week or so with you on your return to Mark, and to seeing Owen again after a very brief meeting last month.

I had the good fortune to be able to get ashore for an afternoon in Normandy, and get a first hand impression of the destruction that has been wrought there and of the feelings of the French inhabitants. Of the latter there is no doubt; they hate Hitler with a truly Gallic fervour. But whether they love the British with a like enthusiasm is not so apparent. But it is much to expect a virtually homeless population to love the hand that has robbed them of their homes until time has elapsed for emotions to cool and reason to take its place. Shall we say they were restrainedly friends (what else could they be?) and bore us the utmost respect.

Out of the ruins of one little seaside resort arose a perfect little Norman church – entirely undamaged except for a few broken windows. My friend and I went inside and were astonished at the richness and beauty of its furnishings after the austerity of the English village churches. The curé was even then pottering devotedly around in his cassock arranging the flowers. God knows where he lived – possibly in the crypt.

see I know all about Daddy now, and although I miss him and it is painful to think of his physical absence, yet I feel nearer him somehow now, for I feel that he and I share a secret about him that nobody else knows: just what a man he was. And also he influences what I do now far more than when he was alive. Which all sounds very silly and sentimental but is nevertheless the truth. The fact of the secret between us makes me chary of talking about him to anybody, though when I do the least embarrassing part of him was his death. The most embarrassing is his attributes when he was alive. And that is because I know so much more than anybody else. You see? It is all very

[The letter ends abruptly here, and is unsigned - Ed.]

5 Sept 1944

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

Thank you for a large budget of letters which have been forwarded, including one from Gertie Rollo, who I intend to look up, as she lives not far away.

I am getting on swimmingly here. The Captain is altogether a charming fellow, and I get on very well with all the other officers I have met, especially with Bolton by whom I was beaten at chess last night. There is of course a stricter discipline aboard here than about the other ships I have been used to, but if anything that is a refreshing change. The captain is a pretty average RN Lieutenant with not too much money in the bank who gets a kick out of all sorts of pleasantly simple things like watching wrestling matches for 3/- and reading about birds and learning new languages, and apparently requires considerable provocation before he gets really worked up about anything; the First Lieutenant I have only met for a day or so and is just getting married, but he is given an excellent character by the other officers. Altogether I think my good luck holds and I have been given another good ship. It's extraordinary how fortunate I have been with my officers this war; except Edwards and he couldn't help it! Altogether about a year ago according to reports this ship was bloody awful (excuse the language) with a gin-sodden captain and fiendish No 1, so I am fortunate not to have been aboard then! She's pretty efficient now, I should imagine.

The only trouble now is that I don't get enough to do; I potter around and do odd jobs and get to know the ship's company, and go ashore in the evening and see a film or something.

By the way Bob Haywood turned up the day before yesterday and we had a riotous evening together. His wife was awfully pleased with the letter you wrote her – you may be descended upon for a weekend! I think you'd like to meet her.

In the tube in London when I was up I met a bloke who is the son of the nursing-home proprietor on the Highbridge-Mark road. Rather a smooth-faced fellow with an unpleasant moustache, dressed in civvies. We parted insincerely promising each other another meeting "sometime, old boy"!

I saw a very good film here called "Fanny by gaslight" – quite refreshing after the trash there is showing in town now (though its name must surely have an adverse effect upon its box-office?), and I went to see "Pygmalion" again with my captain and Bolton (or Bottom); the latter all the better for being seen a second time. I think it is an awful pity that Leslie Howard was killed – he was a magnificent artist. Do you remember I told you I had seen "The white cliffs of Dover" in London and disliked its sentimentality? I read Punch's criticism of it, and the reviewer and I agree entirely. It's one long drip!

Give my love to Owenus, and my respects to Miss A. Lawrence.

PS You may well be seeing me back again on leave.

Lawrence.

9 Oct 1944

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I forgot when I rang you up, to tell you that Mrs H J Powell's address is 41 Clapham Road, London SW, for the box of eating sharps, that is. They really were most hospitable this weekend, and the doctor introduced me to all his professional friends at Addington. My golf was woefully beneath their standard I am afraid, but they bore with me heroically. In spite of this I enjoyed myself thoroughly – and had the pleasure of meeting John Powell, Tom's younger brother newly in the Welsh Guards, again last night, and with him his anaemic girl friend. Mrs P is as busy as ever at her good works and the better for her holiday away from the doodlebugs. I took her to see the play at the Aldwych Theatre, "Tomorrow the World", a depressing play about the difficulty of re-educating Nazi youths. The Nazi youth in the play was brilliantly acted by a boy of twelve or thirteen. The play left poor Mrs P in a very dejected frame of mind. Perhaps I should have taken her to "No Medals" instead. When I invited her I steered carefully clear of suggesting that it would do her good! Though I think she enjoyed her little outing.

