

The book cover features a large, close-up portrait of Alan Bristow, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark, pinstriped suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The background behind him is a warm, golden-orange gradient. Below the portrait, the title 'ALAN BRISTOW' is written in large, white, serif capital letters. Underneath that, 'HELICOPTER PIONEER' is written in a smaller, white, serif font, with a thin horizontal line separating it from the subtitle 'THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY', which is also in a smaller, white, serif font. In the lower half of the cover, there is a silhouette of a helicopter in flight, positioned above an offshore oil rig. The rig is situated on the ocean, and a bright light source, possibly the sun, is visible near the rig, creating a lens flare effect. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden tones.

ALAN BRISTOW
HELICOPTER PIONEER
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ALAN BRISTOW WITH PATRICK MALONE

Alan Bristow: Helicopter Pioneer

The Autobiography

Alan Bristow
with Patrick Malone



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*For Heather, who wiped the eyes of
the Baynards guns and was the
world's best co-pilot*

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Danger Money

Rarely does a single catastrophic blow kill you; it's the cumulative effect of small difficulties individually benign, that build and build into a deadly threat while the realisation grows that you're in over your head and the cold sweat rises on your spine. Sensible people said it was too risky to fly a primitive Hiller helicopter, with balsa wood rotor blades and vintage piston engine, over the Antarctic Ocean from a small, difficult-to-find ship in weather that could not be accurately forecast; whenever the notion crossed my mind I would think of the extraordinary sums of money Aristotle Onassis was paying into my Swiss bank account. When your safety margins are cut down further by a fog that materialises all about, you just have to get down low over the grey waves and slow down to forty, maybe even thirty knots, whatever the visibility allows, and set course for wherever you think the ship is. But when those balsa wood blades start to take on ice and the helicopter begins to shake and rattle, you lose power and lift and you find yourself descending inexorably towards the cold ocean depths, it's difficult to find much comfort in the thought of Onassis's money.

Helicopters fly only if the shape of the rotor blades remains as the designer intended; an accumulation of ice from freezing fog or sleet destroys that shape, kills lift and forces the aircraft out of the air. I was wearing my patented Frankenstein Rubber Co. survival suit but I knew my lifespan would be measured in minutes when I went in; the chances of the ship finding me were virtually non-existent, even if expedition commander Fanden Andersen – known to his crews as the 'Devil' – could be bothered to look for me.

The Hiller rattled out its dying protest as I wound on throttle to stay above the waves. In a few moments, I knew, I would run out of lift. My wife and daughter back in Somerset would receive a telegram saying I'd been lost at sea, and nobody would know how it happened. Strangely, fear was not an issue; I was wholly focussed on the problem of how to extend my life by another minute. Suddenly I became aware of a marked increase in the light level, a brighter glow ahead of me. I slowed the helicopter to a crawl, and out of the murk loomed the side of an enormous iceberg. I came to a hover in front of this vast wall of ice, which disappeared into the fog left, right, and over my head. I sat there for a few moments with my heart beating fast. The vibrations from the rotor head were getting critical. What to do? These tabular bergs could be more than a mile long, and my chances of getting around them were poor. The only way was up. I opened the throttle to take what little power there was left and raised the collective lever to maximum pitch. Slowly, the Hiller rose up this ice cliff, the only visual clue I had to my horizontal situation. With the Franklin engine screaming, the machine began to shake like a wet dog and the rate of climb dropped almost to zero. Just as I thought it would not climb another inch, the light changed again and the ice wall disappeared. I saw what seemed to be a snow ledge ahead of me, nudged the azimuth stick forward and settled on top of the iceberg in a blizzard of my own making as those crippled blades whipped up the snow which now reached up to the door sill. The berg was perhaps fifty feet high. Another ten feet and the Hiller would have run out of power and I would have had to descend, and I wouldn't have been able to stop it.

I sat for a moment collecting my thoughts. The helicopter seemed quite stable, so I shut down the engine, then wondered if I'd done the right thing – would I ever be able to start it again? But if I didn't get the ice off the rotor blades, there would be no point in trying to start up. I waited for the blades to stop turning, then stepped carefully out into the snow and climbed up to look at them. There was

layer of rime ice about an inch thick on top of the blades, right across their span and about three inches in from the leading edge. How had she ever stayed airborne? As was my habit in difficult circumstances, I lit a cheroot, took a deep drag and thought about things. I was alone with a crippled helicopter on an iceberg somewhere between South Georgia and the Pole. Try as I might, I couldn't make the vision of Mr Onassis's money compensate for this fact. Indeed, I would have given all of it to be back with the Foreign Legion in Indo-China, taking my chances with the Vietminh.

Fast forward a couple of years and I'm standing on the corner of Leadenhall Street in the City of London trying very hard not to look like a man who is carrying the best part of a million pounds in cash. Pedestrians bustle by. They must *know*, I thought; it must be obvious to a blind man that the suitcases on which I had a death grip were stuffed to bursting with big white five pound notes. I turned up the collar of my sports jacket and tried to shrink into it. This was 1955 and street mugging was less of an issue than it is today. But a million pounds was a lot of money in 1955. This was the real birth of Bristow Helicopters; I had indeed survived the Antarctic, survived Indo-China, survived wartime sinkings and the early days of unreliable, pioneering helicopters, I had lived to bank Onassis's money and more besides, and things were starting to get interesting.

