# 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

From: Mess 95, Q.D., HMS Raleigh, Torpoint, Cornwall

**Dear Mummy** 

I'm so sorry not to have written earlier, only we're in the seventh week, and I'm doing voluntary instruction almost every evening, so it doesn't leave much time.

Anyway, I had a wizard weekend at home – it was just the tonic I needed. But I had an awful journey back. I must tell you about it. You know my train was due to go at about one o'clock in the morning? Well Lambert and I met each other per arrangement at the station, and as I may have told you we were due in at Plymouth North Rd at a quarter past 5. Well, we waited and waited at Temple Meads for our train to come, and as heard it was hours late we decided to doss down on a luggage barrow with my macintosh underneath, and Lambert's coat on top. The train eventually turned up at Bristol at the same time as it was due in Plymouth: 5.15. So you can guess what time we got back to the Raleigh – about half past ten, and we were due in at 7! Dawn was breaking as we went through Exeter, and after our fitful slumbers I can tell you those sandwiches and biscuits were an <u>absolute Godsend</u>. We split them into two equal parts and ate every crumb.

Nobody minded our coming in late very much, as most of the others coming back from Bristol were on the same train and of course equally late. There must have been about 50 lads lined up outside the Master-at-Arms' office that morning.

Our class is now in its seventh week – we begin the eighth tomorrow, actually, and so we have been doing a bit of gunnery. I think I shall take up gunnery for the future, after talking to various POs about it, and so I am going to the divisional office to tell them about it later. It seems the smartest and best school to go into, and from what I can make out the torpedo men seem to be the odd-job men about the ship. And the gunnery men are undoubtedly the specialists. You see, torpedoes are rapidly being taken out of cruisers and heavier ships after the River Plate battle and so on bigger ships torpedo men will degenerate to electric light parties and odd job men.

I haven't heard anything about a commission yet, but expect to during this next week. If I don't it won't necessarily mean that my commission is definitely off. They may reserve their recommendation and send a private report into the Commander of the ship I am posted to. That reminds me that when I leave here in two weeks time when I leave this place, I have definitely decided to go to the Devonport Barracks and not to Chatham. There was the chance of Portsmouth, but that has now been withdrawn. That's about all the news there is. Things are going along very quietly.

Love, Lawrence

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12 Nov 1940

From: HMS Raleigh, Torpoint, East Cornwall

Dear Parents,

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

London, who was chief clerk in an electrical combine – and evidently held a most responsible position, and myself. All five had separate interviews with our Subdivisional Officer. Anyway, I presume some investigation and reports were dealt with during the week after the interviews mentioned, and in the end Simpson and I went on to interviews with the SDO (Senior Divisional Officer) and the Training Commander, and were told that we had been chosen from our mess, and the other three (poor blighters) have evidently been passed over. This puts us in the enviable position of being in special quarters in barracks, and of going to sea at the first possible vacancy, and being given preference over the others less fortunate.

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 did't mind. Very much.

The weather is simply awful. It's been blowing a full gale for the last 24 hours, and raining at intervals like cloudbursts. The Mess leaks like a sieve, and the rain blows through the window casing. The Geordies (or Tynesideans) insist on having the radiators full on and the windows tightly shut all night, so it's no wonder we all have terrible colds.

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.

We are doing our last gunnery now: the most advanced gun drill they teach us here. We have to know the positions of all the men on the various types of gun, and discuss most technically the various new types of gun brought into the Service. So although we aren't as energetic as we were with arms drill and so on we get through plenty of work still.

Looking forward to seeing you on Tuesday or Wednesday,

Love from Lawrence

27 Nov 1940

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

Dear Mummy

Above you see what I hope is my correct address. We are a bit crowded at the moment, and so I haven't put my mess number in yet, as it may be changed just now.

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.

I believe that in the excitement this morning I forgot my car registration book, which I think you will find on the top of the chest of drawers in my room. Could you please enclose it in your next letter to me? Without it I can't draw my December petrol ration.

I am told that we (the Collingwood or commission recommended blokes) get Christmas leave as well as the seven days we've all already had – so I shall be seeing you again before I sail – unless of course we're drafted to a ship before our leave falls due. I also hear that instead of a fortnight here it may be as long as five or six weeks before we are dispatched. I have been considering, therefore, volunteering for a DA draft – or one for the purpose of bring American destroyers across the Atlantic. They appear to give preference to Canadians, who have not seen home for a long time, for this job, and very rightly so, and in addition to this there are all sorts of rumours concerning the mysterious disappearance of some during previous crossings. But it is an opportunity to go to sea soon instead of waiting for the normal time, and after all that is what I joined the Navy for.

We lucky ones of the Collingwood have every other evening off – from 4.15 pm till 7 am so we are allowed to sleep out. That is very convenient for blokes who have their homes in or near Plymouth. We also don't have to do all sorts of dirty duties that the other poor blighters have to do so at first sight it looks as if the life is going to be easier than the Raleigh used to be. But perhaps it's too early to be optimistic.

My regards to Dr Rhind, Lawrence

16 Dec 1940

From: Mess 33, Collingwood Class, Exmouth Block, RN Barracks, Devonport

Dear Mummy

I am afraid that our chances of Xmas leave are now so remote as to be not worth while considering. Unfortunately we who joined Drake after seven days leave from Raleigh have the bad luck just to be the wrong side of the dividing line between leave and none at all. We made vigorous efforts to get it – but we just couldn't do it.

By the way, do you remember Chris saying something about sponges for Christmas? Well, could you drop her the hint that I really would like one – a small one if possible so that it will fit nicely into my sponge bag.

I paid a visit to Kitty and kids a few days ago, and spent a shivering afternoon in her windswept house. The afternoon was scarcely a success, as to begin with I had a bit of a headache, and Gordon, that imp of the Devil, did all he could to make it worse. In the end I had to ask Kitty for a couple of aspirins – which she most willingly gave me. Perhaps she suspected the cause of the headache. Looking back on it now, it all seems a bit silly, but at the time there were moments when I could have willingly strangled the child. An added complication was the fact that Nell had a dose of chicken pox, and Gordon and she had to be rigorously separated for fear of infection when Richard came home. Nell is a nice girl, and has a bent for biology. So I spent most of the afternoon in her company, with Gordon bansheeing outside, and Mummy pacifying. They invited me to spend a day at Christmas when Rupert is home. I shall take my own aspirins and a pair of ear plugs, as I think I shall go because I do like 4/5ths of the family.

As there is no chance of a Plymouth to Bristol run this month, I am using my December ration with a clear conscience, and my machine is covering some mileage. I tried out my new prop shaft universals on the Plymouth embankment – a wide road straight for a mile and a half, and did well over fifty to overtake a "Luxicab" (luxurious taxicab, portmanteau word). She kicked around badly owing to bad steering, but there was no sign of any vibration.

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".

This Mess is absolutely different from the last. Here one listens to lads saying casually "Oh yes, when I was playing for the Varsity in '37 .....", and that sort of thing. I don't know that there is much difference in the meal time scrum, though. Apparently rich and poor have similar abdomina. Please, <u>please</u>, <u>PLEASE</u>, send me some of my books. If you could bear the postage, could you wrap up my PHYSIOLOGY (Samson Wright) and a biology and/or a botany book. I find that I just can't exist much longer without them. It's funny, how now that I should have less hankering for them, I find that I need them most. You should see my scribbling pad. It's a mess of physiology diagrams and biological descriptions. I can't remember any osmotic pressure theory, and things like that annoy me. They should make me more grateful than almost anything else. And I mean that.

Ever so much love, you two patrol-by-nights. Lawrence.

24 Dec 1940

From: O/S LP Mackie, Mess E33 TD, Collingwood Class, RN Barracks, Devonport

**Dear Parents** 

Thank you so much for your present, the plates of the Sea Dog. Very interesting; while I was reading it someone asked me whether they left a blank space in the end for <u>my</u> photo or painting. It has happened at last. Chris wrote to me enclosing the sponge as "Sub. Lieut. Mackie, RNVR". After passing numerous officers and survived the surprised stares of indignant Petty Officers, it arrived in the mess when I was out, and you can imagine what sort of reception I got when I returned and was handed the letter by my messmates. But it didn't detract from the welcome I gave the sponge. My face should be cleaner now.

They have made me Mess Captain, and I have a certain amount of amusement arranging the holly and decorations for Christmas, and a certain amount of trouble organising the mess cooks, what with everyone going on Xmas leave, and going out just at the wrong time, and so on. Simpson is all fixed up for a patrol vessel, the Wellington, and a couple of friends of mine and contemporaries have gone to the Galatea, a light cruiser. Ian Simpson doesn't go for another seven days, so I am spending a quiet Christmas with him and his wife at Bigbury. It is such a wonderfully restful place out there. I spent a night there last Saturday, and have seldom spent so pleasant an evening. A brisk walk to the pub after dinner, over the sands to the island, and John Haig to warm you up. Then a long drawn out toe-warm by the fire back home again, and an intelligent conversation ranging from music to psychology and the maid's varicose veins. Then a languid bath (tap control by big toe only), and so to bed, as Pepys says. The only snag is the ringing of the alarm clock at 4.45, and the long cold dark drive to the barracks. twenty three miles over the moors. But when I got up I found with their usual consideration the Simpsons had left me a vacuum flask full of hot milk, and some Ovaltine powder, besides a scarf and a huge travelling rug to keep me warm in the car. There is no end to some people's kindness ane Winnie, Ian's adopted daughter, was in ravishing form, and received a succulent kiss goodnight. In case you should harbour any false impressions, I should point out that she is only five or six years old. The Mess is very Christmassy. Holly all round the hammock beams, and Christmas hampers are being opened by lucky lads, who unpack the little parcels inside them and distribute the contents around the Mess. One chap on my right has just opened a typical one. Handkerchiefs, apples here and there, 50 Players cigarettes, chocolates, sweets, meat paste, and lemon and pots come out one by one. I'm smoking one of the cigarettes now, and have just finished one of the soft-centred chocolates. It's great fun watching them come out, and the varied expressions of joy or disappointment – all of them tinged with a background of deep appreciation for the trouble taken by the respective parents or wives. The present I have chosen for you may take some time to come, as I have to write up to London for it. It is for you and Daddy to use alternately. You will see why when you get it. A Bristolian who has only just come has brought me news and photographs of the town, and Clifton. I can only reiterate how I thanked God when I read that single line on the back of that readdressed

Love and the very best wishes for the new year – and for Christmas of course! Lawrence.

letter saying that you were all right at home.

From: OS L Mackie, Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

Dear Mummy

I hope you are all right after the renewed raids on Bristol – incendiary and otherwise. From what I can gather from the wireless, you must be having a pretty thick time of it what with one thing and another. We don't get any newspapers, so I can't learn any details about the raids, but they mention a "SW Town" so often that they must mean either Bristol or Plymouth.

Unfortunately all the letters we write from here are censored, so I have to be careful in what I say – so you must excuse me if I am a trifle vague about things. One advantage I have, and that is that my writing is probably lousy enough to make it unintelligible to the cifer (or is it censor?) officer aboard this ship.

I don't know whether my last letter reached you. After I had posted it I read a notice that informed me somewhat belatedly that Naval ratings were not permitted to dispatch letters from that particular locality, and instructed me to wait until I was aboard ship. It is quite possible therefore that it never reached you. They may have torn it up, not because it contained anything injudicious, but just because of the principle. That would be just like the Navy.

Now that I know a bit more about life on a destroyer, I can give you a fuller account. The Eclipse is a ship of approximately thirteen hundred tons, built in 1934, I believe. That is, she is not exactly new, and not very old. The crew are a most amusing lot of blokes. Many of them are Regular Navy and Fleet Reserve men, and others are conscripts. When lined up in the morning they wear a variety of clothing which would grace the pages of some of RL Stevenson's piratical novels as illustrations. Do you remember the original conception of the pirates' head gear, for instance? An old sock stretched on the head with the foot hanging over the ear, for instance. Or a shapeless knitted object pulled down one side. Those are just exactly what everyone wears here. Most of the POs and leading seamen wear a regulation cap, though, and so it seems almost to have grown into an emblem of authority. Of course the very senior Pos wear a regulation peaked Petty Officer's hat. And that looks too too senior and superior, almost an Orficer in fact.

OON the subject of Officers, we would appear to have a pretty good lot on the whole. The Skipper is, from all that I can hear, a very good man at handling his ship, which is one consolation. There are six of the altogether, with one warrant officer for gunnery. They comprise the Skipper, a Lieutenant-Commander, the First Lieutenant, and then Subs, one RNVR, perhaps the best of the bunch, and an Engineer Lieutenant. Oh – and a Surgeon Lieut. Making 8 altogether.

The Surgeon Lieutenant is Barts, I am told, name of "Temple". He can't have left more than a year or two ago. I may have seen him walking around there when I was at the hospital.

Yes, destroyer life is pretty hard – especially at sea, when one's sleep, and everything, is disorganised, and all the time seems to be spent in nipping up and down steel ladders and manning guns, and so on. But I'm getting used to it.

Cheerio for the present

Love, and please don't get yourselves hurt! Lawrence.

16 Jan 1941

From: Mess 3, HMS Eclipse

**Dear Mummy** 

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.

How is our dear friend Christobel, by the way? You know, Mummy, for all the nasty cracks you make about her, there's a lot more in that girl than you think. And the <u>numbers</u> of her <u>letters</u>! I'm quite swamped by them! You'll think of her when I tell you about London in my next paragraph. 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.

What a terrible time you have been going through at Bristol. It is all so senseless, isn't it? All this useless destruction of valuable human lives. But all this has been said so often before, and so much better put. But we in this ship feel perhaps almost more than other people who are actually in it, how tragic it is. For here one can get to know the menfolk of an average cross section of the people of England, and hear from them of the houses that are now barren ruins, and the wives that they will never see again. I don't want to get morbid, so I won't say any more on the subject.

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.

We haven't had any leave yet, and I am afraid to say I really don't think there's any chance of any until the three months have elapsed – not till March.

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

Well, I think that must be all for now, so good luck, Mummy, and God be with you. Lawrence.

25 Jan 1941

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

Dear Mummy

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.

I have got a new job on board now. Instead of "working pary of the ship", as it is called, I am now one of the Bosn's mates, for harbour duties only. That entails running messages generally for the officers, and piping the hands of the ship to their various stations whether it's to dinner, to fall in, or to watch. The snag attached to it is that in harbour I have to keep watches through the night, unlike the rest of the ship's company, and stand by for anything happening. I think it is better than blistering one's hands working with wires on the forecastle, though, which I had to do before.

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Well, I'm back on board again after a most hectic evening. I wouldn't say we painted the city pink, but we came quite near it. I drank neat whiskey all the evening just to see what it felt like, and of the three of us in question, Aussie and I got back to bed at 3.30, and Mike with milk at 7. Much of the proceedings I don't remember clearly. I know we somehow joined up with two muscular Polish soldiers, and the five of us made an imposing line. Aussie is a real rawboned Australian digger, Mike, though rather a poop, is a muscular sort of bird, and the two Poles, as I've already said, are no Murghi's (or Indian chicken). We walked down the main streets linked arm in arm, chanting Poland, England, Australia, and boy, did the townies melt away in front of us! People scuttled out of our way like rabbits, and wherever we went there was a clear space for about 20 yds in front of us, though the rest of the pavements were very crowded (being a Saturday night).

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  $15^{th}$  I think, and one separated dated about  $22^{nd}$ . 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  $3^{rd}$  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  $1\frac{1}{2}$  stamps to write to me. I've only just discovered! Lawrence.

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  $2^{nd}$ . 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

seem that things are as bad as they were in 1917. Lord Woolson is very frank, but it still makes me wonder how it was that we were able to have so much of everything last autumn, when I should have thought we ought to have been storing up foodstuffs to last us over the winter and spring. 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.

The medico is blood grouping everyone who wants to be done on board here, and of course I've lost my blood group card and can't for the life of me remember what class I am in, so I shall have to be done again. He asked me to give a hand if the rush of people offering blood samples is great, but I don't know whether he refers to the actual drawing of the blood or the testing of it afterwards. I've read up Sammy Wright to refresh my memory on the theory of the business, so I'll be prepared for anything.

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.

With regard to what you said about your difficulties owing to the absence of the Spa Hotel doctor and psychologist, I should suggest you take the facts regarding the two ladies concurrently in the order set down, and make use of the Spa Hotel man's prescription as ordered. Be careful to note in the dossier where figures are used (e.g. "5"), and when they are written (e.g. "five"), and regard them as such, and you will find the notes easier to understand I think.

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!

Lawrence

18 Feb 1941

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

Dear Mummy

Thank you for yours of the thirteenth, just to hand. Hats off to Major Turner, and thank him from me for his messages (both of them) please. I am under no delusions as to the seriousness of the situation, and do not from now on intend to repeat the performance unless in a case of some importance. Hitherto, as you may have noted, the treatment has been more in the form of graduated exercises, arranged so that you can be able to do the job without outside assistance.

You will find that this letter will probably have travelled by air mail. Don't be alarmed or surprised by this; for it is due to ground transport difficulties, I am informed. Normally the mail goes by train, and the services are somewhat disjointed now.

Very glad to hear Richard has arrived safely at his new school. These long train journeys must be very exhausting for a boy of his age, or for anyone else for that matter. I know, when I first joined this ship the train journey lasted over three days, and left behind it a depression more than anything else, which stuck onto me until I was well and truly settled on board. Train journeys in Canada never seem to last less than twelve hours as far as I can see, places being so far apart.

I had a note from Poole – St JC [St John's College, Oxford] Senior Tutor, the other day, wishing me luck and hoping I didn't regret giving up medicine for the Navy. Nice of him, I think I had another from the bank, informing me that my credit balance now stood at close on £20, which is good news. 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

must be very short at home for housekeeping money and whatnot, and I feel that it would be very unfair of me to keep it, as I am being paid regularly. Tell me what you think about this. The alternative is National Savings Certificates, which I shall of course put all my spare money into.

By the way, if you find some big gaps between my letters, don't think I've forgotten to write; it's only that when actually at sea mail is impossible and writing letters almost so.

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!

Ever so much love from Lawrence

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1 Mar 1941

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

Dear Mummy

Thank you ever so much for the parcel and for the letter. I haven't heard anything about the first family war death. Daddy's letter hasn't arrived. But I don't believe they've sorted all the mail out yet, so I may get it tomorrow. I will hold up this letter till then.

I've had a terribly tiring evening; the ship trying to come to a buoy in very dirty weather at night, with half a gale blowing. The buoy jumper fell off the buoy, and spent an awful 15 minutes in the ice cold windswept water. The port whaler broke loose and had to be picked up by another ship. Searchlights playing on tossing boats and ensuing [?] matelots. They're secured at last, but for one I am just about all in. So I shall go to my hammock just now and finish this note tomorrow. This winter is worse for weather than the last, they tell me, and we haven't been out yet without having had at least one gale warning, and far out in the Atlantic the seas can be terribly big.

We have been having some very interesting talks with one of our officers (who went on the same course as we are doing) on the subject of navigation. Very helpful. And he says that it is a tremendous help if you can go to the King Arthur with at all events a preliminary knowledge of that subject.

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2 Mai

Daddy's letter arrived this morning. Yes, it would seem a more satisfactory arrangement to wait until I've my majority, and then this business of trustees will solve itself. However, as he said, it would be most injudicious if I were to die just now.

I am sorry to hear of my cousin's death. It seems so pointless and wasteful to die that way, rather like Peter Ball's death. There seem to be so many "killed on active service" nowadays, nearly all the result of flying accidents, many of them miles away from the scene of any fighting.

Tell Daddy I am writing him a birthday letter as I can't get anything to give him up here. As regards your Christmas present, it was an "Orilux" lamp, designed specially for ARP work and Home Guards. I saw one a friend of mine had, and you sling it round your neck, and it has two brightnesses, one for reading by, and the other for seeing where you are going with, besides being specially shaded, and having a pencil attached. The first letter I wrote to their address in London went unanswered, and the next was returned "unknown". So you'll have to imagine it until I can bring something home with me for you.

Don't forget to send the photos if you possibly can. Although I've only another month to go I should like to be reminded of home now and then. I enclose a snap of myself. They suddenly mustered all the ship's company and took photos of us all, and what you see is what we usually go around dressed in. Isn't it an awful photo!

I'm writing to Mrs Bessel. It is a lovely scarf. The other one you sent is getting a bit dirty now, so the new one is a valuable relief!

Love, Lawrence

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

Dear Daddy

I hope you enjoyed your birthday as much as you could under the circumstances. I'm sorry I can't get you a present, but you will realise how impossible that is up here. I have just written to Mummy and commented on the financial situation, and your decision seems to me to be the most sensible one. And it has the advantage that on April 11<sup>th</sup> I shall no longer be on this ship, and will probably be closer at hand, so that I may be able to nip up to Bristol for the weekend and talk the matter over with you. It comes as quite a shock to realise that I shall be of age so soon. I'd forgotten all about that business of majority and minority, and it seems such an age ago to my last birthday.

I wrote to Mummy about a week ago to suggest transferring my income to her account for the time being, to help out with her housekeeping money and so on, or to use as she chooses. It would be of far more use to you than to me, and I must say I feel very selfish keeping it all to myself when I am earning enough to support myself with – and some over.