As I told you on the telephone I stayed a night with the Sellers in Mill Hill, on a camp bed in Norman's room to be precise, as they had such a houseful. Pam, the Wren from Queen Charlotte, was there on a visit, and I met Norman's nice little sister Mary (and a silent school friend of hers). Mary is going into the WLA, though I doubt if she'd like getting up at six o'clock! Pa Sellers and Norman and I argued about post-war labour problems until late into the night. Also in the house were two aged and infirm grannies who crept unobtrusively about with ear-trumpets and things. Pa Sellers I should say earns a goodish screw as everything was good (even to a butler) and beautiful garden with smooth lawns and green cypresses. Oh, and I almost forgot, Pa Sellers has been patriotic and produced another son in the last couple of years, of astonishing intellect and prodigious strength. Norman 24 and Mary 19, now another aet 1½ about!

I stayed one night at the King George V Officers' Club in Piccadilly and met D Boyd (Marlborough and Oxford) whom I last met in Dakar when his destroyer tried to ram my ML on my first trip in command. He has grown very conceited and has an unpleasant manner. I'm afraid I walked out of the lounge there in high dudgeon (having had, I am glad to say, the last word!).

I collected my wristwatch this morning and do you now they refused to accept a penny for fixing it for me! And it was actually mended by a form of nautical instrument and chronometer repairers so it had the best treatment in the land. Mr Lamb (who as I told you I met accidentally) then stood me a cup of coffee at his favourite elevenses shop and sent me off wishing me the best of good fortune. There are still many generous people about these days. Mr L has a son fighting in Italy and proudly showed me his photo. An artillery Lieutenant. He's an insurance man himself, but I didn't get a chance to ask him what he thought of Mr Beveridge. I have no doubt the reply would have been unprintable anyway.

The kind-hearted gentlemen of this wardroom have unanimously elected me their representative at the course over which Joyce presides (partly because someone had to attend, and partly because they have a sense of humour) so I shall be busy this week. We are having a more or less formal dinner on Friday to which I am inviting J of course. About 14 will be dining in our wardroom and I am going to need some help over my bow tie. Thank goodness I packed two as well as some wing collars. I rang Joyce up this evening by the way and she seemed very excited that I was taking her course. It will be amusing being stiff and formal at each other and addressing her as "Leading Wren Watt" and her me as "Lieutenant Mackie Sir".

As you will probably deduce from the length of this letter I am duty officer tonight and the only one aboard; penalty for so much leave! Doctor Powell has given me a book on golf and another one on the appreciation and meaning of art, and these have whiled away my time so far. He says when I go to Edinburgh I should take at least 3 months' lessons from a pro on one of the many nearby courses, and then he will play me level at Addington. He's a very good 12 by the way (9 on ordinary courses – Addington is a bit tough going). By the way, you may not believe it but I got up at 7 o'clock on Sunday morning to leave the house at 8 to make Addington by 10 to play in a thick mist till 1, to have dinner, to play from 2 till 4.30 with Drs Clatworthy, Townshend, and Another, to get back after tea and drinks with them at 6.30 and then to catch the 11.45 from Euston and to be aboard the ship at 9 this morning, to feel as fit as a flea when I got here. So you can see 'twas a strenuous 24 hours! And

that was after playing all Saturday afternoon as well with Dr Townshend (the lady golfer). My play deteriorated progressively the whole time, so you can imagine what it was like on Sunday afternoon.

I do not think that there is much else of interest to tell you so
Au Revoir – write soon please. L.

27 Oct 1944

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I've just torn open the letter I wrote you this morning as one came from you before I posted it and requires answering. I've sent a telegram to Lloyds asking them if they did in fact send the £6 to Chas. They have certainly had an order to do so. If it has been neglected I am going to kick up a stink because Mr Pullim is getting slack about quite a lot of smallish matters just lately. Your "enclosure" or letter "sent yesterday" whichever it was has not arrived. Who is talking of letters left in coat pockets now?

You will find a cheque within for £4 being 2/3 share of trunk calls from Wedmore 206 since June 1st. And you needn't get snooty and try and send it back because if you did you would lose £4 and I should lose 2d (for the cheque) which would be a loss whichever way you look at it. It is also for the Packhorse Maintenance Fund.

Good show about the minimax.