In the absence of an armed escort, I hailed a taxi. 'Yeovil, please.'

'Where?' asked the startled driver.

'Yeovil,' I repeated. 'It's in Somerset.'

'It'll cost you,' he said suspiciously.

'I'm aware of that,' I said. 'You'll be well paid.'

Near Blackfriars Bridge we passed a line of telephone boxes and I asked the driver to pull over. He watched me suspiciously as I manhandled the cases to the phone box. I couldn't get them in the door so I called my accountant, George Fry.

'George? It's Alan. I'm in a taxi.'

'Bit extravagant, isn't it?' said George.

'I've got about a million quid in two suitcases,' I said.

George was not easily perturbed. 'Hmm,' he said.

'It was the damnedest thing, George, I never saw a living soul. Some disembodied voice told me to shove the suitcases through a hatch, they came back full of money, and I walked out. I kept thinking they'd come after me saying there was a mistake. Or somebody would knock me on the head.'

'Strange business,' said George. 'Better get it to the bank.'

'My thoughts precisely.'

The taxi pattered through the London suburbs and out into the countryside, and I sat wondering why the Dutch had insisted on paying so much in cash. But there were all sorts of restrictions on the movement of money in those days, and it didn't pay to ask questions. They could pay me in cowrie shells for all I cared, as long as they were negotiable at the bank.

The money was in payment for the patents on a helicopter-borne harpoon I had invented, a fleet of helicopters I didn't yet own, and a contract to operate them hunting for whales in the Antarctic. The fact that only a few months later the patents were utterly worthless didn't seem to bother the Dutch. I thought at best they might want their money back, at worst I might wake up dead with a harpoon between my shoulder blades, but they even settled a hefty bill I sent them afterwards for conversion work on their helicopters. I have sometimes wondered since what their game was, but it's never come me any sleep.

Hours later I was decanted in Yeovil, paid off the delighted driver and added a fat tip, and hauled the suitcases up the steps of the National Provincial Bank. 'I want to see the manager, please,' I said.

The clerk smiled. 'I'm afraid Mr Cudlipp is with a customer, sir. Would you like to make an appointment?'

‘Young lady, if you value your job, tell him now that Mr Bristow is here and wishes to deposit one million pounds.’

A hush fell on the bank. Suddenly the manager’s door sprung open and an aggrieved customer was pushed out, still grappling with loose papers. The manager beckoned me in, turning the key in the lock behind us.

I placed a suitcase on his desk and clicked it open. The money glistened. New five pound notes, fat bundles of them, each one as big as a pocket handkerchief and covered in swooping script, all together promising to pay the bearer on demand a sum that the average labourer would earn in a thousand years. The manager, a friendly chap with whom I was on good terms, was washing his hands with invisible soap.

‘Have a cigar, Mr Bristow,’ he said.

He fired up my cigar and I sat watching while the staff was dragooned into counting tall bundles of money. Even as the work went on, the remainder of my money was being transferred to Switzerland by more orthodox channels. It was a very satisfactory day, I thought. There were to be many more millions to come, but I remember that one with particular fondness because it was my first, and because everything really took off from there.

We – myself, a handful of my closest friends and an army of good men and women – built on the foundation the best helicopter service company in the world. There is no corner of the globe over which Bristow Helicopters have not flown. We have opened up the jungles and great sand seas, the ice fields and mountain ranges, and we have pioneered delivery services far, far offshore in places where people once said helicopters could not fly. We have carried employment and prosperity to countries which, but for oil and mineral exploration, would still be languishing in poverty and despair. Our helicopters have saved thousands of lives in rescues at sea and ashore, and perhaps millions more indirectly through our assault on the mosquito and the tsetse fly. In doing all this we have helped to shape the modern world, and not incidentally, we have made a lot of people very rich. One year soon the Bristow Group will turn over a billion pounds.

So it’s been lucky for everybody that I’ve been difficult to kill. I have been torpedoed and sunk by gunfire, grenades and mortar bombs have been lobbed at me, and the Vietminh once put a bomb under my bed, blowing me into a nearby jeweller’s shop, still in the bed. I have flown cranky helicopters with bolshy engines, which people now look at in museums and shake their heads, and I have narrowly escaped from flying stunts of my own devising, which were, frankly, bloody insane.

Nor have the companies I have led – among them Air Whaling, Bristow Helicopters, and British United Airways – prospered by observing the constraints of business orthodoxy. The story is told of how I stuck my Foreign Legion throwing knife into the kitchen table of the trade union leader Clive Jenkins while he danced around the room telling me that this was not the way that the chief executive of a major airline should handle industrial relations. ‘You’ll hang for this!’ he said. But he was wrong, too.

Confidence is the name of the game. You fly with confidence, you drive with confidence, you swim with confidence, you play a golf shot with confidence, you make business decisions with confidence in your own gut feelings. And I was confident to the point of arrogance. In fact, looking back, I’d say I was so bloody cocky I could take on the world. And I did!