Doesn't it seem years and Donkeys ears ago to the happy times of family birthdays at Felden and Winterbourne? Those wonderful days of carefree happiness, cricket on the lawn with the people up the road – Agnews and Dowsons – and lying underneath the silver birch watching Richard batting studiously in the sunlight. Sitting down here thinking, looking at the sky through the open port-hole brings all those scenes back with amazing clarity. And then the big room at Felden at night, with its velvet curtains drawn, and a huge log fire blazing at the grate, and a portly Father Christmas entering through the double doors. Rows of eager faces on the sofa, lit only by the firelight and the Chinese lantern, and above all the Christmas tree, a mass of scintillating ornament, reflecting the fire in red and gold. And then afterwards the rustle of paper as large and cumbersome parcels are opened, and the litter of wrapping and string on the floor. Those were wonderful days, and I know that I for one never appreciated them. The cynics say that it is only the best moments that one remembers, and that in fact they weren't as perfect as memory paints them. That may be so, but I'd rather stick to memory. Only one more month to go on this ship. The last two have slipped by very quickly with me here: perhaps because you're always busy on a destroyer. I hope this one goes as quickly. I want to get on and know whether my recommend goes through or not. Signs may be encouraging, but you never know you know do you? (sort that one out!). They were sorting out the number of sea miles run by this destroyer during the month of February, and the result is fabulous. The weather has been continuously bad, too, and we never get enough time in harbour to catch up on washing and things like that, that have accumulated during our time at sea. But being fairly few and far between we make the most of them. Being Bosn's mate means that I keep sea watches in harbour; one full night in four in my hammock, and so from the point of view of routine it doesn't make so much difference to me. But you can get a certain amount of sleep during the day so we don't go really very short. Now I must close down, and the Mess is going to dinner, and want the table.

Ever so much love from Lawrence.

8 Mar 1941

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

**Dear Mummy** 

I had a brief bout of nostalgia when I read all the old familiar names in the Marlburian Club magazine, but decided it was not worth contacting them; after all, I hardly think it would be worth registering with all its fuss and bother after such a long lapse of time.

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.

How terrible for Gerhardt: that such a fine boy should be wasted mending roads and being treated more or less like an animal behind bars. But still I suppose his treatment is no worse than that of most of the interned Germans during the last war for instance. We ought to be more enlightened now, though.

Looking back now I'm afraid I wrote Daddy rather a poor birthday letter: mostly homesickness diluted with treacle. But still, there is nothing very much else to talk about these days, though there will be the hell of a lot to tell you when I do get some leave. Heaven only knows when that will be.

Did you hear about our operation off the Lofoten islands? Wonderful job, and very well carried out, wasn't it! Rather significant, too, that the British ships were almost entirely left alone by Jerry aeroplanes. They must have all their Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean and Balkans. Hence also the diminution in the frequency of the air raids over England.

I had six hours on end of dreamless sleep this afternoon – 1 o'clock until 7. Just making up for lost time a bit. Partly because this morning the leading hand of the Mess deck threatened to take me on the quarter deck. Can you guess why? Because he couldn't arouse me! Sounds like you trying to wake me of a morning at home, doesn't it.

I'm doing what you say about the Nat. Savings Certificates.

Ever so much love from Lawrence.

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12 Mar 1941

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

Dear Mummy and Daddy

Thank you both very much indeed for two very nice letters. At the same time I have had another one from – guess who! – Lowndes. I wrote him a few days ago, and he seemed most pleased to hear from me again. He is at Rugby now earning a little spare cash as assistant Biology master, and though somewhat incoherent on the subject in the letter seems to be enjoying it better now that he's been there a few weeks and got to know his colleagues. He is also very cock-a-hoop because the editor of Nature debunked effectively a paper disagreeing with him on the subject of the weights of marine animals, and held his theory up as the correct one.

I sent the will off a week ago, in which I left everything to Daddy. If he should predecease me, does the money go on my death to my blood relation (David and Ian), or to Daddy's next of kin (via you to R and O)? I made the will in a hurry in somewhat difficult circumstances, immediately I received it, and I assumed then that the latter would be the case. Your latest letter has aroused a doubt in my mind. If the former is the case I had better rectify the matter.

Yesterday a letter together with pamphlets arrived from my bank manager, and I am buying 15 Nat. Savings Certificates now. I had my eye on an Assurance scheme for buying 3% War Bonds (£100) on what is really an instalment scheme of about £5 yearly for 14 years, but they won't assure me if I'm in the forces. They naively invite me to get it just the same, though. The Sun Life inspector wrote me a very nice letter and told me all about the golden prospects for me in 14 years' time –  $\underline{if}$  I'm still alive to enjoy them. If I'm dead the only people who appear to enjoy them are the Company themselves! Yes, thank you very much, I got the photograph album and assorted gals, together with Mrs Baulsh's socks, which are very welcome. The newspaper cuttings about about the Lotofen Islands also. How perspicatious you are! The photo of seaman battling with the elements on a destroyer from the Telegraph (?) aroused a great deal of interest (purely professional) in the Mess. They claim it was not taken on a destroyer, but on the deck of a cruiser, as no destroyer carries two whalers on one side. I only know ours doesn't.

Well, I must turn into my hammock now, so goodbye for now.

Love from Lawrence

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

#### Dear Mummy

It now seems that we did not come to the ship until January 6<sup>th</sup>, so at the earliest we can not leave until April 6<sup>th</sup>. So visions of a pleasant interlude in Wales have now faded, I'm afraid. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if it isn't later still, too, as we have to take a preliminary board examination before the officers of another ship, before we leave, and this is bound to take a couple of days at least. Do you mind awfully if I bring an Australian home with me? He'll bring his own ration card, so you needn't worry on that score. It is only a question of accommodation. I propose to go right down to Plymouth and pick up the car there (perhaps spending a night of recuperation there) and drive up with this bloke. Mike Yeo, who is on this ship with me, lives in Plymouth, and has pressed me to stay a night if I do go down, and as you can see it will probably take some time fixing up licence and taxing which I allowed to lapse when I left Devonport in December. So you see that will add another couple of days onto the sum total.

I saw a lovely sight this morning. The sun rising behind a layer of early morning mist. It was blood red, and as it came over the mountains, moving bit by bit, I noticed it behind the very battered ensign we were flying. All that is left of the ensign after some days of continuous seatime in bad weather looks most romantic, as though it had been shot away by shellfire. And the complete picture – sun and flag – looked like the coloured patriotic paintings one sometimes sees.

I heard about that bad raid on Bristol, and thought about you in it. My fellow Bristolian in the Mess said there was only one bomb near you, and the centre of the town was one again the part that suffered. There can't be much of that left now.

Do you remember my telling you about the cigarettes we had from the Overseas Tobacco Fund? Well, there is a very surprising and delightful sequel to that. When the cigarettes came they were accompanied by printed postcards bearing the donor's name and address, on which was to be written a brief note thanking him or her for the gift. I filled mine up and got a letter back from the dear old lady who was responsible, and promptly forgot all about it. Yesterday a whacking great parcel containing chocolate, books, playing cars, Stiffies (?), and writing paper came from her. I've just sent her as cordial a latter as I could muster. Isn't it wonderful how these patriotic old women will do anything for you? It was so completely unexpected in this case, too.

Ever so much love, from Lawrence.

31 Mar 1941

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

Dear Daddy

I am afraid it would be quite useless and most injudicious. Useless, because other men with far better reason for having leave (bombed homes and wounded relations) could not be spared for compassionate leave, and injudicious, because your writing to the CO would savour of a suggestion of ostentatious favouritism, and perhaps abuse of my position, most damaging in the present circumstances. As you say, the date doesn't really matter a damn, so we can hold the bacchanalian celebration when I get home, irrespective of whether it's before of after the 11th. I am sorry to have to be so emphatic about it. But I mentioned it to a hardened active service gunnery rating, and his derision left no doubt in my mind. I must be nothing more than an ordinary seaman RN for my three months. You know I would like to be at home as much as you would wish me to be, but there it is. I had a most pleasant interlude this evening. The doctor asked me to take him over to another ship in the whaler – under sail. The ship was only a hundred yards away, but after piddling around under the lee of our destroyer for about 20 minutes we got under way at last, and there was a fine breeze. The whole beauty of the thing was that it was not service sailing - overcrowded, uncomfortable, and too formal, but just a minimum crew, and it's the first time I've had a tiller under my hand for some time. The snag about sailing is that there is always an outcry from the duty watch about hoisting the boat afterwards. Otherwise I'd be out in the damn thing, by hook or by crook. Service whalers are not

provided with booms to their mainsails, butt the only effect this seems to have is to slow down the boat a bit in the good old "down helm, in mainsheet" shoot up to windward. I didn't have time to try out her paces in other respects, alas, but I'm always hoping something like that will happen again. What a lot to write about a 100 yds run in a very ordinary whaler! So sailing makes men crazy.

I've just taken my winter woollies off! Consequently I've been freezing all day, especially when having to get up at 4 o'clock to secure ship and watch the northern lights flickering over the sky. Later, in the long awaited haven of harbour, watching the primrose in the west and the gold and grey in the east as the sun rose, with me, forlorn and shivering, as the bos'ns mate of the morning watch on the quarterdeck!

Love to Mummy, Lawrence.

7 Apr 1941

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

**Dear Parents** 

I am sending an Easter egg in a Craven 'A' cigarette tin, with good cheer and what ho and so on, but I don't know when it will arrive – probably not by Easter, anyway. I don't know what is inside it, but it rattles, and that at least sounds interesting!

Prospects of leave – and even of leaving this ship – are receding "owing to circumstances over which we have no control". But still, we just go on hoping. The ways of the Admiralty are devious and obscure, but I hope something happens soon.

One of the first things I'm going to do when I get leave is to go and see Christobel, and try and make it up. I hate being on bad terms with people, and with such a nice <u>useful</u> girl as that! Dear me, I must be getting cynical!

A very remarkable thing about this ship, every kind of rumour can gain credence. Rumours spread, and yet just about everyone seems to make it his job to keep them going, and the more they repeat them the more they believe them. On board they are known colloquially as "buzzes". You'd never believe how absurd some of them are. One of our lads who is going in for a commission, Walter Henderson, is very susceptible, and is always most positive about them, and is perpetually plunged in gloom. [CODE – Reykarvic]

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10 Apr 1941

Well, here I am, and 21 tomorrow. And still in this bloody dump without hope of leave or even seeing the Prelim Board – or of getting any mail. We haven't had any for a fortnight or more. So I don't know how you are and whether you have survived the last blitz on Bristol. I wish I did. This dullness and monotony is getting me down too. For the first time since I came aboard I've been feeling really depressed. That's because the whole Messdeck is fed up as well. Everyone gets irritable, too, and when you live in such close quarters with your messmates any friction soon becomes intolerable. Two leading seamen, the two who are supposed to run this Messdeck, were losing their tempers with one another this morning, and I suppose occupying ourselves by "catching fish" all day is not conducive to equability.

You won't be surprised to know how I am looking forward to coming home. I was just recalling the times when I used to drive up from Plymouth and arrive unexpectedly outside the house in my little stink [?] wagon. I hope that will happen again soon. Perhaps with a white band around my hat, denoting officer cadet. Who knows? But as the days go by this moment seems to get more and more remote.

I haven't sent the Easter egg off yet. No mail has gone. So you won't receive it till ages after Easter. Well, I've got to "clean into the rig of the day" now, for the afternoon watch. So au revoir, and all my love. Lawrence.

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 Lownde'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 <u>today</u>, 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.

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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 <u>very</u> nice letters. Especially Daddy's one cheering me up at Reykjarvic. 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

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

Dear Mummy

26 April 1941

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 afaid 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.

By the way, for want of anything better, how about naming the rendez-vous outside the barrack gates? If there isn't time to write send me a telegram.

Telegram 28 Apr 1941

Love from Lawrence.

Moving to unknown destination negative my suggestion re meeting. Lawrence

Tologram 20 Apr 1041

Telegram 29 Apr 1941

Mackie Westcliffe Hall Hotel Hythe Hants Unable to get to Portsmouth Could you find Leigh Park camp near Havant by 4.30. Mackie

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Telegram 29 Apr 1941

Mackie Westcliffe Hall Hotel Hythe Hants

Moved to camp near Havant Perhaps could manage Wednesday at 1800 at Barrack gates no [sic] George Hotel Must get special leave. Lawrence

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30 Apr 1941

From: O/S LP Mackie, Jx 221252, Mess 12, RN Camp, Leigh Park, Havant

Dear Mummy

The cuckoo woke me up this morning, and after I've written this letter, lying full length on the grass alongside the wood, I'm going to bed. It's a beautiful place this, with birds singing their little hearts out at dawn and dusk. Or "in beechen green and shadows numberless, sing of summer in full throated ease", as Keats put it.

I've been wandering in the wood this evening, and was strongly reminded of what Daddy said in his letter; of primroses and bluebells, and all the other fragile things nestling in the mossy bed. It's all so different from what I've been seeing for the last long, long months, that my heart was almost bursting with happiness and contentment that such things could still be, in the middle of this terrible and destructive war. That I had no outlet for that happiness was the only thing that marred the perfection. I wish I could paint or write decent poetry or something. It's a wonderful wood, large enough to get lost in, with young spruces and larch and shrubs of all kinds and young ashes in one part, wild as anything, with only just room to make your way between: bracken clutching at your trouser leg (or skirt!). In the other part great beeches and ashes, long smooth trunks reaching skywards, and a carpet of last autumn's leaves rustling beneath. As an agreeable climax to the walk by myself I put a robin up accidentally from his clutch of speckled brown eggs. His nest was hidden cunningly in a tuft of long overhanging grass, divided carefully in one part so that he could get in and out. In boy scout fashion I've marked the way to find it again with sticks shaped like arrows, so I shall be able to watch his progress.

The night before last we were bombed out of barracks (that's why we're here), and a land mine dropped at the back of the building where I was stationed as a fire party. It killed two of my friends in the same building, and brought the hall down around me, but left me with only a finger split by the blast. One friend of mine, an Australian, had a – no, I don't think I'll tell you; I didn't really mean to say anything about it, but it all comes out because I can't forget it.

Love and God protect you. From Lawrence.

[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.]

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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 <u>years</u> 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.

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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 <u>below</u> 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 antitetanus 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  $\underline{he}$  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  $2^{nd}$  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 "OLOs", 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.

#### Undated

From: The Officers' Mess, HMS St Christopher

Dear Mummy

Vrs Lawrence

Thanks awfully for getting the suitcase off so promptly, and for your last letter. I enclose a grouse's foot for your – if you like them. I think it's rather nice.

Well, I leave here for operations next Friday, after a very good time up here. It's a wonderful place, as you know if you have looked it up on the map, with Ben Nevis right behind us. I haven't climbed it yet. Yesterday, Saturday, saw the beginning of our War Weapons week. We had a march past of matelots, soldiers, Wrens, and the civilian defence forces, followed by fun and games on the rugger pitch. Unfortunately we didn't arrive for this till rather late, but Tony and I and five others won the human boat race, our team being composed entirely of Subs from St Christopher. We only won by a very short head from a team of soldiers and a team of sailors. We receive our prizes next Friday at the town hall. Then Tony and I had a pillow fight on a spar (very painful for the sit-upon), and had the best bout of the afternoon, as we were both practised at this art. It lasted nearly twenty minutes, and at the end of it I was so exhausted that I fell off. Tony fears that he has had permanent damage to his os coccyx. There was a huge crowd to watch one bout, including several high-ups in our base. They congratulated us heartily afterwards. We don't get a prize for that as Tony was knocked off by a soldier in the next round. He was too exhausted to start to fight.

I wish I could tell you about all we're doing up here, because it's such interesting work. All I can tell you is that it is one of the youngest branches of the Navy, and is very highly thought of at the Admiralty. AV Alexander came down today to see us, and told us that he thought we should soon be doing what was in his opinion something which should prove to be one of Hitler's greatest menaces on the sea. We have to keep exceedingly fit, as they say it requires very fit men. And I think it rather an honour being chosen for it, as they only seem to send the best blokes up here, and one of our biggest lessons is learning to cultivate our "aggressive spirit". I think we shall need it. Perhaps the best thing about it all is that it is almost entirely run by the amateur sailors, yachtsmen, and the like of the RNVR. And we intend to show the regular Navy a thing or two. We have a lot of RNVR fellows from destroyers and raiding forces to learn this business, together with some exceedingly tough Aussies, stick-at-nothing sort of fellows, who would be the best chaps in a crisis I should ever like to see. We have one fellow here who was in command of a ship which used to transport the periodic raiding forces which land on the French or German coast for demolition work, and another one who went through Hell and high water at Dunkirk on a 25 ft yacht that he owned, and saved dozens of men. He lost it returning for more, I believe. But he doesn't talk much. But we're all damn proud of our new force, as you can see, and that is due to the efforts of our tutors up here who, being RNVR themselves, are very keen that we shall have as much esprit de corps as possible. The snag about this place is that it rains most of the time. But what the Hell anyway, as the Americans say.

I'm glad to hear about Mark. I wish you could both go off and settle there right away. I can't find that cheque. Could you have it stopped and another issued.

115, Lawrence			

21 Jul 1941

From: HMML 305

Dear Mummy

Thank you very much for the nice long letter I've just received today.

I had a very good journey down from ... [word erased] in the old Tin Lizzie, which, as you once so rightly said, is so dependable and speedy. I'm afraid it's getting that time expired rattle now though, and is not quite what it was. I'll try and bring it back to Bristol when I next get leave, so that it will be able to die quietly at home. That may sound unduly pessimistic, for she still goes magnificently and pulls like a horse.

Such a lot seems to have happened since I left you at Bristol. Honestly it seems like a year ago now – and I'm afraid I shalln't be getting leave for a very long time. But still I've been far more fortunate in that respect than many of my friends. I am very happy aboard this ship. It seems that I have here an almost ideal situation: a job which requires more application and skill than any I have yet come across, a most delightful captain, a Glasgow man with the proverbial Glasgow generosity and kindness, and a crew with whom it is a joy to work. The ship, too, if you could see her, you would understand my affection for her. Amongst my other jobs I am navigating officer, so now I am putting into practice all the theory I learned at King Alfred and St Christopher.

I had a most extraordinary and very pleasant surprise when I arrived. The big white chief of all the MLs [motor launches] in this area – the "Captain ML" they call him, was an old friend of my Uncle Henry's at Weymouth, and used to know me running around there as a – [?] headed youngster, as he put it. Captain Farquharson's son, Jamie, was one of my kindergarten friends down there, now in the army, going into an OCTU. The Captain has very vivid memories of Richard Meek. He was disappointed to hear how serious a young man he is now.

Out of our crew we only had two trained men, the Coxswain, and a Stoker. So when entering harbour for the first time we had a very difficult evolution . You see the Coxn was on the wheel and the Stoker in the engine room, so there was no one on deck to point out to the boys how to arrange the ropes and so on for going alongside. I had a terrible job getting things squared off. Now we have a third trained man, who arrived a few days late, and luckily he's an old sailor, and certainly knows the ropes. The others were very willing but woefully ignorant. It seems the training they have, poor fellows, before coming on active service, is quite inadequate, but they really have astonishingly improved since they've been aboard. They had no more idea of splicing than of jumping over the moon.

This is a very convivial flotilla. My opposite numbers on other ships – or those I've met – seem to be very pleasant. We have a very good lot in the MLs. The only snag is I've been too busy to do much visiting, as I guess they must have been if they've been through the same process as me. This life comes quite fully up to the rosy pictures I painted of it for you. It's a very busy life, but a

This life comes quite fully up to the rosy pictures I painted of it for you. It's a very busy life, but a happy one.

Please excuse the ghastly journalistic style of this letter, but I've just been reading some stuff on the same lines, and I can't get it out of my head.

Yrs Lawrence

PS When the photos come, don't forget to send them on.

PPS I look at that little housewife you made me with great affection.

Undated

From: HMML 305

Dear Mummy

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.

The navigation is even better than I thought. We have been guide [?] of three ships for some time now, and the captain leaves all the navigation to me. So I have the responsibility of knowing that if I make an error all three ships may run into the rocks or get lost. Actually to begin with one of the others was guide – the senior ship – but owing to faulty compasses she took us several miles off one course, so since then we have done it. And it's fairly nerve racking work as visibility has been bad lately and approaching heavily defended East Coast ports we look uncommonly like E Boats when we come out of the mist. They are apt to be rather light fingered on the triggers of the coastal defence guns. One gets the uneasy impression of long gun muzzles following you enquiringly round as you close [to] the land. We had our first defaulters today, as two birds had failed to keep their watch. I had to administer an official raspberry. Very unpleasant, as they are both good fellows and excellent workers. But if you give matelots an inch they'll take a mile, so you have to step rather delicately.

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 Signalman - 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.

How is Daddy getting on? It must be damned annoying for him, but I expect he's glad he took your advice and saw Angel James. That reminds me, I've got a fine medicine chest here under the supervision of the Coxswain, and could you ask him if he could recommend me or send me a really good <u>practical</u> first aid book. Burns, shrapnel wounds and drowning are the most likely wounds on these ships I think, and so the ARP books cover almost too much to put it thoroughly. And again so many of these books glibly advise treatments quite out of the question in an action or air raid. I'm getting to know this by experience now. So ask him and tell me what he says when you next write. Well, I shall be turning in just now, so good night.

Yrs, Lawrence.

11 Nov 1941

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother,

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

After that notice the Roysterer, Buccaneer, Freebooter, Marauder and the Robust. And lastly, as a contrast to their appearance and the other names I've just told you, we have the Poet Chaucer, various Saints – (which I've never heard of) – Dogmael, Briock, Blazey, Issey, and the St Just. And finally, one that I've seen, soot begrimed and solid, puffing its way contentedly up the Thames, the "Thomas Lee Barber".

Who says the Admiralty doesn't have a sense of humour?

I'm very glad we've started something in Libya again. It is good to see that the old British army now has a chance of justifying its existence. It's got plenty of tanks apparently, too, so it can have no excuse now.