I hope CGM had my letter; she doesn't appear to be claiming for income tax return on her money. Could you jog her memory when you see her?

The KOs may be interested, but I fear they will not be gratified. The worst has happened and Joyce has fallen deeply in love with me, but I fear I cannot go through with it – however great my regard for her – because I know that in the end it would not be a success. I'm afraid I shall need someone of tougher fibre to tolerate me for twenty years. But I am very concerned and most worried about poor Joyce. Perhaps I shouldn't have waited so assiduously upon her when we got back. But I have never misled her into believing things that are not so. She tells me that she has a great respect and regard for you: do you think a sympathetic letter from you would be welcome (without mentioning what I have told you above, of course)? I am writing a farewell and thanks letter to her Mama, as I shall soon be out of touch.

Thank you very much for the snarps [?] you sent to Mrs P. She wrote and told me how much they were appreciated. I owe her a lot.

I have had quite a lot of most pleasant mail just recently. A long letter from the Lavender girl as beautifully written as the one you saw, one from Ray Bibby my erstwhile No 2. He is in Puffin, a corvette, now, and shipmates with another old friend of mine Paddy Bramwell who was also with me in Freetown though in another ship of the same flotilla. I have also had two letters from Tom Powell, one a very nice one of sympathy in my father's death, and the other one posted in Sept '43 describing Tom's adventures in Sicily and Salerno. One chatty one from Pat (how she clings) which have taken the risk of answering very rudely indeed in the hope that she (a) will benefit from what I say, and (b) will stop writing to me. If you get an irate letter from Pa Riddell talking about horsewhips you will know why. Also one from John Macbeth of Oxford days, who has heard about Daddy's death. He thinks I'm in the Merchant Service.

I cannot advise A Arthur on a career as I've only met him once. But I will write him if you wish. Though what I shall be able to think of to say I don't know.

We have a doctor aboard now (name of Goodbody!), who has just qualified, just bought a new and very smart uniform, and just joined the Navy. He looks 18 but is 24 and has a wife and child. He is very new and lazy and like me likes to get up at 9 o'clock in the morning. But he is also very pleasant and full of new-fangled ideas and ideals about how to diagnose the various diseases Jack Tar is liable to. So we should have some fun when he runs up against some of our experienced disease-inventors.

I must turn in now. Lawrence.

Hope you are well. Enclosed is a letter from Dr Townshend the lady I played golf with when I stayed with the Powells. I thought I should write and thank her for the good time she showed me, and this is the result. The prescription she alludes to is one of a mixture of gin and sherry, which she treated Dr Powell and me to after the game, and which had a surprisingly powerful effect on the three of us; we were all quite tight.

I wrote to Chris the other day, reminding her once more to claim that income tax back, as I have not heard yet whether she has done so. It's only a question of telling her bank to do so as a routine measure whenever the money comes in.

[illegible]

The run was eventful in more ways than one. They have been having a Navy week in Rotterdam with Naval exhibitions and parades, bands playing, and ships thrown open to the public, and cocktail parties with Distinguished Personages going on until 4 o'clock in the morning and great demands on the aspirin bottle during the forenoon. We were sent to sea in a hurry at the end of it (so much of a hurry that we left our First Lieutenant and a lot of the ship's company on leave) to bring back some of the bodies, and the Portsmouth Division Marine band (crackerjact) and 7 tons of instruments. In the absence of the No 1 I had to double up in the duties of navigator and First Lieut, which made me very haggard by the time we got back, stowing 7 tons of the most odd shaped boxes

On the way over (empty) it was as rough as I have seen in the north sea, and the after messdeck was partly flooded and the after flat quite so. Gear was washed off the upper deck. So you can imagine it was really quite a party. We didn't get into Portsmouth but anchored in Spithead, and John Fleming the No1 who lives in Southsea said how smart we looked from the shore. Small pleasure motor boats with trippers in put-put-put-ted around us with handkerchiefs waving. The No 1 ashore paid sixpence for a seaside telescope "peep at the ships" so that he could criticise my work as No 1 in his absence. He found nothing so complimented me instead when he got back. I expect the longshoreman who hired out the telescope on the pedestal wondered why the gentleman in the grey flannels and the sports coat was so interested in one of the many destroyers lying out in Spithead.

See you soon, I think. L.

From: HMS Mendip

I haven't heard from you for ages. Are you still writing letters to people?

Things have been very slack indeed for some time now, and I am beginning to find time hang pretty heavily on my hands. So next time I come back to Mark I think I'll collect one or two books with me so I can do a bit of reading in my spare time. For me, as for most of the folk aboard, it's simply a question of waiting now with our fingers crossed for our demob date.