I might have been a knight of the realm, but I jibbed at the cost. I had made a bid for the Westland Helicopter Company, and twice it was indicated that I would get a knighthood if I threw my shareholding behind a wrong-headed scheme to sell it to the Americans. I held out; the episode, which came to be known as the Westland Affair, cost Michael Heseltine the Premiership of Great Britain, forced the resignation of another Cabinet minister and didn’t do me any favours either, but it was the right thing to do.

I have twice been hauled before magistrates, once for stealing a bus. I have drunk champagne with billionaires in the best hotels in the world and hauled my men out of some of the seediest whorehouses in South America. I have been court-martialled for desertion and awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the Order of the British Empire, I have triumphed in shipboard brawls that would have appalled the Marquis of Queensbury and have represented my country at four-in-hand carriage driving with the Duke of Edinburgh. I have put a lot of backs up and disjointed a lot of noses, physically and metaphorically, and in an era when most companies are controlled by risk-averse men in suits shuffling other people's money and creaming off their cut, my way of doing business is perhaps an anachronism. But by god, it was fun while it lasted!

The subtitle of this book ought to be 'I met a man .. .' because whenever I've been in difficulty someone has come along who has opened a door, or shown me the way. Some of them you will know: Douglas Bader, DSO, DFC, who put me into the oil business. Freddie Laker, with whom in 1960 I tossed a coin for £67,000. Nick Cayzer, Aristotle Onassis, James Clavell, Lord Beaverbrook, the Shah of Iran. Some, equally important to me, you will not know: Harald Penrose, who taught me what being a test pilot was all about, Henry Boris, Fanden Andersen, George Fry, Captain Patterson of the *Matiana*. Some you may not know, but ought to: Igor Sikorsky and Jimmy Viner, Stanley Hiller and Frank Piasecki. A thousand more men travelled this journey with me, and all too many of them did not live, as I have somewhat surprisingly done, to tell this tale.

War Clouds

1930. The Great Depression cast a malign shadow on the world, but no cloud of care crossed the sun that always shone on my personal paradise. As the son of the Senior Naval Officer to His Majesty Dockyards Bermuda I enjoyed a life of privileged comfort, attended by servants and wholly free from worry and want. Many men of my era recall the thirties as a grey grind of unemployment, hunger and hardship; I knew nothing of it.

We lived in a beautiful house befitting my father's appointment, facing east towards Hamilton and west towards the sunset. On the sunrise side, a path led down to a sheltered cove and a dock where my friends and I would swim and fish for languid hours. I was an aquatic animal, skilled at turning an octopus inside out in the flash of an eye, twisting its pouch over its head before it could fire its blinding jet of ink. Thus disabled, it became bait to catch snapper, or was cut to pieces to entice the little grunts that swam under the dock.

I was tutored in the water by the man in charge of security on the dockside, Chief Petty Officer Stewart Dyer, an exceptionally fine swimmer who made a point of ensuring that my sister Muriel and I learned to swim properly. The water was sheltered and warm, and we were apt pupils. At the age of eight I persuaded Dyer to swim with me to the Pepperpot, a beacon that marked one of the turning points in the deep water channel for the big ships coming into the dockyard. Years later, when I set eyes on it again, I found it hard to believe I had swum two miles at such an age, through waters well populated with sharks.

My father got to hear of it and forbade me to do it again. Dad's word was law, not only to me but to the army of men who kept the dockyard running like a machine. Bermuda was an important promotion for my father, who despite his title was a civilian. During the war that was to come, when he was running the bomb-shattered dockyards of Valetta with the invasion and capture of Malta in looking a distinct possibility, Sidney Bristow was made an honorary Commodore in the Royal Navy, and there were times in my life when being Commodore Bristow's son did me no harm at all.

My father was a quiet, meticulous and able administrator with a talent for mathematics. He had the common touch, and under his guiding hand peace was declared in the perpetual conflict between naval personnel in Bermuda and the dockside navvies, who joined together in membership of a sporting club. Founded and built by my father largely, I believe, to further his ambition to captain the local cricket team. The members felt duty-bound to vote him into the job in return for his efforts, and he was very pleased to accept.

His common touch extended to his refusal to avail himself of the car and driver to which he was entitled – a significant perk on an island where only the Governor, the Admiral and Members of Parliament merited such a privilege. It was a sore point with my mother, for whom a car would have been useful; dad got his come-uppance when he was blown off his Rudge bicycle and into the dockyard wall in a hurricane and was quite badly cut about. His cycling came to an abrupt end and a car and chauffeur appeared, much to my mother's satisfaction.

My mother Betty was a wholly different character. Bright, outgoing and determined, she had been to Edinburgh University – an extremely unusual achievement for a woman of her generation – and was a great sportswoman, passionate about golf. She and Sidney had met at a sporting event in Scotland where he was working in the dockyard at Rosyth, and they married late in life – she was forty when I was born, and forty-four when she had Muriel. Astoundingly, my father was unaware of that fact.

Many decades later, when I had met with some success in business and was being driven home by my chauffeur in my Rolls-Royce, the radio-phone rang. It was my father.

‘You’d better come round,’ he said. ‘Your mother is unwell.’

When we got there it was clear mum had been dead for some time. Funeral arrangements were made, paperwork was pressed on my grieving father, and he came to stay with me while I made arrangements for housekeepers. He was not a drinking man but he liked a pale ale, and one evening he was sitting in the living room, nursing his beer, lost in his own teary thoughts. Suddenly he gave forth

‘Your mother deceived me, son.’