I shall be seeing Richard Meek [a Weymouth friend – MEHM] soon at his new base. Maybe you've heard when he's going. That's the advantage about the Army. They don't seem to be so keen on disguising your whereabouts.

Well, I must pack up now, so goodbye and much love from Lawrence.

1 Jan 1942

From: HMML 305

**Dear Parents** 

Thank you respectively for two very nice letters. At last I bring good tidings. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of this month I hope to get a fortnight's leave – the fates being kind. It is practically as certain as anything is in this war, but I may arrive a couple of days early or late, depending upon weather and other natural phenomena.

You can guess how much I am looking forward to it, especially as we are supposed to have put in more sea time than most MLs on this coast, and certain more than the two other MLs of this flotilla added together. My crew laugh and call them "The Wallflowers", and are secretly proud of our record I think. We had a wonderful Christmas, both os us and the ship's company feeding off roast turkey, plum pudding and mince pies. And the plum pudding was flickering eerily in the light of flaming rum poured over it.

Both Norrie and I went down to the messdeck on Christmas day before dinner, and drank a considerable amount of spirits and had the great pleasure and entertainment of having a good informal chat with our boys. They were all a bit tight (so were we) and maybe both sides said a bit more than was intended, but we ate our Christmas dinner with the warm feeling that maybe we were appreciated after all. The guest of honour was the Air Force man who HAD CARRIED OUR COX'N ABOARD THE NIGHT BEFORE!! Being in a strange port we also had the hospitality of the port officers to contend with – which was overwhelming, and we could look out of the window at the base and see our masthead decorated with a bunch of holly (precariously lashed on by Stoker Stewart, who risked his life and limb climbing it). We sailed out of the port on Boxing Day with memories of one of the happiest Christmases I have ever spent.

This is the first news I've had of Gerhardt since I've heard of him in Australia. I'm really more happy than I can say to know he's in England and is having a happier time of it. I'm dropping him a line this morning as soon as I've finished this letter.

It is very kind of you to offer all those things to my crew, but as they are going on leave so soon it would hardly be worth while. As a matter of fact they are very well provided for as it is. We get almost as many cigarettes as we want duty free, we get free issues of books from Naval libraries, and they are thoughtfully provided with plenty of woollens by the Navy who know they need them. And they all bought sweets to send home at this wonderful Eldorado where we spent Christmas – where you could buy anything – even silk stockings if you had coupons! Perhaps you can guess where it was. Your letters only arrived today. I see they are dated 19 Dec. We have been away pottering around the

Your letters only arrived today. I see they are dated 19 Dec. We have been away pottering around the coast for the last four or five days, so that will explain the delay.

I want to get prints made of the film I sent you, for the crew, so I'll keep it if you don't mind till I come on leave.

Well, a happy New Year, Mama and Papa, and keep yourselves well till the 15<sup>th</sup>. Love and happy expectations, Lawrence.

20 Feb 1942

From: Adelphi Hotel, Glasgow

Dear Parents

Thank you so much for gloves, gas mask, underclothes, and the other good things you've sent me. Norrie has been away sick since we came back from leave, and they appointed me to act as captain during his absence, and gave me one of the spare officers to help me out, as second-in-command. It's a fine feeling when you are on the bridge by yourself at sea, though perhaps a bit awe inspiring just at first. By the time he got back four days ago I was getting quite used to it, and enjoying it immensely. Oh for my first real command!

We have at last heard where we are going and when, to put an end to all the rumours that were flying round the flotilla.

Christobel wrote me just before I left for Glasgow, and you'll be glad to hear she is still well, and full of her good news.

I've read another book in which this latest X-ray is discussed. Apparently they say definitely that they'll expect all new hospitals, and the old ones when reconstructed, will be equipped with this new apparatus. They are basing an entirely new cancer treatment on it, and high hopes of success. Best of luck to them. Your friend at the Imperial Airways should be interested in this!

[This last paragraph presumably contains a coded message as to Lawrence's next destination.] I'm collecting quite a library now. Do you know Gidding's book "Sweet Thames Run Softly"? He's done the wood cuts in it himself, and the whole thing is quite exquisite. This afternoon I bought an introduction to physical chemistry: this to keep my brain from rusting. It is valuable if only for interesting oneself in the types of straight scientific reasoning, if not in the subject matter. I had a most lengthy and indignant letter from Gerhardt, refuting what I wrote in mine to him. I haven't replied yet. I'm still trying to think up some reasonably intelligent reply! Excuse this awful handwriting, please, but I'm sitting in an easy chair in a hotel lounge, with pad and blotter balanced on my knee!

Love etc. from Lawrence

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26 Feb 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Daddy

Mummy reminds me that I've forgotten your birthday again. It may not be a very original idea, but I think it is easier to remember one's acquaintances' birthdays. Because a fact like a birthday date is a star that shines very bright in the constellation of things you remember him by, whereas in the case of a close friend there are other and brighter stars which take precedence.

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.

I see from the papers that the Russians continue to do well. It is marvellous though a little humiliating to watch their progress. I think we need invading to wake us all up. The papers seem to print terrible condemnation on our war effort. How different must Russia's be! One of our flotilla officers is a violent socialist, bordering on communism. A stimulating man to listen to, and constructive instead of merely critical. He makes one rather uneasy though. But perhaps that is a good thing!

Very much love from Lawrence.

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26 Feb 1942

From: HMML 305

**Dear Parents** 

Thank you for your last letter, which you say arrived so opportunely to stop your sending your angry one. It was very bad of me not to have written before, but you have my excuse.

Three or four days ago I went for a marvellous walk all by myself. I started walking up the river bank, and a very twisty river bank it was too, with close growing young Christmas trees right down to the water's edge, making progress difficult but better enjoyment. I saw a fine sort of bo'sun's chair which the woodcutters presumably used to cross from one bank to the other; a precarious platform suspended between two tightly stretched wires, running on pulleys. I should have liked to have tried it, but it had been left the wrong side of the river, and there seemed no way of recovering it. There was much activity in a logging camp on the side of the mountain, with blue smoke ascending and the whine of circular saws. And the river guggling on its cheerful way. A walk like that does much to restore peace of mind and health of body.

Your news about your unsatisfactory tenant seems bad. I think Mr Dommett should be a match for them. He strikes me as being a pretty downy old bird.

Christobel writes to tell me she is leaving London in the middle of March to see her friends in the South, so <u>you</u> may have a visit from her then. But I don't think so. She has no other news.

Well, I shall have to end now, and so till next time, au revoir. Lawrence.

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5 Mar 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

We are having a very jolly time here in a nice place, and some most pleasant people. There are several of our flotilla with us, and, since our "Navy Comforts" have arrived, we spend the evening sometimes playing Ludo, Snakes and Ladders, and other such diversions. In addition, the walks around this part of the world are very pleasant, and we get plenty of fresh air and fun. We have been suggesting rugger matches between the crews, and some of the heartier of us PT at eight o'clock in the morning (mentioning no names)! There are scenes of feverish activity all round us. Strange men climb over our beautiful ship, and swear with strange oaths. But we remain severely aloof, as befits our uniform and station. Norrie and one of the stokers alone feel at home here (and <u>are</u> at home much of the time!). I discovered a <u>very</u> nice Wren some days ago, and danced with her once or twice, but she proved but a broken reed, and our ways have parted.

I have just finished reading a very good book. The authoress, Dorothy Cottrell, has a delightful and entirely feminine way of writing – it's a light romance, rather after the styl eof Jeffery Farnol, but not so stilted and less unlikely. Twice I have tried to read the latter's books, but always find them too long or too similar. I'm afraid I have not a literary taste.

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  $3\frac{1}{2}$  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

Telegram dated 18 Mar 1942

SUB-LT MACKIE 3 GL
RETURN IMMEDIATELY = COMMANDING OFFICER + +

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

bowsprit used to be rigged, and her obvious square rigged sailing ship lines. Now she suffers the last and crowning insult of having callow Sub-Lieutenants (like Bill Marshall and myself) roaming her deck with marlin-spike in hand, to strip her of her last useful fittings. Shackles and slips are very useful on our ships, and the old hulk has plenty lying around for anyone to take.

I had a letter from Lesley this morning wishing me luck. It was nice of her to write. She wants me to be a trustee of David and Ian's fund. Perhaps she has told you that already.

We had a beastly passage down here. The Irish sea can be very vicious when it wants to be. It was rather a wonderful sight, though, seeing the others, following, tossing about literally like corks in the heavy seas. I have heard and read about ships being tossed like corks before, but I thought it a decorative simile only. It appears not to be, however.

I went up for a spin in a Sunderland flying boat the other day – the first time I've ever been up in an aeroplane. Unfortunately something went wrong after we'd been up about ten minutes, and we had to come down again. You don't get the impression of flying at all in those huge planes. It is like being in a bus. And what is even more surprising, you can scarcely hear any noise inside, either. I suppose they must have special sound proofing. It strikes me as being a very pleasant way to get around the place. The pilot was a very young Flight Lieutenant with the DFC, and a most charming manner. Altogether one of the boys. And what a surprising slant you get on things. I've never seen a cow from above before. It is a surprisingly lean animal.

From the odoriferous and noisy interior of an ancient pool petrol lorry yesterday I saw what looked like a perfect EE Broach [?] spire and some very nice decorated and early perp [endicular] windows – with a gargoyle or two. It was a little country parish church, but unfortunately I can't think of the name of the village. The said pool patrol lorry was a fearful and wonderful thing. The driver drove it between 45 – 50 mph most of the way, and nearly took the skin off my nose once or twice. This, I may say, in contrast to a most streamlined and flashy American heavy lorry in which I was a passenger, which proceeded with dignity at a sedate 25 mph all the way. As Confucius says. "The superior man rideth in a separate carriage, with little noise and no pleasure, while the lower types endanger the life and property of others."

Love, Lawrence.

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1 Apr 1942

From: Coastal Forces Base, Gibraltar

Dear Parents

I hope you received my cash safely, which I sent off a couple of days ago.

What a relief it is to get fresh fruit again. Grapefruit for breakfast, bananas for salad, and tomatoes and whatnot. It is far too hot here, though, and you will see me most afternoons lying flat on my back with my mouth open like a frog, presenting my maximum surface are to the fitful wind.

We had a most pleasant trip down, with seas comparatively calm for the time of year, and several really lovely sunny days, with shimmering white horses dancing along with us, and the crew sitting around the upper deck with handkerchiefs on their heads. Nights dark and squally we had, but also with clear moonlight and the ship's wake a blaze of phosphorescent light astern. We had 7 days at sea altogether, and with only two officers aboard we were beginning to feel just a bit tired by the end, what with the continual tossing, and the discomfort of damp, and so on. Some say they saw flying fish, and I certainly saw several porpoises.

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6 April

But we are having quite a pleasant time here. We haven't moved yet, and hear no reliable rumours of doing so.

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.

You may have read or heard of an air raid here, most grandiloquently described by the Italians. It was a poor affair, and as far as I know they didn't drop any bombs at all. Their accounts of great fires blazing as they left was certainly eyewash.

The address I have put at the top of this letter is quite legal as long as you don't make any additions to it other than my name and rank, and you will find your letters come through much quicker than when using my old one. The chief thing is not to mention the name of the ship.

In some ways I am very glad to have come out here. But there is something to be said for "Oh to be in England now that April's there". If this was peace time and I could do what I liked it would be a different matter, but in these times one is rather restricted in the way of movement and time – the latter especially. All sorts of things like curfews combine to cramp one's style. But watching a Mediterranean dawn and starlit night makes up for a lot of discomforts.

Well, I must be away now, as we are at sea even at this moment, and I have to take over watch.

Yours with love, Lawrence

19 Apr 1942

From: Coastal Forces Base, Gibraltar

Dear Mother

No mail has arrived for us yet, so I haven't had a single letter from home. Heaven knows whether you have received the two I've sent, either. They will roll along some time, I suppose.

It now seems likely that I shall stay here indefinitely. The plans I told you seem to have been cancelled, and we are going to be stuck in this place: not that it is so bad really, but it is rather the end of the world from the point of view of promotion and leave and such like. Some of the officers here have already spent a year in this place, and even for them prospects of getting out seem no brighter. Anyway, why should I grumble? We are doing a better job of work here than we ever did in England, and being worked a lot harder too. It makes the days slip by very quickly. So little time do we have on our hands that the three letters I have written to you are the only ones I've written since I got here, which is a terrible confession.

Why do cats jump and run up and down early in the morning? One morning watch (0400 – 0800) this question occurred to me, for when the Mediterranean dawn had broken I felt so fit and uplifted that even at that grisly hour of half past six the crew were infected by my light spirits and fought mock battles on the upper deck with hoses, and we all behaved like a lot of children fresh from school. And they were so happy, and I was so happy – just for no reason at all but that the dawn had broken and the sleepless dragging night was finished. From the nature of them, sunsets being memories with them, sunrise hopes and fears. The end of a worn out day leads one along the paths of reminiscences, where the happy things are remembered, in an unconscious effort to forget the disappointments of a finished day. I suppose it's nature's night cap. Fears are born at night, bitter disillusion, and a hopeless looking forward, which culminate in misery just before the dawn. These hours, which hang so heavy on a sleep-bemused brain, can usefully be spent in selfless speculation, in which the tawdry materials of hopes subdued and fears realised can be moulded to a pretty ethical discussion. Hopes and fears are introspective feelings, but useless to drug [?] they colour any reasoning, however abstract and extrovert.

How I'm rambling on! But these things occur to one during the dark starlit Mediterranean nights and need considering. But isn't it a poor show for a Naval Officer, who is supposed to be watching for German submarines! But I think it is still possible to let one half of the mind meander away in thoughts, and still keep the faculties alert enough to do the job. I hope so anyway. A few nights ago I saw a most suspicious object – oh, most suspicious: a small packing case, floating there all by itself in the half light of the dawn. What was underneath it, and why did it sit, and stare, and watch so silently? The stimulated imagination suggested a number of colourful solutions. Visions of DSCs floated before my eyes. So stepping most delicately, like Agag, I approached it, and hove to some hundred yards away, and put the searchlight on it. Emboldened by continued immunity I went alongside it, and turned it over with a boathook .... When Norrie, aroused by the grinding of the engines going astern,

came on deck rubbing his eyes, I could only point feebly to a margarine packing case, looking <u>most</u> unromantic at closer quarters. It hadn't even any peep-holes bored in it!

Well, we must shift ship now, so cheerio, and I'm looking forward to when the mail comes!

Love and good luck, Lawrence

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22 Apr 1942

From: Coastal Forces Base, Gibraltar

**Dear Parents** 

Now I have just half an hour to write this letter before I go on watch at ten o'clock, so it will need to be short and snappy.

I've just been made flotilla Medical Officer, a not very onerous job as everybody seems so healthy. The most important things seem to be arranging about vaccination and inoculation for the flotilla, and seeing that the medical charts are kept up to scratch. Now and again I have to bind up wounds, and I've already had to splint a suspected fracture (which turned out to be quite harmless). The trouble about it is that as we are on patrol almost every night (as we are this minute) I usually turn in in the afternoon, and the morning being filled up with work about the ship, it doesn't give you much time to get anything done.

This afternoon, to further reduce my sleep hours, I had a row with the Coxswain. He, being active service and a Petty Officer, tends I think to think he is the lady's fur overcoat, and he started talking back to Norrie this morning. I hated like hell to have to talk to him about it, but I felt I should as Norrie hadn't made a fuss at the time, and you can't let that sort of thing start aboard a ship this size. So I got him in the wheelhouse, gave him a preliminary propitiation in the shape of a cigarette, and told him there were no witnesses in earshot, so he could say what he liked – call me a damned idiot if he thought that way. Both having this right, I told him I thought he was acting like a silly kid, and reminded him he was only 24 years old, in spite of his being a Petty Officer and all that. He wants to leave the ship, I know, but told me he was happy with the crew, and had few complaints about either Norrie or myself. We shall be sorry to lose him, for he is a good Coxswain and a willing worker with the right ideas.

When you write to me spend 5d and write less often but send by airmail. They get here quicker. None of yours have turned up yet.

I've just finished a book called "The Fountain" by Charles Morgan. It's an introspective sort of book, but mentally stimulating – and has an agreeable love interest in it. The style of writing is perhaps the best part of it, and it is almost biblical in parts. He combines philosophy with an undercurrent of religion and gets some remarkable results.

Having got very interested in stars owing to the study of navigation, I get a great delight during these clear nights on the bridge looking around and identifying them. Several new ones can be seen down here that were below the horizon in England, such as Scorpio, a most beautiful and bright constellation – even more clearly marked that the Plough.

That's not bad going for 25 minutes, is it? Now I must put a sweater on and away. It's chilly at night here.

Love and best wishes from Lawrence.

15 May 1942

From: Coastal Forces Base, Gibraltar

Dear Mummy

I've had two letters from you and one from Daddy – but no sign of any cable. But now please revert to my original address when you write, as the one which heads this letter is no longer valid – for reasons

not hard to guess! We are starting on our travels again fairly soon, moving South. The plan of action I outlined to you before we left has been altered, and so instead of Wops we shall have Blackwater fever [malaria] to contend with.

On the subject of diseases I am much enjoying my job as flotilla MO. It is not a sinecure as I felt it might be, and there's plenty of work to be done: medical stores to be collected, and I get the local Doc to explain any of the prevalent diseases (such as scabies, which we've had one or two cases of in the flotilla) and then I write out a signal explaining it and send it round to the various commanding officers.

You ask about the Rock itself. It seems to be run almost entirely by Spanish labour – the shopkeepers and dockyard workers coming from La Lucia, a Spanish town just over the border, and practically all the real Gibralteans have been evacuated to England (laugh that off!) and elsewhere. They say the Rock looks like a lion crouching, but it is a rather bald headed and ugly one. They also say that there is a colony of apes somewhere around, but you don't see them. They also say that there is a colony of Wrens somewhere around, but you don't see them either. They tell me that if you ask for a date they whip out a well-filled notebook - engagements for the evening run to as much as 3 weeks ahead. But I have no personal experience to work on. They wear white tops to their caps. Hideous. There are one or two quite nice flick-houses, and there are plenty of sweets and cigarettes to be bought. But I find I get sea fever; I haven't been in one place two weeks before I want to be off again. Gib. will get very monotonous.

Your letters are a great pleasure to me. They are very descriptive of the country just now, and have a very real flavour of England. And an even better flavour of home. However, I must finish now and go to bed.

Much love from Lawrence.	

20 June 1942

From: HMML 305

**Dear Parents** 

You will be wondering at the hiatus in correspondence. I, too, have had nothing from you for a very long time. But if you don't hear from me for intervals like these there is no need to worry, and you can depend on it I am doing my best to get a line to you. The mail situation is very bad indeed around these parts, and letters you send me by sea mail will take several months to reach me.

It's an awful place we are at here, but we should be leaving soon and going to an even worse one. We are rather rushed at the minute and I have no time to write a proper letter.

I hope you are all well at home, and that you are getting R and O's letters regularly. I shall almost definitely get no leave for at least a year, unless it is sick leave. I have had no news of the war or anything else for ages, it seems. How are things going?

Now I must close down – wasting all this valuable space, I fear. [He is referring to unused parts of the letter card, sent by air mail.]

Love, Lawrence

6 Jul 1942

From: HMML 305 [handwritten note by MEHM - ?Freetown, W Africa]

Dear Mummy

Now for a good long letter to make up for the time that will be sure to follow before the next one. This place is awful for the amount of work we have to do – compared with it the UK bases and others we have visited were rest camps. MLs are really pulling their weight here, working as they do seven days at sea and maybe three in harbour if you are lucky – and all the accumulated paper work to deal with in those three days off. But I'm very happy. One can see the results of the work out here.

The rainy season has just started in earnest, and we have a pretty incessant downpour which tends to make life uneasy. It's rain which malevolently finds its way under oilskin collars, and seems to defy gravity by creeping up unprotected wrists. But it is warm rain, and some have solved the problem of how to keep dry most paradoxically by spending their time in a bathing costume. It seems easier to dry your body when drenched thoroughly than to pursue the drops slyly trickling to the small of your back. The swim in much swollen and is an evil brown in colour, and on the ebb tide runs at four or five knots. We hear it gurgling under our keel as we swing to our buoy. You have to steam two or three hundred miles straight out to leave the clouds behind. To give you an idea of the type of work we do, one of our regular jobs is 500 miles straight out and five hundred back, escorting merchant ships, which takes us about six days in all, in any kind of weather you like to imagine. But as I say it is enjoyable because we know we are doing the same type of work of corvettes and destroyers, and are earning our salt.

The land is of a most vivid hue when the sun comes out and shines on the raindrops, and you see monkeys jumping in the trees and you can buy mangoes and custard apples and avocado pears in the native market. Some of the officers go up to the hill station for a resting period, and if I have the luck to be chosen for this you will imagine me walking through the jungle with your 20 bore under my arm potting parrots and monkeys. I am told, however, that you have to crack up under the strain before you are sent there, so perhaps it would be better if I kept clear of both!

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 <u>is</u> 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 ....

I heard from Gerhard a few days ago describing his visit to Clifton, and telling me how much he enjoyed it. How faithful he is. A lot of boys of his age with the troubles he has had to go through would have forgotten about us. It speaks for his character.

I heard of rather a curious incident that took place on one of the ships here. It might be called "Hoodoo on an ML". It is the custom here for some ships to take on niggers as wardroom stewards – to do all the valet's work, scrubbing out decks, and so on, and very good servants some of them turn out to be. Well, the captain of one of our ships had reason to dispense with the services of his dhobying firm ashore – run by a nigger of course. Shortly afterwards (in no sense replacing the aforesaid dhobying firm) he took on a Krooman [?] steward. Unfortunately the former got to hear of this, and vengefully made his way down to the ship armed with a dummy and a great many pins. He propped the dummy up against the ensign staff on the quarterdeck and stuck all the pins into it one by one, thereby laying a curse on the unfortunate steward for a fortnight. The steward pined away and died on the twelfth day of the curse. That is a true story.

