



**Bernard, telegraphist on
minesweepers**

Bernard, born December 1st 1924 at Hitchin, Hertfordshire, younger of two boys, older brother killed in 1943 as RAF Sergeant Pilot



I joined the Sea Cadets in 1941 and went to *HMTS Bounty* as a “Sea Cadet Wireless” at Worcester (Morse at 16 words a minute) before transferring to *HMS Collingwood* at Fareham, Hampshire. It was a 16-week course. Then to a Commando camp at Devonport virtually living outdoor using the facilities provided by nature; the Navy provided the



trenching tools. As young lads we were always game for a laugh, of course, and it became a sort of ritual to wait for some unsuspecting fellow to squat behind a hedge and watch his relief turn to consternation when he found the evidence had vanished – thanks to the deft use of a trenching tool from the other side of the hedge.

I trained as a boy telegraphist, then an ordinary telegraphist, then an operator telegraphist; the star on my sleeve shows I’m a trained operator telegraphist. Between 1941 and May 1944 my life was below decks as “Sparks” on a drifter or trawler converted to minesweeping so I didn’t see too much of the action, probably a good thing. My first real experience of life at sea was on Royal Naval Patrol Service out of the Sparrows Nest, *HMS Europa*, Lowestoft, Suffolk, on *HMD Golden News*, a minesweeper conversion of an old wooden drifter with about eighteen crew, for magnetic mines. Silly japes relieved the inevitable boredom of routine: instead of hedges we had the customary naval “heads” at the ship’s bow (front) and a quick dash aft (to the rear of the ship) to salute the “admiral” as “he” sailed past.

Then on *HMT Welbeck* we used to sweep “E-boat alley” in the North Sea from Harwich up to Cromer. There was an inner road and an outer road used by coastal shipping. The German E-boats laid mines on the sea-bed in the roads so our job was to go up and down, up and down, sweeping, to clear them. It was no good stopping after blowing just one up, you had to keep going in case there was another one. We used to anchor offshore at night-time and sweep in the day. If we had information that the E-boats were out there, we’d go out and try to find them. At Lowestoft the Messerschmits used to come over the sea wall very, very low and take shots at us. If we had warning we were ready for them, but we often didn’t.

Our pay was five shillings a week and a regular tot of rum every day. Temperance men were paid 3d in lieu. We paid them a shilling per tot, bottled the rum and sold it to American servicemen in Norwich for thirty-five shillings, topped up with cold tea.

About mines, every ship is magnetised. Royal Navy ships had copper wire round them to demagnetise them, called “de-gaussers”; a lot of merchant shipping didn’t

have de-gaussers so they attracted magnetic mines and got blown up. The most tiresome job was hauling in the minesweep cable when nearly everyone was called out on deck to give a hand. We were only doing about five knots, so it wasn't difficult, just tiresome. They were very efficient, really, the Germans. They kept trying to outwit us. They put a ticker or counter on the mines which allowed several ships passing over before exploding. Then they had not only a north pole mine, but a south pole mine; so when you exploded one, you had to keep going until you'd exploded the other. It usually took about three runs. But, of course, you could never be sure when you'd finished.

Then they brought out an acoustic mine. It was set off by vibrations, a propeller shaft or any noise. We lost six ships out of Harwich in one day to acoustic mines. Then we brought out a "hammer"; it was fixed to go under the bow and made a continuous knocking noise like a pneumatic drill, so it exploded the acoustic mine before we got there.

Then there was the moored mine. For this we used an "orapesa" sweep, something like a fishing trawl with floats and long wires that go out astern on the starboard side to about 45 degrees, under which are slung 'kites' below paravanes to keep the wire cutters down and a weight controlled to the depth you wanted to sweep, with an otter-board and so on.



H.M.T. WELBECK

On a clearance sweep the leading trawler would have a bow sweep which you hoped it would take away before you got there, followed by a flotilla of five in line, each protecting the other, what we called "sweeping in G formation". You had to sweep at different depths. There were anti-submarine mines as well. We spent five

days out and five days in. The whole of the coast was swept continuously but we couldn't get all the mines, of course. Over the years they are still coming up in fishing nets because of the movements of the sea and sand. The sea never stands still.



We were sweeping the English Channel out of Newhaven two days before D-Day with a French named ship and a French flag. We weren't told anything about it, so I

suppose it was to mislead the Germans into thinking we were a French fishing trawler. There were three of us. Coming out of Newhaven just after D-Day we hit an underwater obstruction and the "Abandon Ship" signal was given. I jumped onto the carly float with some of the lads and we were soon picked up by another trawler. She only settled a little way down and then was towed in, so we didn't lose her. After that we returned to Lowestoft.

Then we were posted to Canada for about a year on the Atlantic convoys. We sailed out of the Clyde on the Aquitania from Gourock to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The big ships, Aquitania and Queen Mary, were faster than the submarines, so they were unescorted. From Halifax I joined HMS Miscou at Sydney, also in Novia Scotia.



Sydney used to ice up in Fall so we had to go down to Louisbourg further south. We'd steam along towards Labrador and then come to a halt almost and have to break our way through the ice, charging forward and then astern.



On the Miscou my cabin was just beneath the bridge, quite exposed. The convoys were attacked from time to time. One or two ships might be lost. The most dreadful thing was to leave men in the water; we couldn't go back for them. Awful – but we had to keep going. That was the worst thing. It will haunt me forever.

On shore we taught the Canadians how to play football.



Two friends who served with me throughout the war were Fred Loasby from Kings Lynn and Jack May; Fred married Jack's sister and they moved to Michigan, USA, in 1952. I visited them in 2002. Fred was a "bunts", a bunting tosser = signals man. I got married on July 8th 1944 by Special Licence at the Westminster Sanctuary.



Bernard, Eric Bronfield, Taffy Jenkins

We didn't wear uniforms, except for going ashore and special occasions.



Taffy Jenkins Willie Walker Jack Mav Local 'Newfie' Bernard



Bernard, Cox'n Joe Tonkin, Jack May



I was demobbed March 20th 1946 and joined the Police in July that year as a mobile wireless operator. Their Morse was slower than the Navy and was soon changed to more modern methods with improved technology. I retired after 37 years with the Police.

Ships I served on: **HMD Golden News**
HMT Welbeck
HMS Miscou
HMT Elm