‘Don’t talk about Mum like that,’ I said. ‘You’re upset.’

‘No, she deceived me all of our life together.’

‘What do you mean?’ I said. ‘She was never unfaithful ...’

‘No,’ he said. ‘But I had to sign her death certificate. She was nine years older than me! She always told me we were the same age!’

Dad subsided into his chair and stared long and hard into his pale ale. ‘Come to think of it,’ he said at length, ‘she did seem to be getting a bit wrinkly.’

Mum was largely responsible for the success Dad enjoyed in his career. He seemed to be a man without ambition; had it not been for her, he would probably have remained a middle-ranking civil servant at the Admiralty. She nudged him in the direction of advancement and promotion, and once he had tasted it, he found it to his liking. Outside the windows of his impressive office in the Royal Naval Dockyard in Bermuda, D-Class destroyers were bunkered, armed and provisioned, fussed over by busy stevedores under his command. Down on my dock I watched the warships come and go – *Dana*, *Dragon*, *Dauntless*, *Despatch* – and I knew that Dad made it all happen.

At home in Alfred Terrace he would play the grand piano, a talent he had achieved without benefit of lessons. He’d go to the music hall and hear a new song once, then come home and work it out on the piano. By midnight he’d have it note-perfect. I inherited his love of mathematics but no part of his musical talent, which went to my sister Muriel.

Muriel is here today thanks to me; as a four-year-old she got stuck underneath the iron steps leading out of the water below our dock with an octopus the size of a football clinging to her leg, and was drowning. Bristow, eight-year-old man of action, leapt into the water and cut away the ‘okky’ with his knife, lifted Muriel out and pressed the water out of her. I probably got to her a few seconds before Dyer, but I claim the credit.

Events rarely disturbed my shoeless idyll. The hurricane season came and went; Mum, Muriel, the cook and I would huddle together under the stairs and listen to the wind roar. On one occasion I ventured to the door to look out just as the roof of one of the traders’ stores sailed by fifty feet off the ground, and I dived back into the comforting bolt-hole between Mum and the cook.

I attended the Royal Naval Dockyard School in Ireland Island, where Commander Fred Giles was headmaster. It was an egalitarian establishment in which the sons of British admirals sat side by side with black Bermudian children whose fathers worked in the dockyard. One of my best friends, Freddy Dale, was a Bermudian, and we sailed, swam and played cricket together. Two of my tutors, the Hurst brothers, were well-known figures whose talent did much to improve the image of Bermuda in the sporting world, and who fostered my lifelong love of cricket. Even academic work was a joy to me. I was naturally gifted in maths, and the teaching was virtually one-to-one so standards were high. I was looking for Freddy Dale when I moved back to Bermuda in later life as a tax exile, but he had died young. I took a nostalgic walk by the old school, the docks and the house, and I realised that in all my childhood years in Bermuda, I had never once felt unhappy.

I was nine when we moved to Portsmouth. I felt surprisingly content to leave Bermuda – Dad had been promoted, he had to go, we all had to go. The cold was a shock, but because it was beside the

water it didn't seem to matter too much. We moved to a Victorian terrace near Fratton Park, and Dad had an office with a big round window looking straight out at the bow of HMS *Victory*. He took me to Portsmouth Grammar School for an interview with an imposing headmaster who was wearing full gown and mortar board. I was told I might be a bit behind, academically, so I'd have to sit an entrance exam. One of my tasks was to write a word as it would be seen upside down in a mirror, and somehow I got it right. I was asked what books I had read. I was not a great reader, but I had just finished a book Dad had bought for me called *South with Scott*, by Vice Admiral Teddy Evans, and this impressed the headmaster mightily. Scott and Evans were Navy men, Portsmouth was a Navy town, and their heroic and tragic exploits in Antarctica twenty years before had passed into Navy lore. The book had made a great impression on me. I was amazed at how many animals they'd got down there in the boat. One never associated horses with the sea – I thought they would be seasick. It planted a seed within me that perhaps opened a door to the Antarctic adventures that were to come.

Far from being behind, I was put in the 'A' stream and remained there throughout my years at Portsmouth Grammar. The school had a strong sporting tradition, and that suited me fine. I played cricket and soccer, learned to box, and joined the Officer Training Corps where my sergeant major was an impressive young man called 'Jimmy Clavvle'. Jimmy was a born leader of men, clear in speech and decisive in manner, and I was happy to follow him. He was a year older than me, but I was in the 'C' stream largely because of his poor grasp of English. His spelling was atrocious, and I used to help him with his written work. We were fated to meet again twenty years later, at which time he told me he was now called 'James Clavell', pronounced as it was spelt, and he was a successful Hollywood scriptwriter – hadn't I seen *The Fly*? We remained close friends until his untimely death from cancer in 1994, and during those years he became a literary phenomenon with such books as *Tan Pan*, *King Rat*, *Noble House*, *Shogun*, and *Gai Jin*. I introduced him to the Shah of Iran, who tried to get Jimmy to write a book about his country – something he finally did with his best-seller *Whirlwind* – a fictionalised account of one of my adventures, when I extracted all the Bristow families and almost all our helicopters from Iran under the guns of Ayatollah Khomeini's Revolutionary Guard. Jimmy used to send me notes on little strips of paper, and to the end of his days his spelling was bloody atrocious.