There's a lot of nasty driftwood washed into the backwaters of these continental cities. Rotterdam, Antwerp, Ostend are all the same.

This Foreign Minister's conference of Ernie Bevan's seems to have been a pretty average flop, doesn't it? Even the atom bomb hasn't made people forget their narrow nationalisms.

Yours, Lawrence.

[illegible]

6 Oct 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I've just had a letter from Costin who now appears to be senior tutor at St John's College, enclosing a form for details about myself in connection with class "B" demob. So I've filled it in and sent it back, and enclosed with it my correspondence a year ago about release, together with a letter explaining its presence. The Government have a scheme of assistance (financial) for the education of released warriors, under which I may get an annual grant of £160 – probably less in view of my own income. This of course removes the main obstacle to my return to Oxford after the war, and I pointed this out also to Costin, so whisper it not in Gath nor publish it in the streets of Askelon, but something seems to be stirring somewhere.

Our Petty Officer Steward ordered two chickens from Zabby's hen farm and was rather surprised when she demanded to know if there was an officer aboard named "Mackie", and if so, why he hadn't rung up, and how long the ship was to be in for and so on and so on. Our No 1 is reported to have seen the mane "Prentis Champion Court Newnham" on crates containing live chickens, and suggested to the steward he try that address for replenishments to our mess. Dixon reported very gravely to me yesterday that 2 fowls had reported aboard the ship asking for a Lieut Mackie.

I rang up Zabby afterward to thank her, and told her I hoped it wasn't familial considerations which had reduced the price to 25/- a pair. I don't know what you had said to her, but she was most pressing in her invitations this time. Unfortunately it is now out of the question.

Had a most amusing letter from Mr Pullin today in which he told me he'd bought £150 worth of BAC shares for me. The old boy is getting distinctly skittish now that the war is over. He's a nice fellow. Also a most cheery letter from Julie Goodall.

How do you like this – an epitaph on a child (not original poetry, of course)

"Here a pretty baby lies,
Sung to sleep by lullabies.
Pray be silent, and not stir
Th'easy earth that covers her".

I think I would like that on my baby's gravestone if I had a baby and if she died.

To the consternation of all the wardroom our 1st Lieutenant has announced his impending departure. He has been in this one ship nearly five years so he's about due relief. He was very happy in the ship until this man Blackmore joined her and it has been entirely the 1st Lieutenant's influence that has kept the wardroom together since then. Now that he is leaving we shall feel rather like lost sheep. I hope the new man is good. He'll need to be.

Were it not for the fact that I don't think I could tolerate shoreside existence in the Navy, I'd go and ask for a relief as well. But there are positively no ships available; the No 1 is going to a shore base somewhere.

And Blakemore is so dam' polite to me all the time that I don't get an opportunity of venting my spleen ever (perhaps fortunately).

Talking of epitaphs, I have another here whose simplicity appeals to me almost as much as the baby's. It is on the death of Sir Albertus and Lady Morton, and was written by Henry Wotton.

"He first deceased – she, for a little try'd
To live without him, lik'd it not, and dy'd"

You may have heard them both before, but I only came across them last week and they struck me at once. Poor Lady Morton. She lik'd it not.

Work is not exacting, and I have a certain amount of time on my hands. Would it be too much to ask you to wrap up

1. Cunningham's Anatomy
2. Samuel White's Physiology [*I think he means Samson Wright's Physiology*]

at your convenience and send them along to me?

2. I hope to be home for Christmas.
3. I think Miss Love must be an excellent lass if she lives up to her name.

There were, I believe, 2 more questions, but remember them I cannot. They may come back during the course of this letter.

Many interesting and exciting things have happened just recently. The most important is that Tom Powell has suddenly appeared in Sheerness with an HDML and seems likely to be based here. I spent all yesterday at sea in his ship surveying the South Edinburgh channel (one of the passages between the shoals of the Thames estuary). It was perfect autumn weather with a bright sun, a healthy nip in the air, and a blue, blue sky, and as Tom had no actual surveying to do (that was done by his first Lieutenant and a tame surveyor) he and I sat in deck-chairs, yarned about Oxford and our Services, discussed what school my godson (Mr Powell jnr) should attend, and what name should be given to the anticipated addition to the Powell family: carried, Tom Patrick or Linsey Patricia, subject to Mrs P's concurrence. We sat there and watched the big ships pass up and down this great ocean highway, and I was just as happy and contented as I can imagine. There is no doubt there is magic in the sea, in the hidden recesses of it that we were actually probing there and then, in the mysterious shoals and sandbanks, and the feeling that you have when you see the outline of shoals growing on a chart under your hand. The Edinburgh channel is flanked on either side by two great sandbanks; the shingles bank, and the shingles patch. Both can be seen at low tide as wide as a playing field and as golden as a cornfield, and at that so far out to sea that the land is only a low misty streak on the southern horizon. But in rough weather they become bleak and ugly and covered by spume and spindrift and a mane of hurried broken water. Even at high water the seas break over them in sinister white toothed coamers. At night they are a danger to any honest ship, and many have come to grief on them.