Very much love from Lawrence.

15 Jul 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Daddy

If you happen to visit this part of the world at the end of the year I shall certainly be here still – for this is our permanent operational base – permanent, that is, for the period any ship does on this station, for their Lordships see fit to send us home after twelve months for sea going personnel (that's us) or eighteen months for maintenance staffs in the depot ships. So if it is any time before next June, I shall be here – or hereabouts. I thought you would deduce from the diseases where we are, but funnily enough in your letter you mentioned three place names but omitted this one – which is right between them!

The job of flotilla Medical Officer is lapsing somewhat in company with all the other flotilla jobs. We are out so frequently that I never have time to get flotilla medical stores when we are in harbour, and when we are in there are invariably several of the others at sea and out of touch. So they do their own work now..

I have already given the troops on this ship a VD lecture which they apparently took to heart – going by what they told their pals when writing home (we do the mail censoring). The depot ships are full of it and the situation ashore is terrible from that point of view. It is difficult to know what to do about contraceptives (of which the Navy supplies good old Durex, officially known as "condoms"), as one school of thought takes the line that to issue them is an encouragement, and the other that as the men are sure to have their basinful anyway it is only fair to them to give them an issue. I incline to the latter point of view, but not for that reason necessarily. No one in the flotilla has yet caught anything but one officer who caught a dose in Gibraltar handed the parasitic side of it on to the other officer on his ship. It seems a poor show if the messdecks keep clear of it and the wardroom gets it.

This seems an odd sort of subject to write about, and rather one about which you have heard too much in your travels around the globe, but it comes as rather a shock to me to find that the natives who, before the coming of the white colonisers were as free from disease as Adam, now treat clap as we treat the common cold – irritating but ubiquitous, and syphilis as 100% and congenital. Poor fellows, they haven't gained much by learning to wear trousers and to use money. Rather has it degraded them.

I went ashore a few days ago and had a look at the Kroomen's barracks. It seems odd to see black men in naval rig and all very clean and smartly turned out. The barracks are very fine and well laid out with plenty of good drainage and open spaces with palm trees etc making shady parade grounds. The Admiral's residence and offices are just by there with an enormous white ensign flapping overhead and his personal pendant at the peak. Native sentries looking cool and efficient – but not very good at English yet (?). Two VADs were waiting at the jetty for a boat – the first white women I have seen since leaving Gib.

Darwin in 'The Origin of the Species' or was it Beagle speculated about flying fish. We see an awful lot out here and they seem to vary in colour, though when they land on board as they often do they seem

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.

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  $2\frac{1}{2}$  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 (<u>not</u> 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! ...

I long to see Daddy out here and have been looking forward to it more than I can say, but perhaps it wouldn't be wise. I can console myself by saying it will be all the more pleasure by abstaining for ten [?] months. I detect in myself a certain tendency to emulate the astounding heights of homesickness to which some of our crew strive. It is a thing I dislike in principle, because having got oneself voluntarily into a thing, there is no sense in gnashing one's teeth about it, and some of the letters I read make me sick – not on this ship so much, but from ratings on other ships – they go to such extremes. But there was something to be said for the metaphorical fleshpots of Oxford which I did not appreciate at the time. But I am happy here in that I hope is a good ship and a magnificent CO, and an excellent flotilla – one which has the reputation of being the best and most efficient flotilla of MLs. And that is saying a very great deal, as there are many MLs.

Tell Daddy not to let Joan Page escape before I get back. You never know, you know. Well well.

It is a stimulating job I have. You see men growing and advancing: two in particular, one a labourer and the other a hairdresser come to this ship straight from a training camp as Ordinary Seamen. They then advance to AB. Now they graduate through a fairly stiff exam, taken this morning, to the exalted heights of Leading Seamen, nearly a PO, with the right to wear an anchor or "killick" on their sleeve, and God knows how much pay. The labourer is so illiterate that his letters are a tragedy, and pathetic in his adoration for a wife and two kiddies who will not write to him apparently. I used to give the two of them little lectures explaining the technicalities of blocks, sounding machines, and charts. The results are not through yet, but I shall be one of three happy men if they pass. They get very expansive and tell you about things on watch at sea at night (why does darkness encourage confidences?) The hairdresser showed me a photo of his wife – an awful looking creature, though I shouldn't say it – but she is regular enough in her letter, I gather, and he is very attached to her.

Very much love - Lawrence.

PS Fancy Digory in the Marines. He was a good fellow. Crete?

19 Aug 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Mother

We continue in health and amusement just as before. We are working pretty hard and I am enjoying it. We seemed to have been given what is really quite the best job; runs to and from the "Paradise" I mentioned in another letter. The trips are pretty long ones – usually seven days each way, but it is worth it to come into sunshine and civilisation (almost), at the end of it.

I met two altogether delightful Canadian pilots in the RAF mess last night. They are hurricane pilots one of whom flew a Spitfire during the Battle of Britain and is as modest as all of them are about it. They quite like it out here, and told us fantastic tales about their RCAF pay, and a Yankee chipped in with his lovely Southern drawl to tell us he got £136 per month in the American Eagle Squadron. Now that he is affiliated to the RAF he gets less but still more than any Naval officer of his equivalent rank. It is delightful to listen to these fellows talking, who have come it seems from the ends of the earth to help us.

We went thirty miles through the jungle the other day to a surf beach to bathe. The niggers get less anglicised and more natural the further you go, and I saw a case of elephantiasis of the ankles. They asked me what it was caused by, and I said I thought it was a parasite of some sort, but he said he thought it was dietetic deficiency. Could you ask Daddy and tell me in your next letter. We also saw such a case of rickets that the man was walking on hand and knees with legs in the air. We also saw land crabs and ate coconut milk from the shell. The beach was so perfect that it reminded me strongly of a P&O cruise advertisement. With a little island surrounded by surf and two palm trees leaning from the side of it, deep blue-white sea, an enormous stretch of vivid sand, and the jungle – a native village at the back of it. The car we came in looked very out of place. We brought surf boards but I found I hadn't the first idea how to use mine. But it tires you out very quickly and it was just exactly "a long and tiring day"!

Love, Lawrence

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 12<sup>th</sup>, together with one from Joan Page dated July 20<sup>th</sup>! 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 <a href="TwO">TWO</a> mornings <a href="in succession">in succession</a> 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 <u>real</u> 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!

8 Nov 1942

From: HMML 305

Dear Father

I saw the BOAC van rushing past me today in the town, but enquiries from the policeman did not elicit information as to where it was going to, or whence came. They seemed to have heard of the Corporation vaguely, but did not know of any office. Two Greek merchant service officers I had dinner and a drink with afterwards said the office was "some way out" but could tell me no more. Incidentally they knew Avonmouth and Bristol pretty well and had stayed in the "Rocks" Hotel. They knew it was now Imp. Air. Headquarters, so must have been there recently.

Tell Rupert to come out here and get sun burned. The rainy season is nearly finished and it is getting pretty hot. The surf no longer roars so loudly on the beaches, and I shall think of you counting your meagre lumps of coal as you put them on your fire, as I suppose this winter coal will be shorter than ever. It makes us very angry out here when we hear from our people at home of the hardships there, and ever more determined to protect our merchantmen and sink the submarines. We haven't had any losses in our convoys yet, but I don't think that is due to any lack of effort on the part of the subs

My friend Tony Lovell, who you may remember, has just been killed in the channel in an attack on an enemy convoy in an MTB. He got a posthumous mention in Dispatches. He is the first of my really close friends to be lost. He should never have been killed; he was altogether too alive. Luckily he was almost an orphan, as his parents were divorced and both had remarried, and neither had any real affection for him. I think.

This morning in town I saw a little bag made of the same deer fur as those mats you have at home. The man was asking 7/6d for them, but I got one for half a crown by a bit of haggling. I'm not sure it's even worth that now I've got it. But it looks all right on the outside until you open it.

As we have already seen one or two cockroaches on board we are thinking of bringing some lizards in to deal with them. All the local MLs who preceded us down here are infested with these insects, and once started it is almost impossible to get rid of them. If you go alongside the Fleet Store ship – a big converted merchantman – you see them at least two inches long – some three and a half ins I'm told – and coloured a vivid yellow colour. I know they smell pretty bad, already, as I kept some to experiment on at Marlborough. We had none of the large ones there, though. I should hate them aboard these ships; they'd look as large as rats.

Love, Lawrence.

PS Had a letter from Joan Page, and have answered it.

14 Sep 1942

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown

Dear Mother

It seems now that it is advisable to use the name of the ship, c/o GPO London, when addressing me, as your letters when addressed as above are sometimes held up because of insufficient sorting arrangements. I will, however, continue to head my letters as above, as it leaves me freer to tell you about movements and other places I have visited without offending the censor.

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 ...

We saw a crane on the way out black in colour with crest and orange cheeks which stood in the middle of the road and declined to let our car past. We had to reverse and go round it. It caused quite a traffic jam before stalking majestically into the undergrowth. We also saw a very fine Cardinal Bird sitting on the telegraph wires, and admired its scarlet monochrome.

It is very hot here and the tornado season is in full swing, but we haven't struck one here yet, though one of the boats here just before us had two in a week. The reverence in which they are held dates back to sailing ship days I think, as a power driven ship has little to hear whether at anchor or under way. I told you about the balls of electrical fire in my last letter (which you probably won't have received yet) and I have now learnt their name: St Elmo's fire. The "Pilot", or Admiralty Published Sailing Directions, does not mention this name, so I do not know any details about the worthy saint himself. It is so hot that in the evenings I have taken to winding a towel round my head turban-fashion to keep the perspiration out of my eyes.

My friend Bruce ("Red") Webb and I have fierce political arguments about ways and means of arranging a suitable form of government for post-war Britain – with the main object of finding the best way of averting another war. He favours an almost week by week MP for each constituency who will be changed if he disagrees with the majority of his constituents. His nickname "Red", incidentally, refers not to his colouration but to his supposed political tendencies. Actually he is misnamed. We are thinking of starting the good work by provoking and then leading discussions amongst our crews. It should be most interesting to see how they react.

As is usual around here, we were escorted on our last trip by shoals of dolphins. But this time I saw them in fancy dress. I hung over the bows of the ship one dark moonless night and saw sight of them dressed all in silver and diamonds as they swam with dorsal fin almost cutting the water. Every detail you could see clear cut by phosphorescence, even to the spiracle, and when they jumped clear of the water they seemed to vanish as their velvet bodies blended with the [?] of the water. We were steaming at about three knots and I saw two glittering tracks approaching from right ahead. They turned cleanly and joined the troop swimming with us under the bow, and their wake would have betrayed a skid but did not. A clean turn through 180 deg from 4 knots one way to 10 knots the opposite shows remarkably fine submarine efficiency. Natural selection shows much better results than scientific development. But perhaps the latter is only a development of the former in the case of homo sapiens?

Love from Lawrence

14 Sep 1942

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown

Dear Chris [Mackie, The Cottage, Thornbury]

I think after all my apologies and excuses on my last leave there should be some result in this matter of writing letters. These letter cards seem to be pretty prompt in arriving, so you should receive this within the week. If you intend replying don't use the address above, but use ML ..... (you know the number, and I mustn't say it), c/o GPO, London.

You will likely have heard from my Mother what I think of this place, but now that the rainy season is nearly over my opinions are less pronounced. But it is difficult to find anywhere ashore to go to in our spare time. Actually at the time of writing this we are up the coast at Bathurst, where the weather is better but very hot.

Perhaps Daddy has shown you the deer skin and leather work mats he brought back when last out here. I have just bought a little bag of the same material and put it aside for you. I don't think you'll be able to use it for anything, but you'll have the consolation of knowing that it is real native work and quite decorative, and maybe I can splice a lanyard into it for something to hold it by – as it has no strap.

Unfortunately all my camera films have become covered with fungus because of the damp atmosphere, and I shalln't have many photos to bring home. The same fate befalls all one's clothing here and coats and trousers are green unless you take them out of the wardrobe and air and brush them regularly.

I count myself very lucky to be able to see what I have seen and do all I've done before settling down to a more or less vegetable life in England. In spite of its manifest evils war brings wonderful opportunities to people like me who without any experience are given responsible jobs like this. I often picture what I should have been doing had there been no war. Probably treading the corridors of some London hospital, or, as a very raw young recruit to the army of doctors expecting patients to respect and confide in me – in me, who would have had no more experience of life than their own sons. Now I shall be able to hold up my head and know I have dealt with other men and have advanced at least some distance on the difficult path of understanding and sympathy – which are the same in this matter. To set against this I have to consider time and opportunity lost. But what is this, against the other?

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.

So I'd better close down now – as I'll be turning in shortly (cracking the swede, as it is called!).

Yours very affectionately, Lawrence

20 Sep 1942

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown

Dear Mother

We are still here at Bathurst, and very hot and sticky all the time. But the awnings we have hoisted over quarterdeck and bridge and the cool breeze that springs up in the evening make this bearable. We are rather depressed by this terrible tragedy about the Clare, which of course we know all about. The bodies were terribly mutilated by sharks and fire before they were picked up. I expect one of my air mail letter cards will have gone down with her, by the way, one describing the dolphins I saw on my last trip. Clare was the first flying boat to do the commercial transatlantic flight, wasn't she?

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 <u>say</u> 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.

We have just been talking to an RAF officer who gave us some interesting facts about the bombing which the RAF is doing over Germany now. We hear no news from one month to another, and it is heartening to hear of one German city after another being systematically bombed by decent sized numbers of aircraft, with the Germans doing so little in the way of reply. I suppose all their aircraft are tied up in the East. Would it be too much trouble for you to send me a few newspapers – Chronicle, Express, or Telegraph – if you have time to do so? We have nothing but a shockingly printed two pages of local paper to read – when we can get it. Some of your neighbour's detective magazines would go down very forward, too, as reading material is very scarce. But I can guess how busy you are now, so if it is any trouble don't worry about 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

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown

Dear Daddy

Your letter dated Aug  $16^{th}$  arrived today – or rather I got it today on my return from Bathurst. There is some mail to come yet, so I may find another from you or M tomorrow. However, I hasten to reply to yours before it gets lost.

I don't think it is any good sending your letters by air mail. You see how long this last one took. I suspect they all come by sea mail and PMG pinches the air mail fee.

You ask what sort of quarters we have. We all live aboard our respective ships, and as we never lie alongside jetties at night the question of mosquito netting is not so acute. I believe the range of an Anopheles is only ¼ mile, so he'd have a job to make the passage without fuelling on some other unfortunate en route, as we lie at buoys or anchor half a mile from the shore. As I believe I have mentioned in previous letters one or two from our flotilla have already had malaria, but I have not succumbed as yet.

We had a very pleasant trip down from Bathurst: a full moon to make night watches a pleasure, and calm seas. We had two Army officers aboard taking passage with us – Majors – and very Blimpian they were. Four is a crowd for our wardroom and makes it very uncomfortable. But they were both small ship men, one having had a motor cruiser in peace time, and the other being OC Motor Boat Company, so they knew how to make themselves as little nuisance as possible. It so happened they had several excitements, a suspected submarine, a Vichy French destroyer, and so on, to keep them distracted, so I'm sure they didn't get bored. We picked up a brand new motor tyre with semi-inflated inner tube – flotsam from some torpedoed ship I suppose – and hope to sell this for £10 to the Syrians ashore.

Mr Curtis the BOAC superintendent and his wife came aboard before we left Bathurst, and we found them very pleasant company. He says I should look up Mr Whale, his opposite number here, but I doubt if I'll have time – what with this, that, and the other. Wasn't the loss of the "Clare" a terrible thing? Curtis was very interesting on that subject, and we were grieved to hear that there were no survivors, and that the bodies recovered were all badly mutilated by sharks and by fire. That somehow makes it all the worse.

On our last trip one of our ships depth-charged a shoal of fish. Big, roseate fellows they were, and gave us a few for our supper. We had to eat them the same day as the scorching sun made approach difficult and unpleasant after more than an hour's exposure. In spite of this rather menacing aspect they proved tender and tasty, unlike the majority of fish, coarse and strongly tasting, that one catches in these parts. Sharks fell ravenously upon their entrails thrown overboard after gutting. We fired machine guns at them, but had no success. I dislike sharks intensely, and class them with rats and cockroaches. That such a lowly form of fishy life should attain its very considerable success by methods at once so cowardly and carnivorous strikes me as unfair as the close parallel of Hitler and his crowd of elasmobranchs. They both prey on the defenceless and are very evil-smelling themselves. The trouble is that they are both remarkably efficient types. Scientifically, I suppose, this is a distinctly false argument, as natural selection demands that all animals prey on others that are (to them) relatively defenceless. But nature has no sporting instincts, and nor has Hitler. So, are we more developed mentally or less well equipped instinctively? I'd rather be the former.

I am very happy to hear you have such a satisfactory tenant for Mark. The gannets who preceded him were a source of great anxiety to you, I know, but I hope that when we do at last take over there everything will be in decent order – as it should be under a good business man.. It must be a nice cider crop to fetch £50.

I believe I told you Joan Page wrote me. It was very good of her to do so. I have no attachments at home, so a female correspondent would be pleasant variety (for Heaven's sake don't tell her this!).

Now I must close, so goodnight for now. Lawrence.

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 last liberty man\*, pleasantly tight but very civil, has just come aboard and spun me a delicious yarn, circumstantial in the extreme, about how he got lost on the way back (in an alcoholic daze, I suspect), and how he cam to be two hours late. He thanked me politely and with careful articulation when I told him he'd have to see the captain (Norrie), and get his basinful, tomorrow. Then he retired carefully and deliberately to his bunk, where I trust he'll have pleasant dreams. So I will follow his example now and retire to mine. Au revoir.

Much love from Lawrence.

\* a Glaswegian (or Glasgonian), and a townsman of Norrie's

15 Oct 1942

From: c/o ML Base, Freetown

Dear Mummy

I have no mail from you for a full month now, and I hope you are all right. Please write to me as soon as you can.

We don't have much time in harbour now – a letter I wrote to Daddy a couple of weeks ago had to stay aboard until three days ago when I found an opportunity to post it. I think some mail has been lost coming out here and possibly on the way back, so I hope my letters are reaching you all right.

Today a BOAC launch put two of our men aboard whom they had found waiting on the jetty, and the officer in charge of her asked if I was aboard and said Daddy had mentioned that I was out here and that he was to look me up. He had to rush off then and I didn't have a chance to speak to him, but he told my man he'd be looking me up. Name I think was Anderson. They are very efficient out here, the BOAC, but Curtis told me that Daddy's fumigating schemes had entirely been dropped for the duration, which seems to presuppose that tsetse flies are less dangerous in war time. He said there had already been one outbreak in Palestine (??) thought to be due to aircraft.

I heard grim stories from the ships that picked up the "Clare" remains. One kept three bodies on her quarterdeck covered with canvas for three days in this heat, and they had been badly mutilated by sharks. They will have been dead before they reached the water, thank God.

The captain of a certain merchant ship sailing down this coast had a crew consisting of one hundred lascars, nine officers, and some dozen others. Being conscientious he had himself made small facsimiles of the coastal charts covering the particular run he was making, some twenty copies in all, and had copied this out so that each lifeboat should have in it an envelope containing these twenty copies. That entailed a lot of work. Also in each envelope were pages from the nautical almanack giving necessary navigational data to cover the period of the trip.

This ship was torpedoed seven hundred miles from land. All the lifeboats on one side of the ship were destroyed, and when the other boats had been lowered by the officers (the lascars were fatalists and knew land was far away), the submarines surfaced, the captain leant out of his conning tower and bid the master of the merchant ship good day and how he regretted his unpleasant but necessary task. He said he would stand by while the lifeboats picked up the swimming survivors, but regretted he could not tow them nearer land as when he had done that previously the RAF had bombed him. He said he hoped they would meet in happier circumstances after the war and split a bottle of lager. He submerged when he say all the men in the boats, and they saw him no more.

The ship had gone down in fifteen minutes, but one officer had rescued his sextant. The other boats tied astern of his – except one which thought it knew better, and together they set sail eastward. Ever eastward. At noon every day the leading ship sent back to the other ships their position which each plotted on their little charts. The little convoy did about 50 miles a day. The lascars slept and would not work, the officers sailed the boats and kept them fit to sail. Seven hundred miles they sailed, with nobody injured but the captain with sunburn. They knew where they were making for and they made it. They were met by a boat sent out when they were sighted, and it capsized in the surf and they had to swim ashore. The boat which knew better and did not accompany them also did not arrive.

I have kept this account purposefully prosaic and like a list of facts. It was very difficult, for men like that merchant service captain win the war for us. There are other tales, reading

like wild story books, but so prosaic when the men tell you them. I heard the above from the captain of the ship.

Write when you can

Much love from Lawrence.

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26 Oct 1942

From – Coastal Forces Base, Freetown

Dear Mother

Here we are again at Bathurst, and very hot, too, far worse than Freetown. We shalln't have long here, I'm afraid, as we get pushed out of these places so fast these days we've hardly time to get ashore for a bathe. Actually we had ten days at Freetown last trip in, and I managed to get a lot of letters written to various people by sea mail amongst them one for you, so that will be coming along slowly. Thomas Powell wrote to me, Eric Clarke, Ian Simpson, R Meek, Gerhart, and others, so I had some material to work on while writing mine.