My father bought me a boat, a fourteen-foot wooden dinghy with a dipping lug sail. I called her *Sharpy* because she was pointed at both ends, and during the school holidays I was taught to sail her properly. I learned the rudiments of navigation aboard a youth training ship, the TS *Foudroyant*, tied up in Portsmouth Harbour, and I never stopped swimming – Dad insisted that I swim in the sea every day, rain or shine, summer and winter. I joined Portsmouth and Southsea swimming club, and would cycle down to its changing rooms by the war memorial on Southsea seafront on my Rudge, a bike that had synchromesh gears and curling handlebars you could turn up like rams' horns or down for racing. The keen swimmers had keys to the club because the staff didn't come in until nine, and very often were there before dawn. I loved it, but there were some cold winters in the thirties and swimming could be terrible. I would put on a black rubber cap, goggles and gloves, and on a few icy days I ventured in just far enough to get my costume wet, and to hell with swimming around the buoy. It was torture, but Mum said it would make me live longer and I'd be stronger for it, and perhaps she was right. I never caught cold, never got sick. I sometimes think now that Dad had some god-given insight into my future, because when ships were being sunk under me during the war, I withstood the rigours of the water better than most.

The war shook my faith, which had been strong. Mum was deeply religious, and Muriel and I were schooled in scripture, joining the Crusader bible-reading group and going to church and Sunday School. Mum said later that divine providence had spared me during the fighting, but what a discriminating hand had passed me over while slaughtering my friends, and in such terrible ways?

retreated into an open-minded agnosticism.

~~For all my Christian teaching, my behaviour was less than pious. Workmen who were digging near our house had placed warning lamps around their excavations and their pyramids of pipes, and I thought it would be quite fun to put them out. A few days later a sergeant of police called at the house and asked my father if he could speak to me regarding an accident that had befallen a pedestrian who had missed his step in the dark and tumbled into a hole. I could not tell a lie. 'Yes, I did that for fun,' I told him. The sergeant left my father to deal with the matter and I got a jolly good hiding. It had seemed such a nice, simple way of annoying people, but I didn't turn lights off again.~~

In the holidays Muriel and I were sent to Scotland where Mum's family, the Falconers, were landowners along the Cromarty Firth, around Dingwall, Invergordon and Alness. There I would plough with Cleveland Bay horses or help with the harvest, stacking sheaves and riding home on the green horses, my little legs sticking out almost at right angles on their broad backs. Mum actually ran the farms. Her brothers lived on them, but she was the eldest – an older sister had been killed in a riding accident – and under Scottish law nothing could be done without her agreement and signature. There were three brothers, Bob, Jimmy and Hamish, and while it was always said that times were hard on the farms before the war, they each had a new car every year.

Bob was the gentlest of men, without any aggression in him, but god, he was tough. He was built like an oak tree. Family legend said he'd won the caber tossing at the Highland Games in Perth, and he certainly supplemented his farm income by bare-knuckle fighting at fairgrounds. When he played the bagpipes he'd take off his shirt and vest and stand in his kilt, and he was a sight to see. Behind the house in Alness a steep track ran up through a fir wood, and he'd go up there with his Border collies in the early morning to check on the sheep. He'd stroll back playing his pipes, and I'd wake to the sound of the bagpipes coming down through the mist and the trees half a mile away, and the thought of that makes me shiver to this day. Only two things could induce me to fight for Queen and country, a bottle of port and the bagpipes.

The land was sold shortly after the war. Jimmy died of cancer and Hamish went to Australia. Bob ran all the farms for a while, but for reasons that were not vouchsafed to me it was decided to sell up. Before the war Mum had mapped out a career path that had me going to Cambridge, then running the farms. I rather liked the idea at the time. But neither Cambridge nor Scottish farming were to figure in my future. The Navy built Evanton, a Fleet Air Arm aerodrome, on one of the farms and I landed there in a Spitfire after the war, when I was flying with 1834 Squadron in the Reserve. But the sound of the bagpipes had faded, and nothing now calls me back.

Flying appealed to me from the earliest days. Behind our house in Fratton was a garage owned by a chap called John Randall whose son was at school with me. We didn't have first names in those days, we were Bristow, Clavvle, Randall Minor. Randall's father had a de Havilland Puss Moth, a lovely four-seat biplane in which we would fly from Portsmouth Aerodrome to the Isle of Wight, landing on a beach near Ryde. There was a regular air service, too, from Portsmouth to Bembridge in an aircraft called a Westland Wessex – an interesting portent – and dad would take the whole family to the island for the day. I was fascinated by how those machines worked, but I was far too young to try flying for myself. Portsmouth Aerodrome closed in 1973, and today it's an industrial estate.

I found I was quite good at boxing. Portsmouth Grammar School had a Navy PT instructor called Chief Petty Officer Bellinger, a man who was very keen to have a boxing team. We started at fourteen years of age and fought inter-schools competitions. It was a cushy number. You got away the day before, you stayed overnight at the other school, and you had a superb meal after the fighting in the afternoon. It served me in good stead in the merchant navy later on, when the officers seem to enjoy having cadets around them who could fight. One of my fights at school was against a chap called Clarke – quite a handy fighter, but I knocked him down hard and he went into a coma. He was

hospital for a while and it was a difficult time, with his mother getting on to my mother and saying I might have killed him. But he recovered and came back to school as though nothing had happened. I never fought again.