So you can see how important it is that they should be accurately surveyed and the extent of their dangers known. The tides run fast and unpredictable around them. Well, anyway, Tom and I sat there and talked of all this, and above all how we're going back to our medicine soon. He's threatening to go to London now because of financial questions and the difficulty of arranging for his wife and family in Oxford. But perhaps Oxford will draw him back in the end.

And then we sailed back to Sheerness straight down the golden path of the setting sun, the perfect end to a perfect day.

2345 hrs. Ha, I have recovered your letter, with the questions.

As regards the visitors book, I would rather you did not use it; but I can probably provide you with a bigger and better notebook from our ship's store.

I think Winchester is off for Christmas – either in Mark or in Winchester.

Glad to hear you're feeling fit and well. So am I.

As ever, L.

17 Nov

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

The weather is shocking. The sleet and rain come whistling down the gulleys between the hills driven by gusts of wind of tremendous power. The ships all strain at their mooring chains, and you can feel this ship plucking and jerking at hers like a nervous dog on a leash. There are little white horses everywhere and every now and then an especially strong gust of wind whips spume off the water and twists it up on its hind legs pirouetting there like a whirling dancer. The sky is hurriedly grey, the varying tones of it tearing past evenly and continuously. You can see the squalls coming off the hills some way away. If you can picture it, a whitish darkness of snow and sleet advancing at fearful speed and driving before it like the hem of a skirt a mist of driven wave-tops just above the water. A low dark cloud comes driving along above the darkness, and scattered fragments break off the cloud, grey and tattered and join the others' onward rush.

Now between the lines of moored ships you see a drifter come, kicking up the little furious waves into intermittent clouds of spray that cover her bridge and funnel and mast. These little ships used to pursue their peaceful job of fishing these waters before the war, and now their hardy sailors have been dressed in the King's rig, given a steady wage, and still in their peacetime ships, but with a white ensign instead of none at all, minister to the bigger ships of the King lying here at anchor. They are lovely little ships, the drifters. They have been built to go to sea to fish whatever the weather, and to stay at sea in weather that would almost deter a destroyer. They have a very deep draught, for steadiness while working their nets, high bluff bows to stem the heavy sea and give their crews the best protection, and wide overhanging sterns so that they shall not be pooped if they have to run before a gale. They have a little mizzen sail rigged aft [*little sketch of a drifter inserted here*] so that they don't have to keep their engines running all the while they are fishing, and to keep them head to wind if they want to lie hove to. All the space is taken up with the fish hold except a microscopical cabin beneath the wheelhouse and the engines beneath the funnel. Now their fish holds carry all the paraphernalia of a fleet at war; ammunition, rope, food, equipment, bread, meat, rifle bullets, and God knows what. They come puffing out to us, unload their cargo and disappear again leaving the ship freshly victualled and maybe a little plume of black smoke to show us the way they're gone.

It's a hive of activity, an anchorage like this. Ships' motor boats purr busily about carrying officers and men from ship to ship about their various duties. There is a perpetual clamour of the clouds of seagulls as they swirl about disputing for the cans of refuse that are thrown into the sea. The depôt ships, motionless, lie majestically and huge to their mooring buoys attended fussily by the swarm of motor boats, drifters and all manner of small craft which jostle alongside and come and go perpetually.

Now you see a long grey shape poke its nose round the point of the land and another destroyer, with salt on her funnel, feels her way cautiously into her allotted berth to sleep for a day and a night before she's out again. They creep unostentatiously in and out, these ships, and few but themselves and the control people ashore know where they have been and what they have done. If you go over in the boat and meet them and talk to them, they don't say much, except perhaps "that the weather was bloody", or that "they didn't see a thing – visibility a mile and a half for two days". Then you hear something on the wireless about five grey ghosts that came out of the North Sea mist and killed a German convoy, and then disappeared into it again. They were the chaps who did see something, or perhaps the chaps who you didn't ask because you hadn't seen them for a couple of days L.

PS Doc Goodbody is Julian Millikan's cousin.

PS2. I hope the pig is well.