Poor Gerhart is having a miserable time of it pioneering. He writes most mournfully. Army life is pretty grim for anybody, and a Private in the Pioneer Corps must be absolutely the last word. He seems to be based somewhere near Oxford, so I wrote a line to Roy asking him to look G up and try and get him interested in something. But Roy is likely to be pretty busy so doubt if he'll have much time to spare acting the Good Samaritan.

I have bottled some specimens of standing water taken from old kerosene cans in our base at Freetown, and am waiting to see what grows. If I can rear a few real Anopheles I shall be able to take it triumphantly to the doctor and tell him what neglecting malarial sprays causes. But nearly a week has elapsed since collecting it, and in spite of air getting at it through the cotton wool stopper nothing has yet materialised – not even the ubiquitous fungus, so suspect contamination from the bottle. Actually I'm wrong when I say nothing has materialised: on the second and third day there was a mysterious pallid filament hanging from the surface about 10 cm long, depending from a black float, but that gave up the struggle and vanished two days ago. Perhaps I maligned the doctor and the cans had been sprayed!

What fine types of East Africans we see about here, the few that there are contrasting most strongly in their hawklike – almost biblical – appearance with the bovine locals. They wear loose flowing robes and untidy turbans loosely tied, and they look the fiercer with their straggly beards and hooked noses. They are rather my idea of Arabs, but a darker colour. They say the locals reach their maximum intelligence at the age of twelve, and thereon decline. They are certainly an exceedingly stupid lot of men, but the boys are quite sharp. One, aged about six, is getting ducks for our ship, rather expensive certainly, but fancy eating roast duck!

As ever, Lawrence.

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26 Oct 1942

From - WA

Dear Chris

For certain reasons (which you may guess) I believe that a letter I wrote you some weeks ago, won't reach you. So as this long heralded and much considered letter was wasted, I take this opportunity (a good one, as we can get air mail sent from here) of sending you another one.

I wonder how you are getting on as Justice of the Peace in wartime Thornbury. I can well imagine you. I wish I were just disentangling myself from the Austin preparatory to a Sunday afternoon with you. I was looking at the photos I took way back when R and O were still in England, and they and Mummy and I were on one such visit. It brought those times back very vividly. Do you

remember the photo of the three of them in the carriage, and you there too with a tea tray on your knees? That was very good and I am happy to have it with me to look at sometimes. Do you remember your "fowls"? Well, when Bruce Webb, one of my flotilla mates, went down with malaria they gave his ship a spare officer to carry out his duties while he was away. The spare reminded me strongly of them. He was known as "The Quarter Deck Squatter" from his practice of sitting in a deck chair in that place with one eye reading a detective novel and with the other watching others work. He was perhaps the most useless, lazy, incompetent piece of ullage that I have ever set eyes on. He was very like your fowls. Then he had the goodness to point out that he didn't approve of doing both a first and a morning watch (being unaccustomed to such hardship), and that he didn't like the food.

We seem to have more or less reverted to the primitive practice of barter here in Bathurst. Money has little meaning for the Wogs, as though they have enough of it there is little they can buy in the way of essentials. They come down to the ship loaded with eggs and limes and oranges, but are either not interested in money at all or prove their loss of estimation of value by charging fantastic prices. Today I got a handful of limes for a half empty box of matches, and the man was asking sixpence for them. The market price is 2/6 a hundred.

I have bought a little deerskin handbag for you – like those mats Daddy brought back from here last time he was out. I also have one of snakeskin. Which would you rather?

Yours ever, Lawrence

16 Nov 1942

From - British West Africa

Dear Mother

I've written two letters to you in the last three days but neither got posted. We are missing on several mails from home as well, so I haven't heard from you for some time, either. We are having a pretty slack period just now – we haven't been out for over a week, but hope for activity soon if we get around to Dakar. We follow the news with breathless interest, and dream of having a week in Casablanca or one of the French ports to the north of us and sampling the delights of real civilisation again. Old Freetown looks very much the same as usual, and we are getting very tired of sitting here with nothing to do but make the ship look pretty and while away the evenings in the vicious round of inter-flotilla social life.

I wrote to a Glasgow bookseller some weeks ago and ordered three books to be sent out here; and just to be sure he didn't think me too narrow minded I named "The Art of Living" by Andre Mansoir, "Astronomy for the Night Watcher" by Sidgwick, and "Genetics for the Medical Student" by Ford. The two former turned up last week, but the latter is still on passage having been delayed by being temporarily out of stock. "The Art of Living" has been a great pleasure to me, and contrasts most strangely with my normal standard of literature: "G Men at Bay" is my latest.

I spent a happy Sunday afternoon at Lumley beach surf riding with two friends. The waves were just the right size, and the sensations of rushing along at great speed on the crest is an unforgettable one. Banks, our flotilla leader or senior officer, was also there, but simply sank sluggishly and ignominiously when he tried.

My friend Bruce Webb, lucky dog, is away at Pointe Noire in the Cameroons, and Douala, breaking new ground for us. I wish I were there.

How is Mark getting on? I hope the tenants are continuing satisfactory. It will be grand after the war for R and O (if they do come back from Canada) and we can look forward to carefree days in the Gloucestershire country again with English fields and farms instead of bomb-blasted Bristol, Canadian prairies and West African steamy rivers. And I think these days are much nearer now with this grand news of our invasion of North Africa and our overwhelming success in Libya. A canteen manager I met prophesies he will go home in June (when he is due for relief) and see the victory celebrations in London, but this is rather optimistic.

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.

Germany seems to be like this. Twice or three times have we cut off her Libyan head, and each time has it regenerated fiercer than before. If, this time, Hercules Alexander can seal the stump of German resistance, with fire and the sword, and off its blood supply by destroying Pantellaria and the Axis communications over the Mediterranean, then we can consider the first of the seven heads, Libya, Russia, the Far East, the invasion forces, the U boat war, the Luftwaffe, and Vichy France, the first of these finally stopped off and dealt with. The others will take a lot of lopping, I fancy.

So here's hoping for what we all hope, and I hope to be able to get a Christmas letter card off to you before Christmas day, if nothing better.

Lawrence.

30 Dec 1942

From – British West Africa

Dear Mother

Thank you for your Christmas cable. I was especially glad to hear from you as so little ordinary mail has been getting through. Two of your letters (written in March!) reached me on Christmas Day, after having been sent to Alexandria by mistake and then sent back to England! You were at Eddie's when you wrote them.

We are out on patrol again tonight – a very dark night with the lights away in the harbour showing up very bright, and the stars very clear overhead, and Orion striding out of the eastern horizon. It is pleasant being out here on patrol, with just a gentle motion on the surface, and a slight breeze to keep the ship tolerably cool; we are only doing three hours each on watch per night, and so we are taking things very easy. Having a third officer aboard makes a great difference.

I am just recovering from an annoying attack of boils, including one nasty ulcer in my right thumb. I find the only way to deal with these things is to treat them yourself; trudging ashore to the sick bay at inconvenient hours is most aggravating. So far all have healed up satisfactorily, and there have been no complications. Really the only tricky one was the ulcer, and that you can see by my handwriting is giving no more trouble.

I hear from Tom Powell that his wife is having a baby – or will have had by now, I suppose. He seems very bucked by this, and says it makes up for his appointment to Scapa Flow – which I believe I told you about. It was pretty awful when I was there, and won't have improved much in another two years of war. I hope his wife Paddy will be all right, and I cannot imagine how Tom will appear as a father!

News from other fronts finds Eric Clarke still driving tanks in Yorkshire somewhere, with his pip or Second Lieutenancy apparently still as far off as before, and Roy Levy very nearly a fully fledged medico.

On Christmas afternoon I worked off a nasty liver by going up the river with fishing lines and twenty bore, with three friends to try our luck. We came back with no luck having rowed goodness knows how far owing to the failure [spelt 'failior' by LPM!] of the outboard motor we were relying on for our procedure. But I think it was the most pleasant afternoon I have ever spent in these waters. I blued about 8 cartridges without any more than a stagger from the duck flying down the creek out of the setting sun, and we trailed our spinners in vain. The creek itself made a perfect picture that evening. It was really the mouth of a little river, and was banked on either side by thick and vivid green jungle, and a little native village on the point. The mouth itself was protected by numerous shoals and sandbanks, and several times we had to offer our ankles to the barracudas in pushing the boat off. The duck came sailing down close to the water from up-river, but wouldn't really come close enough for a fair shot. I think they come down to feed on the sand flats which are left exposed at low water. I found shooting from the boat a singularly precarious procedure. It was very dark on the way back 10 miles down river against the flood tide, and the outboard decided it had done enough half way back. Luckily we got a tow for the last two miles, but the other three were a stiff pull.

Goodnight, and much love from Lawrence.

3 Jan 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Father

Your Christmas present and Mother's arrived together with your letter on New Year's Day – just after I had sealed and sent off the letter I wrote Mother then. I've already read through "Sub-Lieutenant" and thought it vividly written and quite true to life. I have also read some of the works out of the "Daily Telegraph Miscellany" and enjoyed them very much, and can see that his little book will provide me with many hours of pleasure in the future. Thank you both for these presents, and you can have no idea how welcome they are.

What a grand idea for Mother to go across to America. I am sure she'd be far happier over there with no worries and anxieties, and as you point out, so much nearer R and O. What will your plans be if this scheme is undertaken? And how long is the visit going to take? As I believe you are both seriously thinking of living in Canada after the war and finishing Richard and Owen's education in that country, will you stay in this country with BOAC, until the end of the war? I don't suppose any of your plans are definite yet anyway, but I am loath to give up the idea of your retiring after the war to live in Gloucestershire at Mark. It would be a pity to cut yourself off from all your friends in this country.

For my own part I scarcely see myself returning to Oxford. If possible I would rather finish my training at some other University – Edinburgh, for instance, if it were possible to get in. After the war my aim will be to pass my examinations in as short a time as possible. You see Oxford has served its purpose. For a considerable financial outlay it has given me ideas, taught me how to mix without discomfort with others of my age and station, and it has taught me manners. In addition it showed me how to manage myself. That is what Oxford teaches for its extra fees. After the war, to put it bluntly, I shall require letters after my name, and that other Universities can provide more cheaply and in many cases with as good a reputation. I am if anything keener on medicine than ever, and I can assure you I shall qualify after the war in as short a time as is possible for me.

I am sorry this isn't quite a New Year letter, but if I remember I included most of my news in the one I sent Mother.

Yours with much love and best wishes for the New Year, Lawrence.

26 Jan 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

I had a nice type-written letter from you three or four days ago saying how regularly you write; I'm sure you do. But I know how bad the mail situation is, so can understand the non-arrival of your letters.

Here we are lying off a most picturesque little West African port. We are anchored about ½ mile off the beach and feeling rather uncomfortably directly affected by the ocean swell which is sending the surf roaring up the beach. It is so small a port that I don't suppose that even Daddy in all his peregrinations has visited it. It is most oddly formed geographically; two rivers debouch within a couple of miles of one another, and the action of the river currents within and the surf without has had the effect of throwing up a high sand barrier continuous from one side of the estuary to the other, whereon the surf roars ceaselessly. Inside the barrier the two rivers unite to form a wide still lagoon, with many small islands dotted about it, covered with jungly grass or high trees. There is only one break in the sand barrier, and that is protected from without by another sandbank, submerged and invisible but for the snarling coamers [?] beating upon it. There is about 2 ft of water over this bar.

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

the midday sun, and sweat pours off the glistening backs of the natives. 4 tons of palm kernels and 12 natives to each boat.

Two barracudas came aboard today, one 4 ft and the other 5, exchanged for clothing with a native fisherman who came alongside. A vicious-looking tigerish fish with sharp and prominent teeth, but delicious eating. Ray and I and one of the men took the dinghy away this afternoon with line and spinner to try <u>our</u> luck for barracuda, but all we met was a large hammerhead shark. It circled significantly round our little dinghy showing its sinister sickle fin, doubtless keeping his fishy optic on us. When he came close we saw that he was longer than the dinghy which is 10 foot, and we were very frightened indeed and betook ourselves hastily back to the ship, for he would have had no trouble at all in upsetting us had he been hungry.

Thank goodness we are properly back in operation again. The two and a half months we had in harbour were getting on everybody's nerves. I hear rumours that certain 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants are getting Commands. None have as yet, but we are all living in hope! It is unlikely to mean a second ring or Lieutenancy however, especially as I am still so young – younger than Ray, our third officer, even! One or two of our "Number One's Union" have their second stripes, but they are mostly old gentlemen of little under thirty.

The time being 2300 it is time for bed, so au revoir and I hope to hear from you soon.

Love and the best of good luck, Lawrence.

16 Mar 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Father

We've been away from our base for some time now, so have had no letters from home. I hope all goes well, and that Mummy and you are both fit and are not having to put up with too much blitzing.

This morning we returned from a rather uncomfortable three days trip. Actually it all started romantically in the best traditions of story books with the Captain, Norrie Chesters, at an RAF concert and I reclining comfortably on the quarterdeck of one of my friend's ships listening to gramophone records. It was a perfect moonlit night with the few good friends I have in harbour here at the moment seated around peacefully and "Invitation to the Waltz" floating through the air from the gramophone. In the position I was sitting I could see the port signal station, and I was idly reading the signals it was flashing. I noticed the name of my ship, and read "proceed to sea forthwith, immediate recall to officers and ratings etc etc". For half an hour I had forgotten the war and all its doings, and now it was forced upon me again, and the reaction was extraordinarily acute. I might have been sitting in the country in Gloucestershire so pleasant had been my thoughts and sensations, and then this beastly signal to drive all that away and remind me of all the little routine matters that had to be attended to at once to get the ship ready for Norrie to take to sea as soon as he returned. Somebody commented on how strangely this little disembodied light flashing away in the darkness could disrupt a scene so tranquil and forgetful.

We were senior ship on the trip, and so to us fell to the lot of the navigation once again. The excitement of seeing land appear when it has been invisible for several days, and seeing it where you expect it, remains with me as fresh as ever, for I am responsible for it. In this particular case if exciting it was certainly unpleasant, for we expected it at dawn, and for two hours a tornado had been raging. While it was still dark in a violent rainstorm it appeared as a rocky headland illuminated by the vivid lightning flashes on our port bow, and I thought at first we were a lot too close to it. By 6 a.m. the rain had reduced to a drizzle and it was quite light, and we could see we were a good 4 miles off and pretty well in position. The currents on this coast are so strong and variable that a landfall is always a bit of a gamble, and ships have been known to be 50 miles out if they haven't had a sight of the sun or stars for several days. In our case it was somewhat easier, as we had not been more than 100 miles off the land and had stayed about in the same position all the time, so we had plenty of opportunity of estimating their strength and direction before coming in.

My friend Bruce Webb was in tonight and discussing volunteering for another 12 months on this coast. His point, and I agree with it, is that normally we should be appointed CO of some speed job in the channel operating not against submarines but against E boats etc. Our experience in this sort of job is non-existent, but we do know something about this coast and its little vagaries, and would be of more use out here doing convoy work and the like. Less exciting, but just as important. I had myself been considering this point, and in addition I have found that the climate seems to suit me pretty well, and as yet, touch wood, haven't gone down with any of the usual diseases. So I think that when I get home I'll volunteer for another foreign commission either here or some other place where they are doing similar work. The only other consideration II have in mind is whether to ask for three months or so on a destroyer or some such craft to prepare myself for the job of Commanding Officer and familiarise myself once again with strict Naval routine. On a happy ship like this one, where one knows the crew and everything runs smoothly, it is unnecessary and one quickly forgets the ins and outs of it, but with a bad crew where it is necessary to put one's foot down, one must know the letter of the law or one gets into more trouble oneself than the crew do. We have had a case of that out here already in another ship – and forewarned is forearmed!

I am sorry to talk so much shop, but it is difficult not to when one has this sort of thing on one's mind all the time. In any case, I should like to keep you up to date with my plans for the future, for your criticisms of them will be valuable when I get home on leave to hear them, and have had time to consider them and decide what I think best myself.

Surf-bathing this afternoon I recognised a face and found it recognised mine and my name as well. Do you remember those long cricketing days on the lawn at Felden, and a serious bespectacled boy who came from Berkhamsted High School, and a long dark-complexioned face? Well, it was he. He turned out to be a telegraphist at the Base here. His name I haven't even got now properly – Bickwood or Bickford or something; likely Mummy will remember it. Another fellow I believe you used to know is Eden, from Marlborough, who is a Sub-Lieutenant in a big ship operating out here. Again it was he who remembered my name and I not his, so I am coming to the conclusion I have inherited your rotten memory for names. Faces I can manage as a rule, and names of course are so obvious when once told, but I always seem to have to ask them.

We had a pleasant afternoon some weeks ago with an ENSA party – two appalling women (still it is good to see a piece of white femininity after all this time), and three men. One of the women – Hazel something – comes from Clifton, from one of the roads off the downs near the White tree, and knows the WITTS whom Mummy knows as grocers I believe up there. We travelled an hour in the car through thick bush to a bathing beach and there rode the surf and drank "planter's pluck" – gin and coconut milk, and had a hilarious and somewhat erratic ride back.

We are going back to our base soon, so hope for some mail from you there waiting for us.

Love and best of luck, Lawrence.

15 Apr 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

We are patrolling miles away from our home base this morning, in East Longitude in fact, and the weather is most unpleasant. Last night at about half past ten it blew a tornado and luckily we were at anchor so with no ill effects except a complete sousing and a disturbed sleep owing to have to hang on all night in the bunk. They roll very unpleasantly in a beam [?] sea, these ships. The coast down here is much more pleasant and interesting than the part we know so much better. It has a low lying foreshore with the ubiquitous coconut palm fringing it, backed by smoothly contoured hills and high mountain ranges in the hinterland capped with white clouds in good weather.

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!

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## 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 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 seems busier and happier, and the town more carefully lain 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.

We are still rolling badly in the surf, but I have propped my chair against the bunk on which Norrie is lying, and have the table edge pressing hard into my middle, so when we roll we all roll, chair, me, pen, paper and table, so my writing does not suffer so much.

This evening there was an unusually beautiful African sunset. I stood and admired it from the forecastle as we patrolled up and down prior to anchoring. Venus had her bright and watchful eye on us, and the moon's shining face was shown to great advantage against the bright azure of the evening sky. The west was a mass of reds and gold and yellow, but the east was more modest but I think more successful with her dove grey and mauve shot with the dusky red of a cooling soldering iron. To the north storm clouds were gathered with bright flashes of lightning, consulting amongst themselves in dull undertones of thunder, and just there above the horizon a gap showing the redness of the western clouds. I fear the northern gentlemen tonight, for they have a habit of moving south and hatching their plots over us here at about 2 o'clock in the morning.

So now I must away to my bunk for fear they disturb me later.

Au revoir (61 days!) and love, Lawrence.

21 Apr 1943

From: Kumasi, Ashanti, Gold Coast

[This is a typed copy made by MEHM. She seems to have shortened the original letter, which is missing.]

This is my last evening of a 48 hrs leave up country in Gold Coast as the guest of a timber merchant, Mr Briscoe, And a well filled 48 hours it has been. Mr Briscoe started his business in 1923 and fells mahogany in the vast forests around here, and ships the great logs to England and the USA. It is a most interesting business, especially as my own ship is built quite possibly out of Mr Briscoe's logs! ... [MEHM: after a discourse of Ashantis and their superstitions he proceeds] ... Yesterday I went into the bush to watch the felling and the cutting of logs and watched these fine men from the north, with their beautiful physique, swinging their narrow-handled axes into the mahogany. The bush is just as I should have imagined it, impenetrable except along the paths and 'cat tracks' along which the logs are hauled by caterpillar tractors; to the left and right dense undergrowth and snaky creepers. Long reddish brown centipedes like a Watford tube train with a couple of feelers sticking from its bows. which crawled amongst the rotting leaves that cover the soil. And that eternal jungle noise of crickets chorusing. I pushed my way off the path into a clearing made by previous felling, and sat on a log and watched the butterflies fluttering about, and wondered why they should flaunt their loveliness so blatantly where everything else was so well camouflaged. They don't all taste nasty to birds, and there are few flowers to touch their gaudiness and so in any way bamboozle the birds. The latter, also, were pretty well made up, but their efforts at song were limited in the most part to croaking and screeching.

The West Indian foreman or superintendent of that particular felling was cynical in the extreme about the wild life. Snakes he said ran away and were no danger, and all the other insects and creatures that bite were innocuous if ignored. There were no big game except small crocodiles in the rivers, and they were scared stiff if they saw a canoe. "You are far safer here than in London", he said. So the Wide World magazine must be definitely alarmist!

The night before last, two hours after arriving here with a train journey of 9 hours on an empty stomach behind me, I fainted clean away after supper and was miserably sick. "It's the hospital with malaria for me, for sure", I thought, but the next morning I was as right as rain and feeling fresher than I have done since Abidjan. Mr Briscoe's ginger cat woke me up at half past six, and I didn't curse her as I should normally have done.

This afternoon I motored some 15 miles out and then paddled some 2 miles up a fetid river with some natives and Mr Briscoe's partner, in two canoes. We left it a bit late and came down stream after dark, with fireflies glittering from the steep banks, and tall trees leaning menacingly over my head. The noise of the crickets increased at dusk to a crescendo of buzzing and chittering and clicking, and it was so dark afterwards that we hit several logs, and one of the native paddlers fell overboard and nearly lost his paddle. The canoe was almost full of water, and in spite of the W Indian Superintendent's assurances about the crocodiles, I had no wish to test their amiability by too tempting

a morsel of me! So we baled like mad, and the native scrambled back aboard, and we found the paddle inside the canoe and all was well.

A welcoming beacon from an oil lamp met us when we returned to our starting place and led us single file through the jungle paths in inky blackness to the road where the car was waiting. There the village was gathered, wrapped in their gaily coloured shawls of native cloth, to speed our departure, and they made a brave sight, men, women and picaninnies, backed by their crude mud huts, as they waved and cheered the car driving off.