As I progressed, Bellinger started to teach me some of the nasty things – the elbow, the low blow in the clinch. He would say that my opponents might do this to me, and I needed to know how to react. My record was good – fought 26, won 25, KO 2, lost 1. I've forgotten almost all of my victories, but I remember that one defeat vividly. I was fighting for a Navy team against an Army team from the King's Own Scottish Borderers at Whale Island in Portsmouth, with a full programme, a real ring and several regiments competing. I took a right old bashing. The KOSB were hard men from the slums of Glasgow, where they were taught to fight in the crib. My opponent was stocky, wiry, a lot older than me, but I only found out later that he was the Sergeant Major of the Regiment. I wish I'd known that before I agreed to get in the bloody ring with him. We went the whole five rounds and I only really got pulverised in the last, when he battered me round the ring first one way then the other. I lost one of my top front teeth, and with it went my passion for boxing.

My enthusiasm for all other sports was undiminished. I swam, and played soccer and water polo whenever I could get a game. I played cricket for Hampshire Colts and might even have played for the County had things turned out differently. But unknown to me, far away from Portsmouth a man called Hitler was making plans of his own, and his plans for me impinged on Mum's.

3 September 1939 was my sixteenth birthday, and Britain and Germany celebrated by declaring war. The Bristow family were huddled around the beautifully veneered radio receiver in the dining room, its ornate fretwork spelling out the name '*Philips*', as Mr Chamberlain announced in clear and sombre tones that 'as from 11.15 am today, Great Britain is at war with Germany'.

I have to say, it came as a surprise to me. My attention had been directed elsewhere. I was away from the talk, but hadn't Chamberlain come back from Munich with his celebrated piece of paper ensuring peace in our time? I felt a tinge of fright. Would we be bombed? 'I'm absolutely sure we will,' said Dad, and he was absolutely right. Portsmouth was hit early in the war and hammered regularly thereafter, but those old Victorian terraces took a lot of knocking down. Our house was only lightly damaged despite some very near misses and stands to this day. At Dad's urging we set about fortifying the cellar against the *Luftwaffe*. Pit props were brought in for reinforcement; cupboards were installed and stocked with provisions. This was urgent and vital war work, and I plunged into it with a will.

I missed all the bombing. On 4 September my mother received a telephone call from my housemaster, Colonel Willis, at Portsmouth Grammar School asking if I could be employed with other boys in removing school furniture destined for new premises well away from the town. That afternoon I found myself sitting in the back of an open truck en route to Christchurch, feeling very cold, in the company of a tough young lad called Peter Tickner who was just about to become the school First Eleven goalkeeper. Our lives were to come together again twenty-five years later when I was chief executive of British United Airways and Pete worked for me as a captain flying BAC-111s out of Gatwick.

The move to Christchurch was well organised to the extent that all the students were comfortably billeted in the vast bed and breakfast empire that existed there. By a glorious turn of fate I was lodged in a house full of sixteen- to eighteen-year-old girls evacuated from a college in London, and a new chapter opened in my life. One of the girls, Susan, a dark-haired, exotic creature whose father was a figure in the Greek Embassy, found her way into my bed. I forget her last name; it was typically Greek with a lot of 'dopouloupos' in it, but my memories are otherwise vivid and positive. I think we boys all got very serious about these girls, at least for a short time. They made us feel we were serious about them, anyway. Women always call the shots like that.

A few days later I received a letter from Cambridge University telling me I had won a place at Clare College and explaining that applicants had to be eighteen years of age or over before they could join the colleges, so I could start in the autumn of 1941. I was at once pleased and disappointed; while welcoming the offer, I was aggrieved that the intensive private tuition I'd been put through in my last two summer holidays had been premature, to say the least.

At Christchurch our classrooms were scattered all over the place, sometimes a mile or more apart. War seemed far away. The Phoney War ran its course; we thrilled to tales of daring at Dunkirk, and the Battle of Britain preceded the blitz on London and the devastation of Coventry. Portsmouth had been bombed earlier, in broad daylight, a small taste of what was in store for the town. Colonel Williams was called up and became CO of the anti-aircraft batteries defending Portsmouth, but for us life continued as it had in peacetime. We had carpentry classes in a disused barn on a beautiful estate outside Winchester, where the American owner bred Suffolk Punch horses for ploughing. These animals were a delight to me, and I spent a lot of time in their company. One of their distinguishing features was that they didn't have any feathers on their legs, and they were sometimes disrespectful, referred to as the Suffolk Carthorse. Their tiny Irish groom warned me that the Punches had a tendency to squash the chap mucking out their stable, and indeed one of the stallions took a dislike to me and jammed me hard against the wall. The groom responded quickly to my calls for help, appearing leprechaun-like over the stable door and instructing me to stick my pitchfork into the belly of the horse. I did as I was told, with the gratifying result that the stallion pulled away, giving me enough space to leap over the stable door and into the courtyard, winded but undamaged.

At the time of the evacuation I had been studying Latin, Greek, Ancient History, Mathematics and English, which marked me down as a student of classics destined to transfer to School House at Winchester College, and that is indeed where I was sent. Later in life, when I was pinned in a corner by some bore in an old school tie who demanded to know which school I had gone to, I said cheerfully 'I'm a Wykehamist' – a statement that carries weight in the snobbish recesses of the academic world. In fact, I got along quite well with the natives at Winchester, partly because of my sporting abilities. We played soccer against older boys, some of them taking for the second time subjects they had failed in the Higher School Certificate. I became aware of gaps opening up in the soccer team and in the classroom as these young men disappeared to join the armed forces. Like them, I was fed up with studying. My mind would wander from lessons that seemed trite when history was being made. My father was particularly keen that I stick at my schooling, but somehow I managed to persuade my parents that I should take an apprenticeship with one of the merchant shipping companies. They consoled themselves with the fact that at least I wasn't going into the armed services, and it was envisaged that I would terminate my apprenticeship at the end of two years and take up my place at Cambridge. That was the plan, anyway.

In the Navy

Joining the merchant navy slammed shut the door to my childhood. I went from boy to man overnight, with no adolescence in between. What the hell was I thinking of, deserting a cosy bill for a sea full of submarines? Far from being a safer alternative to the armed forces, the merchant navy suffered crucifying casualties. More than 24,000 merchant seamen were killed, one in three of those who served. My life became a litany of dive-bomber attacks, torpedoes and sinkings, rough house foreign dockyards, mind-numbingly boring passages and occasional quiet stretches of leave spent watching Somerset play cricket. But I enjoyed the war! People are surprised when I say that, but say it I do, and with relish. Every emotion is exaggerated in war, every experience and feeling is more vivid and extreme. I forged exalted friendships with comrades who stood together with me in peril, saw terrible things, did terrible things, and I was bloody glad when it was over, but no one appreciated the joys of everyday humdrum life more than the man for whom life, when the shooting stops, is a welcome bonus.

Late in 1940 I travelled to London, having been accepted for interview at the St Mary Axe office of the Clan Line, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Union-Castle Shipping Company, which was in turn owned by the Cayzer family. The interview has not lodged in my memory, but obviously the content of my jib did not suit the marine superintendent of the Clan Line as in due course I received a formal letter saying my application had been unsuccessful. The next shipping line on my list was the British India Steam Navigation Company, who had impressive offices in Leadenhall Street. The interview went well and I signed a four-year indenture as a cadet for training to be a Deck Officer. I was handed a list of uniform items I was to wear and told to report, properly kitted out, to the marine superintendent in Liverpool.

British India had a link with a firm of tailors in London called Miller Rayner, from whom I purchased my uniform and a shiny black trunk with a big brass padlock. After a bare minimum of classroom formalities I found myself in Liverpool Docks, going aboard the passenger cargo ship *Matiana*, commanded by Captain L.D. Patterson. At the top of the gangway I was met by a smartly dressed Quartermaster in a uniform like that of a Petty Officer in the Royal Navy. Briskly he told me to make arrangements with the Duty Deck Officer to have my trunk lifted on board by the ship's derricks. The Duty Deck Officer fobbed me off onto the Senior Cadet, Wade Smith, who had recently passed his Second Mate's exam and was fulfilling the duties of a Fourth Officer. Smith was a unfriendly, common, ill-spoken lout, but my boxing training had taught me how to deal with such people and he didn't cause me trouble for long.

I was shown to my cabin, which I shared with five other cadets in three double-decker bunks. Being the youngest and newest recruit I was allocated the top bunk on the fore-and-aft bulkhead. At least it was nearest to the washroom and toilet. I lay down on my bunk and fell asleep, to be awakened by the stirring sound of the bagpipes. I thought I must be dreaming of bucolic days in Scotland, but the bunk was real enough, and so was the music. I went on deck to find the King's Own Scottish Borderers embarking in full field kit.

Late in the evening the Second Mate, Mr Bailey, came round. 'I'm going ashore for a beer. Any of you boys want to join me?' That seems a grown-up thing to do, I thought. We strolled a mile to a pub and ordered our beers in the bustle of last orders. After one pint the pub closed and we headed back through the blackout to the ship. The beer had made me slightly light-headed, and as I walked the

cobbled streets with my shipmates in my brand new bridge coat from Miller Rayner, I felt I had found my *métier*. Suddenly there was a distant explosion, then another, then a third.

‘Air raid,’ said the Second Mate. ‘Run for it.’

We stumbled across the cobbles in the dark, the buildings silhouetted against the flash of distant bombs, then with a whistle and a clatter a hail of shrapnel fell around us. It was from our own anti-aircraft guns; jagged pieces of metal shell casing screaming down from 10,000 feet, and if one caught you it could kill you. Suddenly the door of a terraced house was torn open and a voice shouted ‘Come on in!’ We ducked to safety, and while the bombs and the shrapnel rained down, the lady of the house made us tea.