As you see, this letter is written in a tearing hurry to finish and get some sleep before our early start tomorrow to catch the train to Takoradi. All sorts of things I have had to skip ... I'll tell you anon about the crocodile's egg for instance, and there will be a sequel to that story by then, I hope!

Very much love, Lawrence

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24 Apr 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Parents

Enclosed find pencilled letter I wrote before leaving Kumasi. I have not much to add to it; except perhaps that I got back to the ship all right after another 9 hour train journey – part of it with a most fascinating woman whose husband worked in a bauxite mine near Obuasi.

Looking back on the trip my strongest impression is one of wonder at the richness of the natural resources of the colony. Our second largest gold producer, many diamond mines, bauxite, manganese, cocoa, rubber, timber. These make an impressive picture. The rubber has really only started since the war, but seems a very successful export. Hitherto I've always lived as an unthinking consumer, quite unaware except in a quite detached way of the thousands of natives and English overseas who labour to produce food, houses, clothes and motor cars for me.

I must finish now, so goodbye for now. Lawrence.

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25 Apr 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

I have sent off another letter to go by sea mail which will go at the same time, but as there may be a bit of a gap I thought you'd like one of these [air mail letters] to prevent "that sinking feeling". The other letter described my doings at Kumasi. I've just been going through a lot of my old letters and tearing many up. It was very pleasant to read again the old ones from you, describing your visit to Eddie Bartlett and others.

Norrie and half the ship's company are away at Kumasi, so Ray and I reign by ourselves alone in the wardroom with a more or less skeleton crew forrard. We have had trouble with our fresh water tanks – apparently contaminated with bilge water and giving us all frightful tummy palaver – and we are more or less laid up for a week or so to get them fixed. So everything is very quiet and we surf bathe in the afternoon and sit on the quarterdeck in the evenings and hold indignation meetings.

I've found a very nice poem in the DT Miscellany about "the Mason's difference". OF course we don't have a Mason's difference out here except hot and damp or wet and hot, so this little poem brings England out all the more vividly.

One gets a lot of amusement and education out of censoring these chaps' letters. One that tickled me rather yesterday was from our holy man on the messdeck who has religion very fiercely, writing to a young friend of his. He seemed to get theology and seamanship rather mixed up when he told his friend "you may find the Service hard at first, but there are compensations. God is <u>always</u> a safe anchorage, and his anchor will never drag"!

Rather like Norrie who thought he "smelled a fly in the ointment" on this leave question.

The ship is looking very dirty about the upper deck. That is the result of a lot of sea time and not much opportunity to recuperate. Looking round at some of the other ships I suppose I can scarcely complain.

Today we are duty ship again – which actually entails nothing more than sending one officer to keep the war going in Naval Headquarters while the Base officers push off to the mess to feed. It also means we are duty "crash boat" for any air-rescue work there is going, and it is a credit to the RAF how seldom we are called out. So I can sit up here peaceably on the quarterdeck digesting my tea and enjoying the cool of the evening. That's why I was noticing these things about the upper deck a little while back.

Don't the Yanks flog their own backs in these beastly magazines of theirs? Goodness knows <u>I'm</u> not doing much for the war effort this particular minute, but our armies do <u>occasionally</u> meet the enemy. Anybody'd think the Yanks had kept democracy alive ever since the war started.

I see a little tug puffing cheerfully about the harbour with half a dozen or so mahogany logs in tow. I wonder if any of them come from Mr Briscoe, the bloke I stayed with in Kumasi.

Love from Lawrence.

17 May 1943

From: British West Africa

**Dear Parents** 

Over the last couple of days we have been lying in Lagos harbour – our first visit here. And so far we have had a magnificent time. The first night we visited the posh European club of the town – the Ikoyi Club. You will probably remember it, Daddy, from your visits here. It is laid out beautifully with a circular ball room surrounded by balconies and tables, and one side open to the garden with seats set in the moonlight. It was really very lovely. The trouble was I kept comparing it with a cinema set up of "Life in the Dominions" – immaculately dressed men and beautiful women in scintillating surroundings. Thus does the cinema give us our standards!

When we were in the club we met some WAAF officers who had come down on the ship we were escorting, and so of course we volunteered to continue the escort for as long as we were in Lagos. It all went off very well; we took them to dinner, to bathe, and to sundry other functions, and parted great friends. One of them was a doctor, coming from the Bristol Royal Infirmary. She said she'd been sent there because she hadn't been doing enough work at King's, London, where she was before that.

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19 Jul 1943

I have found this unfinished letter card amongst a whole lot of papers in my drawer, so hasten to finish and send it off. I see I wrote it at Lagos: well, we're back in Freetown now and lying more or less immobilised because of engine trouble. I wrote you a good long letter which went by sea mail a few days ago [?dated 16 July – see below], but seize this opportunity of getting you quicker news.

During the next few days I hope to organise a week up at the rest camp on the mountain behind F called Leicester Peak, where one can vegetate completely for the time and do a lot of writing. Previous visits have had a surprisingly rejuvenating effect on friends of mine and I can assure you I used it.

I have just been reading a book called "Our Penelope" which describes the escapades of HMS Penelope in the Mediterranean culminating in her terrible experience at Malta. Stories were still being told at Gibraltar when we were there of how she staggered into harbour bristling with wooden plugs, and an almost completely exhausted ship's company. She had been bombed for weeks in dry dock at Valetta. Hers was a fine record, and it is well told in this little book which I advise you to get if you can. What struck me particularly was how much of action and hard conditions the British sailor can stand and a true saying I read was that it takes one successful action – never mind what the conditions are – to weld a ship's company into a good fighting machine and a happy community. Pride of ship comes from these things, and it is the most important thing to cultivate. I think this applies both ashore

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

[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 1<sup>st</sup> 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!

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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

they differ from the Yank skippers, who have (apparently) dared so much. I have nothing but admiration for these fine British merchant seamen. You'd never believe a convoy conference if you saw one. A motley collection of dull-looking and dowdy men who apparently take the least possible interest in the proceeding and discourse in whispers about the "bad case of gin you sold me the day before yesterday". But put their ships to sea and put each dull-looking individual on his respective bridge and a better disciplined organisation of merchant ships it would be impossible to find.

Sorry to spout such a lot about these blokes but I have such an admiration for these fellows that I feel they are doing far more for the war in their unconcerned way than all the General Montgomeries and 8<sup>th</sup> Armies you like to mention, and that they are not getting nearly enough recognition for it.

I hear Norrie coming aboard now so I must stop writing and get my behind off his bunk and pretend I've been busy on real Naval paperwork.

Ever so much and hoping to see you sometime soon! Lawrence.

25 Jun 1943

**Dear Parents** 

Still no sign of our reliefs! We are back now more or less where we started, with no particular date to look forward to. Norrie and I are of course still together, and Ray has come back to us after his short time on another ship filling a gap.

We are on the brink of a most interesting venture into (for us) unknown territory of a certain quite neutral port where we show the flag and perform other duties during the 24 hours we are allowed in port. There is a very great deal of entertaining to be done, and as far as I could see our predecessors more or less crawled back on their hands and knees! Still, I'll be able to tell you all about it when I come back.

The navigation on the trip presents great interests also, the entrance to the area being quite unlike the geography of the part of the coast I am accustomed to. Up till now the work has tended to be of such a routine nature that one's interest in navigation becomes almost academic – to find how small an error one can obtain in any given type of observation, or a rather detached study of the sundry types of current one finds up and down the coast. But we shall be making this passage in the very worst time of year when the sky is frequently overcast, ocean currents disorganised by the monsoon, and river tides exaggerated because of the increasing rainfall up country. So I shall need all my wits about me, for an error of 5 miles might well put the ship aground.

Now towards the end of the commission we are beginning to snap at one another a bit in our little wardroom. A few days ago Norrie and I had quite a fierce argument about some ridiculously trivial incident, and you can see in other ships as well that all is not going as smoothly as it did. Bruce Webb, for instance, being more ambitious than me, is outraged because he hasn't been given a command already or some such complaint, and daily natters at his CO. Perhaps fortunately he's gone down with malaria for a second time – a mild attack this time, and so things run more smoothly in that quarter. He and John Dowling and I sit nightly in our wardrooms and complain about things general and particular, and I think that 22 months on one ship with one man is beginning to irk in all three cases! After all we each of us prided ourselves on being just a little keener than anybody else, and it really doesn't seem to have gotten us anywhere. Not that it's anyone's fault, only that in this Godforsaken place there aren't enough ships to provide the opportunities. We can't get promoted to 2 stripers because of this ridiculous age bar, and they're bound to give 2 stripers the preference by the laws of the Navy. There is a thing called "Accelerated Promotion" which enables you to overcome the drawback of youthfulness but the Admiral out here is a sticky blighter and gives it to no officers below Corvettes. Now we three, John, Bruce and I, have to wait for our respective COs to be relieved before we can get commands, and then it's a question of staying just the month for it. The thing that really gets our goat is watching these Canadian and Australian gentlemen coming over (many of them seeing the sea for the first time on the troopship) being given 2 rings immediately because they are colonials and over 30 years old, and then making an awful mess of things as CO of one of these ships out here.

However, I'm afraid I've complained too long. It's probably the muggy beginning of another rainy season that is getting everybody down.

The Navy started a damn fine show the other day on the lines of the BBC Brains Trust. They (peacetime occupations respectively solicitor, doctor, rolling stone, and Harrow housemaster, presided over by an RN Warrant schoolmaster as questionmaster) answered questions which they had not previously seen most amusingly, and the Harrow housemaster (by the name of Ford) and the Rolling Stone (a chap called Sullivan who has done most things in his 35 years) made the biggest hits. All sorts of questions were asked, from the post war status of India to exclusively male [?] matters of Sierra Leone. We had an informative and hilarious evening in the canteen. Perhaps the most surprising thing was when Ford got up to metaphorically tear public schools to pieces, and was very much in earnest about it. He enjoyed his time at Harrow, I think, but couldn't honestly reconcile the system with his rather active conscience. Of the five brains on the stage, four could actually produce an old school tie (three Haileyburians, shades of the Owens!) but the only one who stood up the ethics of the PS system was the warrant schoolmaster who entered the service as a boy at the age of about 14, of very lowly ancestry, I should say. Norrie, of course, is very fierce on the subject. He's all for Scotch [sic] education, and the only PS he'll countenance is Sedbergh!

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

8 Jul 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

It is curious how circumstance changes one's outlook: last time I wrote to you, if you remember, it was a shocking letter full of disagreeable regrets and stupid pessimism. Now that Bruce Webb has descended from the convalescent heights of Leicester Peak recuperation camp I have become swept into the orbit of his fantastic yet entirely practical schemes, and have now a new objective and interest to keep me going. There seems to come a time – I suppose it comes to everybody – when you have to make up your mind to sacrifice popularity and often respect (which in my case I flatter myself are considerable) for the pursuit of a real ideal. I am finding it a decision easy to make when arguing the point in the blue tobacco haze of a wardroom, but a difficult one to maintain during the dog days when influence and friendships are so useful.

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.

You will surely be saying now as you read this: how unlikely it is that so junior an officer could attain a position of such power! But I assure you that the authorities now in wartime will make use of the young and active brain of a peacetime industrial efficiency expert, providing they were directed into channels likely to help the war effort.

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

of his that <u>were</u> recognised were naturally in his CO's name. This he also resented. He has told me graphically and rather pathetically the story of the crises when he decides to have his differences out with his CO and clear the whole matter up. His well-prepared speeches break down, his rhetoric turns to a snivel, and his claims to the bombast of a boastful schoolboy, before the cold wisdom of the older and more experienced man. He went below after that and cried his heart out, poor boy. The thing was all so pitiful that now he trusts no one entirely, and deserves more pity than ever. But he has a fine ideal now and a real reason for existence, and the fine fire of his enthusiasm burns one with a desire to emulate such singlemindedness. But the path is rocky and steep and the number of innocent casualties is always high. It is a nice balance whether the end justifies the means.

As far as the practical side of it goes he has already caused consternation at the base here, and made people draw their skirts around their legs. Before long the Freetown authorities will be attacked, and if our base is any criterion the controversy that will be stirred up there will be phenomenal. You see people gathered around discussing his ideas and arguing fiercely on the various points as it is. One of the aspects of his activity I can tell you about, and this is his efforts to improve morale by extra recreation. He has already, in the few short days he has been active, organised a walking expedition for the troops into the bush, which proved a great success, and has two more in hand. He has started discussion groups amongst the men (the minutes of the first of which I enclose, if you can read it!). [No minutes found in the bundle of letters.]

Well, enough of Bruce for the time being. He is so active that one tends to forget everything else! Norrie is away at the moment taking a well deserved week off, and so Ray and I are carrying the infant. We haven't been out this time without Norrie, and I expect he'll be back before we do.

Hope to be home soon (how soon?)! Lawrence.

16 Jul 1943

From: British West Africa

**Dear Parents** 

We are docked awaiting new engines just now, so it is very boring and as it is the rainy season very disheartening. Our time overdue for relief becomes longer and longer, and our faces follow suit! We thought in our innocence 12 months ago that we should just miss this rainy season, as this time last year if my memory serves me aright there were quite decent days of sunshine. This year it has rained solidly for the last 48 hours. So we sit each in our little wardrooms on our little bunks "and sit and hear each other groan" as Keats says.

Bruce's efficiency drive in the base has lost its first momentum but progresses favourably. He has got himself officially recognised as being in charge of certain departments but certain rather unfortunate incidents a week ago prevented him from attaining his preliminary manoeuvres in one step. The trouble is that though everybody thinks that what he is doing is an excellent thing in principle, when they find it requiring them to become more energetic themselves, their assistance rather tends to become obstruction – in the weaker members anyway. As I said to Bruce myself this attitude is one he will find all his life when people are faced with general inefficiency. Not, mark you, that I consider this base to be inefficiently run, but if one's standard is 100% there is room for improvement in the best run concerns. I find far too much of the attitude "75% efficiency is the best we can hope for", and I have heard it put into so many words by several officers, and I'll be the first to admit that in our job 75% is indeed a standard which could well be considered the best under the circumstances under which we work. But you can <u>always</u> find faults, and though they be plausibly explained you can just as plausibly find a way of circumventing them.

I have been thinking over for some time now my plans after this commission is finished. As my training on this coast has been rather specialised it would be a waste of good experience to try to get on the fast light coastal craft operating on the south and east coasts. I admire these chaps very much, but their power boats in these smooth waters (as a rule!) requires a quicker brain than mine. My best opportunities will be found, I think, in getting myself officially recognised as a navigator by taking a course, then going all out for an Escort job in the north Atlantic. Besides being right up my street, it will be a job well worth doing. It will undoubtedly mean missing the certainty of a command, but there

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, Se 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.

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 <u>seems</u> 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 <u>not</u> 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

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 <u>very</u> 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 <u>normous</u> 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!

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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 I11

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

leant from within it and said "Mackie, you are to return immediately, your ship is to sea this evening." So I made some disparaging remark and we got into the car and drove up to the Peak and had tea – a very early one at 3 o'clock. Then we nipped back to the base at high speed – only to find that our machinery was not working and the ship was <u>not</u> sailing after all. After all that what an anticlimax! So Julie is coming down to the ship tomorrow instead.

I think this letter is long enough now, Mama, so goodnight and love from Lawrence.

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7 Aug 1943

From: British West Africa

**Dear Parents** 

I hope my letter written in the rest camp reached you all right. We are still lying at the beastly buoy, but have high hopes of getting a trip shortly.

I had a marvellous day yesterday, when I more or less took the day off. At half past nine I took the lorry down town and saw the dentist, and had dinner in the town with a friend after that. Then Julie and I went to bathe at the beach, where we met a lot of people we knew. We walked up the Freshwater creek and saw some astonishing crabs which lived in spiral shells and would come out and look at you most engagingly. I took her back to the hospital in the car and them changed and met 6 other chaps including (if you recognise any of the names) Norrie, Andy, Graham, Lacy, Benny, Bruce Webb, Brian Marlborough, and we had an enormous slap-up meal. I went to a dance with Benny in the town after that, where all the Africans wore the most exquisite dresses and all the men immaculate evening clothes. Then we returned to the mess and finished up (the whole party, by now considerably augmented) with a game of rugger, COs versus No 1s, which the No 1s won by 4 goals to 1. I have many abrasions from the coconut matting that covers the floor of the base wardroom. The fighting for the cushion which represented the ball got very fierce indeed, and the beauty of this game is that there are no rules at all, the object being to get the cushion onto one of the two goals, the doorway and the sofa, and throttling is permitted. Thus we work off our excess energy.

Julie is the most incredible girl. I have only known her for about 10 days but during that short time we have got to know each other pretty well. The trouble is that on this coast any woman seems to have tremendous social obligations; they are always being asked out here there and everywhere by the various messes and things, and dances are held in their honour. So a poor sailor starts with a disadvantage because he is so often out of port. However it is dangerous to start too serious an affair out here because one's mind's eye is apt to be out of focus because of being on the coast so long. The trouble is of course that these words of prudence (Norrie's actually) are all very well for the casual onlooker but hard to put into practice by the "victim".

Poor Norrie is not relieved yet. Most of the other COs are in the process or have already been relieved. And there are rumours of our sailing away again. For both Norrie and me (for different reasons) that would be a catastrophe. There is a great deal of gentle elbow work being done by a lot of gentlemen who are anxious to ... [hole in the paper here]. Even the modest I have had a talk or two with the old man about a navigation course when I get home, to fit me to navigate some vessel about the ocean. My sight is alas not good enough to fit me for the fast night encounter work of MGBs and the coastal craft we have in England just now.

This side of the paper is quite illegible, so I have better finish now.

Love, Lawrence			

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 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.

As regards the activities of the ship, they have been zero what with new engines, water in the petrol, and other Acts of God, at least for the past month or so.

I will write you again in a week and tell you the result of the Julie v Ship match. It should be decided by then.

The rest of my love, Lawrence.

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1 Sep 1943

From: British West Africa

**Dear Parents** 

The day before yesterday I wrote you a sea mail letter as I had an airmail one to hand. The gist of it was that I now have command of my ship, Norrie having been relieved, and that I have met a wizard girl, a sister from the army hospital here. And I must confess have fallen rather heavily for her. Things are very complicated though, and if I do marry her it certainly won't be before the end of the war. If I asked her I think she would have me. She had a terrible affaire with an officer on one of the merchant ships in here, but that is all settled since yesterday, when alas she went aboard and was sadly disillusioned after three months away from him. It was as I thought, a boat deck romance on board which never took root at all. Poor Julie, she was quite cut up about it.

After nearly two months in harbour with contaminated petrol and bad engines, we have two now ones now and expect to sail tomorrow or the net day to the north – to about the one port we never have been to. From the experience of others it should be most interesting and a great change after this beastly place which is getting on everybody's nerves. Worse for myself, because I find it difficult to concentrate on the ship as much as I should as the new commanding officer with Julie ashore there, and when I am with her suffering from conscience pangs about the ship. Up till now I've manage to do both all right, but now we are fit for sea again it is better that I should leave the port for a few months. I had a good talk with her about the whole matter, and she cried a bit and finally said she agreed. So that is that.

Heaven knows when I shall be back home to see you again. This commission stretches on to infinity. All the hands are about fed up with it, but welcome the idea of leaving this place for somewhere new. It gives them something to think about.

We have just finished painting out the wardroom – and very smart it looks, stone yellow enamel with a grand shiny finish. We had the carpet up and scrubbed the bare boards beneath, and our native steward worked hard to help us out. It is a tradition in our ships that when the wardroom is to be redecorated the officers dig in and do the job themselves, with no help from forward and only the heavy scrubbing etc from the steward aft. So Ray and Stan (my new First Lieutenant) and I got cracking and had it finished in about three days. All the fittings had to be unscrewed from the bulkhead and ship's side, and everything covered in newspaper that couldn't be unscrewed, so for two nights we slept in the middle of complete chaos trying to stop the paint making our eyes water.

For the first time in two months the good ship got under way this afternoon without being towed! With her new captain on the bridge!

This afternoon, after beginning this letter to you I worked a "Turk's Head" on the top of our wardroom gun stanchion. This gruesome task is not so gruesome as it sounds. You work a light line three times round the top interwoven so that it looks from the side like a turban (hence its name). You've probably noticed them yourself on ships. It looks very smart indeed.

three times round the top interwoven so that it looks from the side like a turban (hence its ha	111
You've probably noticed them yourself on ships. It looks very smart indeed.	
Very much love from Lawrence.	

PS So	rry abo	ut the a	brupt en	ding!

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 that 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 <u>this</u> 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  $2^{nd}$  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.

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## 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.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

8 Oct 1943

From: British West Africa

Dear Mother

Thank you so much for the two air mail letter cards, dated 7<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 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

usual depressant immediate after-effects I find it makes me light headed and frivolous in this climate. So much so that after such feasts I find myself sitting arguing points with people for the sheer joy of playing with words and whetting my mind on somebody else's! If you are unkind you will surely say "Ah, it's the vin rosé." But then you will be wrong, because that just sends me to sleep and anyway its alcohol content is lower than generally rated.

The Viscountess had supper aboard last night and with her she brought what she described as two fascinating pieces. They were no Indian chickens though, nor is the Viscountess herself (aet 35 odd). My bearded friend Ross Gillham (captain of the other ship alongside) and I met her first in a British office in the town. She is an excellent and useful contact, and we are invited to an American reception on Monday. After the supper we walked to their homes with the three of them, and the furthest invited us in for a snort to encourage us for the long walk back. She produced a bottle of Irish whisky bless her heart, which Stan and I quietly fed to the potted plant on the table when she wasn't looking. Ross drank his manfully. Perhaps his beard has something to do with it. For myself I disliked her intensely, because she spent most of her time on board with her skirt six inches above her knees and rating about the deficiencies of her husband (who lives in Dakar and we might meet any day). This sort of thing from a woman on first acquaintance gives one seriously to think. The Viscountess is of quite a different calibre and is a charming woman, and was as embarrassed as we were. I think the woman was merely a stop gap as her original choice had failed her. Ross's ship and mine combined to throw the party. In many ways it was a duty, because they like us to show the flag and be sociable. But a pleasant duty.

Thank goodness they give us plenty of work here. We are in and out continuously. I think I should be broke if we weren't. The food ashore is so good.

Now I must turn in and get some sleep, for there is work to be done tomorrow. Lawrence.

14 Oct 1943

From: British West Africa

**Dear Parents** 

An air mail letter arrived from you today dated September 30<sup>th</sup>, in the same batch as one from Julie in Freetown dated Sept 17<sup>th</sup>. So it seems more difficult to slip letters up and down the coast than it is to send them back and forth from the UK. A wizard letter from Julie. I've just been answering it. And to set any doubts at rest it was written in pencil like this one – for the very good reason that if it was written in ink it would have showed through the back and enabled inquisitive people to read it "en passage". The paper's very thin and poor. That's why I'm writing this one in pencil too, so therein lies my excuse and here are my apologies.

I had my finger nails manicured by the French yesterday on the theory of "try anything once". The female who presided had an astonishing and fearsome collection of instruments but poor girl, she was faced with an impossible task to try and beautify my nails – chipped, torn, and dirty. She found a little hole in one of them and deduced therefrom that I had been eating lobster, wherein she was correct. The bristles poke into you when you eat them with your fingers. Don't lobsters make your mouth  $OH_2$ ? They aren't really, though. The French call them langouste, and they are sort of pink and ... [illegible word] crayfish with a rather insipid flavour.

I hope – (hush, whisper it not in Gath), to bring home with me – (not a word, Daddy, you haven't got it yet) – a bottle of – (down, Timmy, it's not for you) – SCOTCH – (written very small so that the customs shall overlook it). Won't that be nice? We can sit in front of the fire on Christmas Eve and gently sip it making sure to leave enough to go with the Christmas dinner. I've been saving it and saving it ever since I got it and appointing armed sentries over it to keep away my thirsty friends. It's as valuable as liquid gold out here, and must be like Coleridge's "honeydew, and milk of paradise" at home. My Scots First Lieutenant, Stan, has fixed his avaricious eye upon it already, so there is now dissension within as well as envy without.

If I'm home by Christmas. Deo and the Admiralty volente.

A certain ship came in (Ross and I brought her in) and with her came 5 Wrens, two officers, three ratings. So they threw a party in the base and on one of the ships, and we were all invited. Ross's very fine beard carried them by storm, and he lately married, the blighter. Still, we had a very pleasant

evening, but I couldn't forget my Julie – and it'll take a lot more than a handful of Wrens to make me do that, however attractive they are (and these were). Hand picked, for showing the flag of the British fighting womankind, I should say.

I wrote a letter to Leslie a couple of weeks back, answering a very nice one of hers, and in it I apologised for having been such a lazy Godfather to Ian. She had very good news of him, and the Wells House and Darvall [Wells House Headmaster] seem to have done him a world of good. I wonder how soon I shall have to start slipping him £5 tips.

I hopefully made out a check for £50 to the Consul General in Bissao (Portuguese Guinea) for certain purposes, and when I got it back put the money in the POSB [Post Office Savings Bank]. I also wrote a note to Pullin (Lloyds Bank Regent St) to tell him it was OK and no forgery, so if he hints to you that your son is on the downward path you can reassure him, and console him if there wasn't £50 in the bank at this time. I've heard no protest since, so I suppose there must have been unless he gave me an overdraft and said nothing about it. And I've heard nothing from Graham (the Consul) so I suppose it can't have bounced. The sum is unusually large for me to manoeuvre, so I was a bit anxious about whether it was all right.

They are nattering about income tax now, so I am beset with finance.

Goodbye for now, and thank you for your regular AMCs (how do you get hold of them, by the way?). Lawrence.

From: The Manor House, Brightlingsea

**Dear Parents** 

My address for future reference you know, so please don't use this Brightlingsea one. This is only a line really to tell you that I am well and very busy, and that 'tis unlikely that I shall have any leave for a very long time. I can tell you nothing about the work I am doing or about to do, so please don't ask or be disappointed if I don't tell you.

Things have changed here sine I visited the Manor House last. Capt Farquharson reigned here then in all his glory if you remember, but he has moved now and another Captain has taken his place. I haven't ventured anywhere near where I garaged my car for fear they'll jump out at me and demand three years' rent, which would lighten the pocket somewhat. Lieutenant Solesbury, the No 1, is still here and certainly remembered me – as I remembered him. We agreed to differ over several matters. He's very fed up that he hasn't a new and better job.

My friend Brownie from the old 27<sup>th</sup> is in the same flotilla as I am so it will be pleasant working with him. The rest of the flotilla – or those that I have met up till now – are all a bit elderly, and responsible-looking blighters, with oodles of seniority, so as usual I suppose I shall be junior boy. Or tail-end Charlie as we are known in the Service.

If Daddy is in London between 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of this month, and if he had the time to slip down to Portsmouth for 24 hours we could probably arrange a meeting there. Dates are entirely provisional, and are quite possibly a week later.

I know that it is shocking bad form to write to you on a signal pad like this but I am very sorry that it is necessary if a letter is to be written at all.

I reckon I shall have grey hair by the time I have finished with this business. Work, work, work, and sheets and deluges of paper – the eternal paper: let's get to sea and finish with it. My No 1 is largely incompetent so I have to supervise <u>everything</u> myself.

Yours, Lawrence.

PS. Ray Bibby's letter included for you to read. Shows what F/7 is like nowadays! [No letter from Ray Bibby in file.]

3 Mar 1944

From: ML 198

Dear Daddy

Do you know that darned letter you sent only reached me yesterday evening, having taken over a week on the way? If only I'd known sooner I could have been in town last night, as we are (temporarily) out of action. I nearly phoned you at the GWR Hotel, Paddington – would have done, in fact, if I could have found a public telephone; but they all seem to be Naval, and I was discouraged after one or two failures. I gathered you were going up to town anyway, so I hope it wasn't a wasted trip for you. I'll ring you in Bristol one of these evenings.

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 8<sup>th</sup> Army in N Africa and knows very well what a leadswinger looks like.

Discipline in the Navy is a wondrous instrument. Terrifyingly ponderous and mechanical. The No 1 of the ship (in MLs) has to see the defaulter within 24 hours of commission of the default. He investigates it and has the option of dismissing the case or putting it in the CO's report. Then it comes to me; I can punish the man fairly severely, but very often for moral effect on the defaulter the CO puts him in the Base Commander's report, whence if the offence warrants it, he is sent on to the Base Captain. The case I have just been describing has only one stage further to go, so the poor blighter with all this formality is distinctly dazed; and he has had plenty of time to slip up if he is not very careful with his story. I suppose this must be very similar to Army discipline, but it always fascinates me in its endless ramifications, and amazing thoroughness. It's come down from past ages of the Navy, and like a snowball it has picked up fresh amendments and clauses to suit it to the changing times. The fundamentals of fair play to the man and strict discipline have been preserved since God knows how long. There is a lot to be said for tradition in this respect.

The wrist watch I bought for £7-10-0 in Portuguese Guinea has now lost its 3 secs a day gain and has more or less attained equilibrium at 4 secs slow on British Summer Time. I haven't had to alter the hands for months now, and it's a darn sight more accurate than any of the watches the Admiralty have provided me with. Good bargain, hey? In spite of the jab Julie gave it with her golf club when she was congratulating me on a good shot, on Freetown golf course!

I have come across the first pair of identical twins in my experience. Or as near to identical twins as I can imagine. They're both in this type of ship and have up till now never been separated in the Service. They look alike, talk alike, and as far as I can see, think alike. They used to shuttle between Lowestoft and Immingham, and Alan Palgrave-Brown (that's one half) used to go to the phone in Immingham to receive a telephone call from Alastair (that's the other) without any prearrangement within a minute of the time Alastair would actually ring up. They are very attached to one another. Amusing stories have been told of officers, after looking on the wine when it was red, seeing the two of them walking down the street together and forthwith taking the pledge. The intolerable thought occurs – what would happen if one them were killed? I know them both quite well, and – well – it just doesn't bear thinking about.

I believe the two Bailwards at Marlborough were the same – but I was never sufficiently interested to enquire into the question closely.

It is now eleven o'clock of a Saturday forenoon, and I must be ready for rounds in my ship.

Yours, Lawrence

30 Mar 1944

From: ML 246

**Dear Parents** 

Sorry I haven't written for so long but please remember that in this business "no news is good news" and you will hear soon enough if anything <u>were</u> to happen. Excuse my writing in pencil like this, but I left my own fountain pen in somebody else's ship, and the "ship's pen" is in use elsewhere.

I have not yet actually transferred my command to ML 246 but hope to do so over the weekend. Naturally enough I am very loth to leave my ship, but I have the consolation that I am taking my officers and men with me. The change-over has caused much dissatisfaction in all the ships involved in the re-arrangement, and it is unfortunate that the ships' companies should be so disturbed at this stage of training and exercise. We (the flotilla) were settling down to the job in hand and making the best of our rather poor material quite surprisingly well before the Admiralty ordered this ill-conceived transfer. For my part, though, I am glad to say it makes no difference to the work I shall be doing, but more than this I cannot say for security reasons.

For a time now we have had four officers aboard the ship – one extra Sub-Lieutenant borne for training purposes, but he has since left us for an appointment in the north. I still have my No 1, and the Fleet Air Arm midshipman aboard for navigation. The latter is a very likeable fellow and competent enough at his job. At one stage this week I have had 6 officers in the wardroom, and one other aboard during the day! Two of them had to sleep on the deck. And as at that time I had 14 extra men on the

messdeck the food situation was a bit tricky. Altogether life is very full and interesting, though terribly tiring sometimes.

I want to get home on leave sometime, but it doesn't look like I shall have a chance, unless I scrape a couple of days during the change over. The trouble is I really can't trust my No 1 to look after things in my absence. He has no sense of responsibility at all, and honestly I think it is awfully unfair that I can't get rid of him without putting in a damning report about him; for I really like the fellow personally very much, and I don't want to wreck his Naval career for him altogether. It is a very difficult situation to find myself in.

I think I shall have to go and lay all my troubles before the senior officer of my flotilla, and tell him all about it quite unofficially. After all, besides being his senior officer I <u>am</u> human (referring to Edwards, of course).

I have just finished reading Rhind's book about Roger Keyes and the last war, and how very gallantly the MLs conducted themselves at Zeebrugge and Ostend. I hope they put up as good a show in this war. It is almost impossible to know how various types will behave in action until you actually see them in it. The most unlikely people do the most extraordinary things. Like these midget submarine folk when they attacked the "Tirpitz". They were brave indeed, in their little sardine tin ships. I hope Rhind got my letter, by the way.

Goodnight, Lawrence

24 Apr 1944

From: ML 246

**Dear Parents** 

I've had no mail from anyone for ages; we dodge about hither and thither so much. But just recently I've had the aggravating experience of lying right off where Daddy might well be; in fact I went ashore to see if by any lucky chance he might <u>be</u> there, but the porter said he only came down on very special occasions, and not more than once in 3 months anyway. Very annoying all the same. I'm so bursting with pride etc that I'd love him to come aboard and maybe have a meal with us in my wardroom.

Yesterday I went for a wizard walk all by myself onto the open heath and forest-land; tried a couple of pubs for tea but as it was Sunday afternoon they were both shut. It was a lovely day, with all the trees and hedges just shooting green and birds singing everywhere. I saw a large plot of land for sale, and leant over the gate and built myself a house there in the middle of this most lovely part of the country, built it with verandahs and courtyard with fountains playing and creeping plants, built it to suit the hot cloudless June day that we had yesterday. I had already moved in with a wife and a couple of bread-snatchers when my tea-less stomach drove me on up the hill past the cottage hospital. How nice it would have been to have a practice there and go to the hospital three times a week to exercise my surgery; it was only just over the way. I met two of my ratings up there also taking the afternoon air, and also apparently hungry.

I have a shockingly bloodthirsty crew, you know. The other night we nearly got involved in a serious fight, and the gunners were positively gnashing their teeth into the darkness. I enquired (as is my habit) whether one of the guns was in a certain state of readiness, and so ready was it that it nearly went off when I opened my mouth to ask it. It is good to know that your gunners' morale <u>is</u> so good, and that when things do begin to happen in real earnest they won't pack in for just a wee splinter in the arm or something.

You remember that 3 guineas' worth of book token that Mrs Parsons gave me? Well I started off on that by buying a complete edition of Shakespeare, Peter Pan, which I've never read and thought I ought to, and a very good biography of the Luftwaffe (if such a thing is possible) giving the inside story of its development, and something of the characters of Willi Messerschmitt, Herman Goering, Dr Heinkel, and others. It makes very interesting reading. The three made up one guinea, and I have a credit at this particular shop for the other two. And that has no time limit. Peter Pan read in conjunction with G K Chesterton's aphorisms on the intelligence of babies and children in general bore the latter out surprisingly: how much more logical and straightforward are children, and therefore

books for children by necessity, than their so-called worldly wise elders. Peter Pan is perfectly logical once you assume that fairies do exist; and surely a fairy is a more likely being than, say, a Thibetan [sic] llama. Therefore, having seen neither, why should a child disbelieve one and believe in the other just because his elders tell him to do so? Even Captain Hook has many likeable points (in addition to one less pleasant one)!

I hope Owen is fit and well; he goes to Blundells in May, doesn't he? Lucky blighter! I wish I were. You must tell me all about him when you write. It was an awful pity my having to leave so precipitately: almost like my first meeting with Julie Goodall, when I was so roughly recalled. The Navy is an insatiable monster, and always has indigestion because it's in such a hurry. When I left Owen I found that things <u>could</u> have stood over another day, though sure it wouldn't have been very satisfactory.

Work presses – this is Monday forenoon, and I'm writing letters!

Yours, Lawrence

5 May 1944

From: ML 246

Dear Mummy

I had a wizard letter from Daddy the other afternoon all about little o or big O as he now is. He seems very happy and satisfied about him, and outlined a very attractive future for him in forestry abroad. I think that Owen's talents are certainly in that line; personality rather than scholarship.

We have just finished an exhausting exercise involving a lot of night work where I got  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour in 36 hours on a cushion in the wheelhouse – which I was grateful for as it was  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour more than I usually do in these things. And the ship cluttered up with passengers who hog it in the wardroom all night – or most of the night when it rains, anyway. I slept in till 9 o'clock this morning to make up for it.

My new First Lieutenant has now arrived to replace Edwards, and his name is Barry, with carroty hair from Yorkshire. Very young but a very good fellow who knows he doesn't know much and is anxious to learn, which is a very good thing. We get on very well in the wardroom. He turned out very well in the exercise and will soon have things taped, I think. Of course the trouble with this job is that it is experience that counts more than technical knowledge.

I have clewed [?] up with a very nice Wren from the dispatch office here (I don't mean clewed up permanently!). I'm taking her to"the Dolphin" to dinner tonight. I just forget what her name is, but likely I'll remember when I see her this evening. I go up most days and get my secret mail from her so we know one another well enough for the Dolphin though not <u>quite</u> well enough for names. All of which should shock you considerably.

I enclose a letter from Tom's wife saying how her dog bit my godson, which is a shocking do. She doesn't seem to have worried unduly though. It figures way down in items of interest in her letter. Her description of her son's spring cleaning efforts are rather amusing I thought, and her reference to "that part of himself which reminds me of his paternal grandfather" refers to his <u>enormous</u> bottom. If you had met Dr Powell, Tom's father, you would understand the allusion. In the Service we know it as "a square transom".

I also enclose a drawing by the Middy of the Middy and his Wren stepping ashore of an evening. I suspect he copied it out of "Men Only" or some such paper. I think it is very funny. He's always most amusing about her: gets very bashful and <a href="won't tell">won't</a> tell me who it is or what branch she is in. I think he's afraid of my trying to cut him out.

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 Trouncer? I've just finished it now, a wizard book which gives a good description of 18<sup>th</sup> 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 Pompidour, 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.

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 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

while yet. It's a lovely evening now, too, sunny with a fresh spring breeze and little whitecaps chasing each other over the water. The ideal day for a walk.

I'm sorry – I'm so absorbed in all this that I haven't enquired after Mark and the gardens etc. I hope all goes well and that O is fit and enjoying himself.

Love, L.

.................

27 Jun 1944

From: ML 246

7.30 of a sunny morning in the anchorage off the beaches of Normandie

Dear Parents

I am sitting up on deck this morning with the wireless going, enjoying the sun and the fresh west wind. I had to be up early anyway, and I feel so fit and hearty that I fear I've already made myself very unpopular in the wardroom telling everyone down there how nice and fresh it is up top.

Well, we've managed three very busy days in England since D day only so far; twenty one days of the beaches altogether less three, which isn't bad going. We quite plume ourselves; it's better than any other MLs in our flotilla have done. This morning I brought the ship into the anchorage to the strains of martial music through my loud-hailer from the wireless, and woke them all up in the ships there at their moorings. Tousled heads rubbed their eyes from companion hatchways as they wondered what was on. Actually it wasn't <u>very</u> martial music, being Fats Waller and his dance band.

We have two passengers aboard us; a padre, the "little ships' Chaplain" of our force, and a Lieutenant Commander. They are both charming fellows, and we get on very well together. The padre put on a church service and communion for us all on Sunday, and it was a real pleasure to see the little man's gratification when he came back with his eyes shining saying how large and sincere his congregation had been – far larger than he ever had in the base in England. Unfortunately I was unable to go myself, but my No 1 went and several of my men. I think a church service means far more to them here away from their homes and cooped together on board for long periods at a time.

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10.30 in the wardroom

It's still fine and sunny and white horses dancing on the surface of the sea from the stiff soldiers' breeze from the SW. I hope they don't bomb us again tonight – not that that is anything to be <u>afraid</u> of, because their attempts are really very feeble, but it is noisy with all the AA gunfire and it keeps you on deck.

Keep fit and good luck with the bees! Lawrence.

9 Jul 1944

From: ML 246

Dear Daddy

I tried to phone up Mark before I left UK on Tuesday, but it's a bit of a business with the lines as congested as they are these days, and I rather fancy I was somewhere in Yorkshire before I finally gave it up as a bad job; in any case, the numerous false alarms had consumed most of my available small change by this time! As you will guess we are back here on the go again. And I can't tell you how refreshing it was to spend those few hours at Mark with Mummy, and to drive in and see you in Bristol – looking, I may say, so like your usual self as to leave me only looking forward to the day when you'll be back getting stung by your bees in Mark, instead of being stung by the rascally matron of the nursing home. I think the more eminent the specialist, the longer the face he is inclined to pull over

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 <u>quite</u> 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 depôt 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  $2\frac{1}{2}$  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.

As we came out two tanks rumbled by and they were firing at some aircraft from the AA batteries. It had been quite silent inside the church, and we had forgotten that there was a war on. We remembered when we got outside.

The Channel is now like the Great North Road used to be. It was an eerie and rather shattering experience making a fast passage back alone this morning, in a thick mist and lots of traffic. Minesweepers would appear silently out of the mist and disappear as mysteriously a moment later, with a wave of the arm to say "good morning" between us. All sorts of different types of ships would glide in and out of the mist, some most unpleasantly close. Then the 3 ring Commander (our passenger – hence our fast and solitary trip) comes up and bets me a gin in his mess I won't get him ashore by half past twelve – and so what can I do but go flat out? We finally tie up at  $1226\frac{1}{2}$ , so Lawrence Mackie plumes himself exceedingly. And after spending the afternoon ashore busying myself with all these trying trivialities that have to be done on coming in from sea, I find myself unaccountably tired at teatime. I find I've had no sleep for 36 hours, so I automatically assume a dour visage and an acid tongue and retire to my bunk to the ill-concealed relief of my two officers!

It is now eleven o'clock, so I shall really turn in (first time in pyjamas for 12 days).

Very much love from Lawrence.

24 Jul 1944

From: ML 246

Dear Mummy

Today I have written to Joan Page to thank her for her letter to me, to Dommet to tell him I'm coming to see him shortly, and to my Bank Manager to tell him to send my Will to PHF. I outlined our scheme to Dommet so that he could enquire into the legality of this strange business of turning £50 into £100 just as easily as that.

I am feeling very happy just now because I have just had a quite unsolicited roundrobin from the crew commiserating with me, a personal one from the Coxswain and from the Motor Mechanic, and sundry comforting and understanding remarks from the number One, who also seems very keen that in view of possible future events we should stick together. I also heard Ordinary Seaman Graham passing similar remarks on the bridge, and as he is a very reliable disseminator of messdeck opinion, and useful to us because of his rather penetrating voice, I deduce that all is very well with the crew indeed and the ship is a very happy one. Observations like these are as balm to the sensitive soul of a small ship Commanding Officer. Having also eaten three "Mars Bars" in succession, life stretches pleasantly before me.

As you can see the typewriter has survived its transplantation without damage, and is of more use than I can say here in the wardroom. I have been using it almost continuously since it arrived, as it makes our usual amount of paper work that has accumulated vanish like sweet seventeen-year-old's smile. Also its cheerful clatter keep the torpid No 1's and Middy awake n the afternoon (to their annoyance and my satisfaction). Much work remains to be done, and this is stimulating if nothing else.

The general opinion here about the Germany crisis seems to me to be that we shouldn't expect too much too soon, and (scornfully) we wouldn't pack up just because a few generals were nattering and killing each other at home. There's probably something in this; the ordinary men fighting, whether German or British, would require definite leadership and direct from close at hand from above.

Some beastly ship has to move somewhere just now, so I must leave you while I go and fiddle with mine. Restless lot of types. However 'tis done now.

Will it be in order if a friend of mine comes down to stay with us for a couple of days during my leave? It is by no means definite anyway, but he will bring a ration card if he comes. He's a very nice bloke, and I think you will like him. I have to go and see Admty while in London, by the bye, so I can combine that with seeing the Powells and thanking them for their tactfulness and enquiring about Tom and Paddy. It would be nice if Paddy could stay with us for a bit. Little Michael is a wizard creature

I hope you are sleeping better at nights now, Mother mine. As far as I am concerned I have reached the stage that Chris said she had. I am very happy, just quietly and satisfactorily. Because you

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.

22 Sept 1944

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

I've heard nothing from you for a week or so – I hope you are well and as busy as ever. I am coming home on some more leave (!) soon – expect me next week sometime. I will phone you up later to tell you when I shall actually arrive. I  $\underline{may}$  bring a leading WREN to stay for a day or two if that is in order. She is a little Gunnery Control girl whom I know you will like. Her father is Captain of the "Duchess of Bedford", a big liner. I'm going to dine at his place tomorrow evening. Of course she may not be able to come – but you never know!

I went to see a most extravagant film yesterday called the "Lady in the Dark" (the lady being Ginger Rogers). The girl is going nuts or thinks she is, and it gives a most gorgeous picture of her dreams (I wish mine were half as romantic) and shows how she is psychoanalysed by a smooth faced gent with a tooth-brush moustache whose technique appears to be limited to saying "why!" dramatically and forcibly to everything the poor girl says. Eventually of course she remembers the forgotten childhood incident that has caused all this, and she recovers and marries her sales manager (apparently she runs a fashion magazine in the intervals between her dreams). My chief impression was of what delightful legs Ginger Rogers has.

## The Saga of the Lavatory Seat

Last night the captain and Sellars and I had a staff meeting to decide on the knotty problem of the cabin flat lavatory seat which was not quite the design we wanted. Sellars said he had seen a lavatory pan complete with seat (of the right pattern) left unguarded and disconnected on the top deck of the ship lying alongside us. So we decided to form ourselves into a foraging party and take advantage of the moonless night and the acknowledged torpidity of that ship's quartermaster. We would take with us the necessary tools for the disconnecting of the seat, we said, and we would creep triumphantly back with our wooden trophy. But alas, the best laid plans of mice and men etc., and we could not disconnect the seat. But bearing in mind the resource of the Royal Navy, we took stock of the situation by the light of a discreetly shaded flash light. We decided to carry off the whole thing, pan, pedestal, seat, and all, and consider ways and means more closely when we had it before us in our own ship. Its lowering to deck level was successfully effected with nothing more than a strained finger of S's left hand (the captain light heartedly said "Catch!" and dropped it into Sellars' arms, and he fell to the deck embracing the unsavoury object). We got it across the guardrails all right but to our consternation found that its fall had completely broken the seat we so much coveted, and half of it was left aboard the other ship. However we lugged it into the wardroom and set it in the centre of our circle of armchairs, and sat down to consider what we could do next. It really was foul; for one thing the dockies had evidently not understood it was disconnected ..... and for another it smelt of fuel oil and other unpleasant substances. So you can picture the ridiculous scene. The immaculately dressed (except Sellars, who had suffered by his fall) officers sitting seriously round our revolting trophy, and deliberating judicially about its disposal.

Eventually we roped it carefully up to make the carrying simpler, and bore it out again and left it balanced carefully on a beam just outside the wardroom of the ship alongside. Their officers must have been puzzled when they saw it in the morning. They must have thought it had sprouted wings and flown up there like a roosting chicken. And they may have been woken early by the smell ...

As you see life is not quite what you would call uneventful here!

Lawrence.			

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  $1\frac{1}{2}$  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 <u>had</u> 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 1<sup>st</sup>. 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 which ever 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 turr	ı in now	7. Lawrence.
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i iiiast taii	1 111 110 11	. Lawrence.

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

Yesterday I had a short letter from you returning the correspondence I sent you about my discharge from the Nay, and also a letter from Tom. I also had one from him in the same vein. It is curious how one moves around in the war; I am now back where I started in the winter of 40/41 in that other destroyer. And this time if anything the weather is worse and the gales are stronger – or seem so.

It is strange to look back those four years and remember how it was with me on messdeck, how very green I was then, and how amazingly little I knew of what was going on about the ship. Although we were moored in almost exactly the same place as we are now I can remember nothing of the geography of the place; all I remember are sensations – cold, discomfort, warmth, happiness or the reverse, and so on. It shows how little time I had then to look around me. Now what a difference it is! I live in the wardroom surrounded by warmth and luxury (comparatively!) with the most pleasant and civilised messmates and I can take a professional interest in the movements of the ships about the anchorage, and get to know the ins and outs of the place from the charts that I now have access to. And another difference is that this time I am in a happy ship, which makes a colossal difference.

You lucky person with nice fine weather at Mark. It was blowing a full gale the day before yesterday and yesterday and when you're on the bridge there are hailstones to hit you in the face and cause you the most exquisite agony. They drive almost horizontally on the wind and show a perverse cunning in finding the slit between the bottom of your sou'wester and the top of your oilskin that it is necessary to maintain to look through. And poor old "Basher" Bolton on the fo'csle has an even poorer time of it.

Goodbody the Doc is related to the Millicans of Clifton whom you knew there and Julian is a cousin of his (the chap who was going to an HMML). He nearly met me I believe as Mrs M tried to arrange a meeting between the Doc, Julian and myself. It fell through owing to inertia on both sides.

I feel enormously fit these days and my tummy works like a Trojan with nary a complaint. And the best thing of the lot is that instead of overpowering torpidity in the afternoon and uneasy activity after supper I now feel exhausted in the evening and reasonably active in the afternoons. Which comes of having to, I suppose.

I have had scarcely any mail since we have been up here – yours only and a "Times" weekly suppt. Not a word from J. But perhaps on the whole that is as well. Though I have written to her twice already. And I am looking forward to Pat's reply (if any) to my very rude and personal letter to her with the most lively anticipation.

You need not tell me my writing has gone to pot, I know.

Fleming the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant told me yesterday that there is a good chance of my staying aboard here as navigator; if this comes off I shall undoubtedly do so and drop the idea of the long "N" course ashore. I like this ship enormously and have already quite a pride in her.

Love, L.

28 Nov 1944

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mama

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.

We are very busy now and you'll never guess where we are. When we get our next boiler clean I may be able to slip home and stay for a weekend, but that won't be for another month at the least.

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.

NOW I have to work. Au revoir. L.

11 Jan 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

All your parcels containing presents from Gerhardt and Mark generally arrived safely and thank you very much for them – though I think I have said more fully before (or hope I have!).

I have been desperately busy for the last fortnight as we have been doing a lot of sea-time and all the time I have in harbour is taken up with correcting charts and keeping myself up to date with all the latest information, as I am the ship's navigator now. I wrote a couple of letters yesterday and these three are all that I have written since I had the job. So you can see how hectic life is. Soon I hope I shall get into the routine of things better and have more time to myself.

We are operating temporarily from a different port now and shall be for a week or so. I haven't been ashore here yet but Ian Sellers tells me it's a pretty good place – though the beer is a little on the weak side.

The captain was good enough to look in to the Admiralty last time he was in town and enquired about my proposed release from the service; and as far as they are concerned I think they are willing. But the danger is that it may make a precedent, and that the Ministry of Labour wish to avoid, especially in view of the latest Army call-up we read of in the papers. In any event the application has not yet filtered through its various authorities to the Admiralty yet – officially, so we shall wait and see.

Have you seen any more of the Millikins? Doc and I have established other mutual friends now, at Barts, Julie Goodall of all people, and Les Levy, whom I used to know in town. Also a Navy nursing sister I know in Minster called Livingstone.

The new Sub-Lt who has come in place of Stagg the outgoing navigator is a pleasant fellow but very young and come from Halifax.

Now I must stop to catch the mail, as we're going out this afternoon. Lawrence.

18 Apr 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I fear you could not have got my last letter, as I wrote to Minima [?] as well and <u>she</u> hasn't replied either. So that batch of my mail must have gone astray. I told you all about what I did in Marlborough in it, and it was a long one, so I am particularly annoyed that it didn't turn up.

We are all desolate in the ship at the present because our captain, our fine captain, Davey, has left us, and we have been given another in his place, who is still to be proved in action. We had a wonderful party in fancy dress, on the night Davey left us, and we had some snaps taken – if they come out I will send you some. How the old order changeth; first Ian Sellers leaving, then Basher Bolton, and now the captain. All I am left with is the First Lieutenant and the gunner, with whom I go ashore when the ship is in harbour.

This uneasy question of qualified status has resolved itself nicely now and relieved me of the necessity of making a decision one way or the other. The previous captain seemed very keen to put me through for it, but I have found that I am not eligible as officers applying have to have at least a year's service in <u>major</u> war vessels behind them. The decision, before I knew this, was a particularly awkward one because it would be rather ungracious to turn down such a compliment, yet I knew that by accepting it I should almost certainly be appointed First Lieutenant of a destroyer, and it might well delay my release from the service. So now it is all nicely solved, thank goodness!

You will be pleased to hear that I had a very nice complimentary flimsy from the last captain before he left, which I will show you when I see you next.

We are not working so hard now as we have been lately, and I have had a breather to get up to date with all my corrections and things. The weather is lovely and the flowers are all out ashore – the fruit trees gay with blossom. Four days ago you could have seen the No 1 gunner and me walking

down the main street of one or our more popular seaside resorts in civilian rig sucking ice cream cones, a luxury after five ice-less years. We also went on the "Dodg'em" cars and got very excited indeed.

In fact so much is spring in the year [sic] down here that the doctor and I met two pretty girls ashore the other day and took them for a walk and then treated them to the pictures.

In these my new quarters, the double cabin, I have a very nice little desk tucked away round the corner where I can retire quite from circulation (I am there now) and have a wireless playing soft music just behind me: so you can understand that in these circumstances it is difficult to feel fed up for long!

Your very loving son, Lawrence.

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29 Apr 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

Thank you so much for your letter, which reached me rather belatedly as we are away from our home base at the moment, and our postman has to travel long distances to get our mail.

I think your birthday letter did <u>not</u> arrive. But I thought it must be adrift. Yes, Owen <u>is</u> a nice looking chap – I hope his character keeps in step with his appearance. I would rather have good material than a pretty face. Don't you dare spoil him – though I know you wouldn't!

I enclose a photography of myself taken some time ago; I give you three guesses where it was taken and when. I also enclose a terrible one of our First Lieutenant, John Fleming, who is a charming fellow, taken on our bridge a long time ago. He is wearing the sweater he is very proud of, made I think in Belgium.

The gunner's wife is due another child any moment now – it was actually scheduled for four days ago, and we all rang her up the other night to wish her good luck – all put very delicately of course, because we ought'nt to know of her condition really. But it is impossible to keep a thing like that dark in our mess. The gunner has one daughter already, aet 1 year, whom I met when we were in Liverpool.

As you can guess, things are pretty slack these days, and we do a surprising and unwonted amount of harbour time. Did you hear that thing on the wireless about us the other day, by the way. It wasn't very good really – too short.

I shall probably be leaving this ship in a few months – at least I may be. I've done nothing about it yet but am waiting for our next boiler cleaning leave when I can go up to Admlty and see them there. We are none of us very happy. Will Owen be home in May?

Au revoir, and much love. Lawrence.

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29 June 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

Thank you so much for all your pamphlets and efforts to persuade me to vote SANGER. But I am sorry to hear of your "down-days" and Timmy's death and all your carefully nurtured goslings going too. It's funny how these things all happen at once, and natural how depressed they make you feel. Poor Mummy. I wish Owen or I had been home.

My postal vote is already in the post – for your bête noir, Ian Orr-Ewing. You see, I am sincerely of the opinion that we NEED Churchill and Eden to square the world off and try and cure it of its sickness and disputes. It will take more experienced diplomacy than anyone is capable of except they to keep us treading a fair and balanced path between Russia and America, and seeing that they walk either side of us. Really I think we should see our own domestic troubles in fair comparison with

the enormous potentialities for trouble and more strife there are abroad. It'll be time enough to see what Labour can do when Europe is convalescent again and our disagreements with Japan, France, Russia, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Greece and a few others are sorted out. And don't forget the 5,000,000 displaced persons in Europe when you think of our shocking lack of houses.

I think Eden's speech influenced me most in my decision. W-super-M [Weston-super-Mare] sent me copies of the election statements of the other candidates, and I must confess your Mr Sanger's personality didn't impress me very favourably. I believe and hope we shall see a National Government in, but I shall be disappointed if we don't see an increase in the number of Liberal seats as well. I would not like to see our relations with America suffer to the gain of Russia.

Politics, as you can guess, are discussed vigorously in our wardroom.

I went up to Leeds during my last 48 hrs leave to visit the doctor and his beautiful young wife. He has now left the ship as she is reducing complement, and it was more or less a farewell visit. I found it very pleasant to stay with two such happy people, and made great friends with their 11 month son Jonathan who crawls at Derby speed. We just missed seeing Churchill in Leeds. I travelled down to St Pancras overnight and slept so well in my corner seat that I only remember 10 minutes of the  $7\frac{1}{2}$  hour journey.

We had a slap up dance ashore the other day with the girls in evening dress and the officers in bow ties. We had a grand time. I took a 3<sup>rd</sup> officer Wren called Virginia Mason whose lovely long dress almost overcame the effect of a long nose and wrinkly eyes. Altogether things were very successful.

Au revoir, Lawrence.

4 Aug 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I've heard nothing from you since we met in town, so I hope R got home alright when he left me the next morning. It was a pity really that I couldn't have shown him more of the ship during the forenoon I was aboard with him, but during a boiler clean when I'm duty a trip up to town means an accumulation of work when I get back that won't be denied.

As it happened the boiler clean was extended over the weekend and I went up to town and saw "The Years Between" with an evidently much reformed Julie Goodall. It was most interesting and exciting meeting her again after the rather false atmosphere of the tropics. She is very good fun indeed and makes a very good companion. I think I shall be seeing her again soon, when she has finished her walking tour in the Lake District (where she has gone for her holiday).

We are still employed on the usual sort of jobs, nothing of special interest, though there may be shortly. At the moment we are lying in Harwich, which is as dead and alive hole as I have ever seen!

Do you remember Ian Simpson whom I knew in Plymouth barracks when I was a rating? Well he has turned up here as First Lt of a flower class corvette, and has asked me over for a gin before lunch. It really is amazing how one runs across chaps like that. I went through King Alfred with him as well.

15 Aug 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

Before I forget, my address in future is HMS Mendip, Sheerness, Kent. That's a sign of the times isn't it!

As I write this we're in the middle of the North Sea, homeward bound from Germany. We passed Heligoland away to the north yesterday evening. It looks like this [sketch diagram inserted here] – very dark and square and like a box. We are going very slowly indeed and this passage promises to be a very monotonous one indeed as our consorts are very slow ships and we are thumping into a moderately steep head sea – which doesn't worry us but does worry our smaller charges tagging along in a disconsolate string astern of us, their striped blue and white ensigns proclaiming them to be German ships captured and going to England as prizes. They aren't allowed to wear the German ensign.

The day before yesterday a Naval officer drove me up to Hamburg (I couldn't resist the temptation!) and I went walking by myself through the shattered streets I used to know so well. My feet more than any deliberate impulse took me up their usually followed route and where did I find myself but outside Brahmsallee 6. A bomb had fallen and destroyed a house just opposite, and there was some damage further up the Allee, but otherwise it looked much the same as any other street. So I pressed the bell and there they were, Herr Doktor und Frau Hass, and Mercedes, looking very much the same, hanging out of the window of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor flat wondering (with a certain amount of trepidation, I suspect) who the Naval officer was looking up at them. It took about 20 seconds (without any prompting) for Frau Hass to recognise me.

Unfortunately because of the Frat. laws I was not allowed to go into the house, but Frau Hass came down and we had a good chinwag. I had forgotten that Frau Hass could not speak any English so my German received some very good practice. She seemed very genuinely pleased, and pressed me to come up and see them. I had all the news about the family, and when I mentioned the bombing the poor lady put her hands to her temples and was so distressed that she could hardly speak. I might have been talking to a London housewife; all the news of how Mercedes had been married 6 years and had a baby "oh so züss!". How her husband was, she drew her forefinger expressively down her cheeks to indicate how the war had affected him, and all the rest of the gossip. She said exactly the same of the war as any English housewife would have said, and in just the same tone of voice. It was uncanny. But I said little of that, because it might lead to embarrassment, and concentrated on family matters.

Anyway for all our protracted plodding and plunging we have at least our noses pointing west and Arcturus hangs low before us of an evening.

Yrs, Lawrence. Salaams to R and O.

31 Aug 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mama

Thank you for your long awaited letter with enclosures. We had just got back from a circular tour including Rotterdam and Portsmouth when I got it.

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

containing everything from dismembered pianos, through double basses, to little flute boxes, aboard one of His Majesty'd destroyers would have given Einstein a problem in space. In addition of course there were 58 members of the band!

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.

Then we came back to Sheerness overnight – here we are still.

See you soon, I think. L.

30 Sept 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mummy

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

The last thing I sent you – with rather a rushed letter, was a cutting from the local paper of our activities in Shepton Mallet. This I hope you received all right because I want to keep it to remind me of the Mendip.

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.

We had a trip to Amsterdam the other day but had less than 24 hours in and so didn't have much of an opportunity of getting ashore and seeing the city. However, I went to the Officers' Club in the evening, where real Perrier Jouet made an otherwise indifferent dinner into a quite fantastic one! Amsterdam is a leave centre for Canadian occupation forces and they certainly do the chaps on leave there well. The women are the worst part – mostly German officers' left overs, who expect dining and wining like they used to get – or so the base officers there tell me. I only saw them all sitting around powdered and painted like lap dogs in the "Lido" dance club. One was caught wearing a wig there a week ago; she was bald underneath – she had been shaved as a collaborator.

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

I've just this minute heard over the wireless of this ghastly accident of the Scottish express at Hemel Hempstead. 25 killed and over 80 injured is the casualty list so far. Apparently it took place on the embankment near Bourne End and crashed 50 ft down into the field below – it must have been near the canal. How well we know that embankment! They say the train was switched into the slow line because of track repairs in Boxmoor tunnel, so at a guess I should say that he was going too fast to take the points: you know the speed they used to come along that particular section of line. It was very fortunate that the wreckage didn't catch fire, or the casualties would have been even more grievous than they are.

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, I	Lawrence.
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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  $\underline{\text{may}}$  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 the 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  $1^{st}$  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  $1^{st}$  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?

If you would register them I will refund the dibs. They are too valuable to go through the ordinary parcel post.

I feel like a horse that smells its stable now that Costin's letter has come. A little hay in advance would be very welcome.

Now I must think about supper.

Much love from Lawrence.

21 Oct 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

The books and all have arrived safely, and a budget of letters from you. Thank you very much for sending them. It'll be pleasant getting my teeth into a bit of physiology for a change.

Quite unexpectedly we have been very busy for the last week. I think it's the beginning of the changeover from the wartime to be peacetime pusser Navy. We've had evolutions at sea and in harbour, and on Tuesday last the ship was open to visitors from 1400 – 1730. We had her all tiddled up, dressed with flags overall, and sold savings stamps at 6d a go to come aboard, visit the engine room, the bridge, and other places of interest. We sold over £11 worth in that time. Some of the ship's company were rigged up as pirates – and very fierce they looked! Others were detailed as guides, and shepherded parties of ten or so around showing them the sights and explaining the instruments, and browbeating them into buying more and more savings stamps. The officers were stationed at strategic points around the ship's superstructure and below decks to prevent kiddies falling off the pom-pom deck or other fatalities of that nature. I was on the bridge (6d admission) and we had hordes of people including a very attractive school mistress with hordes of children in tow. Sweets and gum were revealed sticking to the underside of the compass and like places for days afterwards. They were all very excited and round eyed and noisy and happy. The school-marm though a trifle harassed also seemed to be enjoying herself. It is really amazing how good sailors always are with children, and there were no tears or cuts or scratches the whole afternoon.

Last Sunday we had to dump some buckshee ammunition somewhere off the south foreland in the English channel, and took with us some ATC cadets with two of their instructors. There were 50 boys, and we had a very nice letter when they got back saying how much they'd liked it. I s'pose a whole day at sea in a real live destroyer must have been a terrific thrill for them. They all came up the bridge at one stage and had to be ejected by the noise and excitement which they caused. They do get in the way climbing all over you when you are trying to conn the ship. We had to go very close to some minefields to drop our ammunition, and some pretty accurate navigation was required!

The evolutions at sea all went off pretty well; we were complimented in Mendip for the work we did.

Well now I think I must finish as it is nearly time for dinner.

Yrs, Lawrence.

1 Nov 1945

From: HMS Mendip

Dear Mother

I've gone and written some notes on the back of that last letter you sent me, by mistake, and given it to one of the Petty Officers, and so I haven't got those questions before me just so, to answer them properly. But I can remember most of them. I may say in extenuation that I did <u>start</u> a reply about ten days ago, but lost the first page so it made it rather pointless.

1. Thank you, the books arrived safely.

- 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.