It was four o’ clock before the all-clear sounded and we continued our interrupted journey. At the dockside, all was confusion. The ship next to the *Matiana* had been hit by a bomb that had started a fire down below, and Captain Patterson, a red-faced Welshman with a hair-trigger temper, was loudly fretting that she might drift onto the *Matiana*. Officers had been sent to assess the damage; with fires burning all over Liverpool, the chances of getting serious fire-fighting equipment aboard were slim. It was decided the *Matiana* must be moved. Our hawsers were intertwined with those of the stricken ship, and men were sent out with axes to cut them. We rigged temporary lines to moor her further up and saw out the night in safety. The bomb blasts had made some serious dents in *Matiana*’s bow, but the Chief Engineer pronounced her fit to sail.

At first light the apprentices were called to the bridge and assigned watch-keeping schedules with various Deck Officers. I was teamed up with Mr Bailey, who I came to know as a delightful character always pleased to help the apprentices. By 6.30 am the engines were running, sending a ripple vibration through the ship. An hour later *Matiana* was pulled off the dock by a tug, through the lock gates and into the River Mersey, where she took her place as the fifth ship in a line of about fifty merchant vessels of all shapes and sizes. The convoy was to be escorted westwards into the Atlantic through the worst of the submarine hunting grounds before dispersing. My first job on my maiden voyage was to stand on the fo’c’sle with the First Officer, binoculars glued to my eyes, scanning the river ahead for German mines. The First Mate was a small, stubby Welshman called Mr Jones, whom I addressed as ‘Sir’. It was bitterly cold, with a north-easterly wind blowing specks of snow across my face, and I was wrapped up in a thick woollen polo-neck sweater under my heavy bridge coat, with a band on my cap proudly bearing the crest of the British India line.

The convoy speed was six knots, with a separation between each ship of about 100 yards. I searched as though my life depended on it, but saw no sign of mines. Suddenly, just at the point where the estuary gets wider, there was an explosion as the ship behind us hit a submerged magnetic mine. The explosion seemed surprisingly quiet; I felt the blast coming up through the deck, rather than being carried on the wind. The victim pulled off the channel to settle onto a mud bank and we kept going with fifty ships behind us there was no thought of stopping to give assistance. The mine had been dropped by parachute during the night’s air raid. I asked Mr Jones how *Matiana* and other ships had been so lucky to have missed the mines. ‘We’ve been degaussed,’ he said. Degaussing was a complex job in which electrical cable was wound around ships to de-magnetise them, but at that time a lot of the merchant fleet remained to be treated and casualties were high.

Steaming north at the speed of the slowest ship, the convoy spread out in five lines of nine ships. The centre line was headed by a converted Bibby passenger liner acting as an armed escort. Our destination was a mystery. Africa, the Mediterranean, the Far East; no doubt Captain Patterson and the senior officers knew, but the Ministry of War Transport had not instructed anyone to inform Cadogan Bristow, who had to be content to go wherever the *Matiana* took him. Convoys proceeded on a zig-zag course set down in papers handed to each captain before the voyage, but observing the timing of the course changes proved difficult and several ships bumped into each other over the next five nights.

The weather did nothing to help, with winter storms churning the slate-grey seas into moving mountains that often hid ships just a few cable lengths off. Once clear of Northern Ireland, we were joined by two Canadian corvettes, which went dashing from side to side and all around us. One of them dropped three depth charges half a mile from the port side of the convoy, and the start of a new zig-zag pattern was signalled. From that moment we were on Red Alert, meaning that there was definitely more than one U-boat in the area.

The storm slowly abated and in the evening of the sixth day, just before sunset, a U-boat surfaced briefly in the middle of the convoy just astern of the armed merchant cruiser, but no ship could fire at her for fear of hitting another. The submarine crash-dived. Captain Patterson explained over the tannoy that this was an extremely unusual occurrence, probably a result of the U-boat captain becoming disorientated. Whatever the reason, it made a mockery of our avoidance manoeuvres. We could zig and zag until we got dizzy, they'd sink us all the same.

Watches on board *Matiana* were doubled up and changed every four hours, greatly reducing the amount of sleep you could get. Four hours on, four hours off around the clock was a schedule that could have been designed to induce maximum fatigue; exhausted though you were, you could lie on your bunk unable to sleep, grey waves rolling in front of you as you closed your eyes.

Matiana was a ship of 9,000 tons, 485 feet long and 58 feet in the beam, and she'd been built at the Barclay Curle shipyard on the Clyde in 1922, a year before I was born. In the 1920s and '30s she had carried passengers in some style between England, Africa and India. Her two steam turbines developed 4,300 horsepower and gave her a theoretical maximum speed of thirteen knots, and even twenty years after her launch the chief engineer could squeeze twelve knots out of her whenever the time came to run away. Had I known at the time that she would survive to be scrapped in 1952 I might have felt a lot more sanguine about our war service together. I served longer in *Matiana* than any other ship, but whenever I was sunk, it was aboard another vessel.

Just as darkness was falling, the armed merchant cruiser got up steam and disappeared over the horizon, never to be seen again, leaving a convoy pattern of four lines. It seems strange that she should abandon us, but my unquestioning mind accepted that she had some more pressing imperative somewhere else. As dawn came the convoy was 400 miles south of Cape Farewell on the southern tip of Greenland with *Matiana* the third ship in the second column. Occasionally we heard aircraft noise overhead, and I was grateful for the heavy cloud cover that rendered us invisible from the air. We knew by the sort of osmosis that carries messages through a ship faster than any telegraph that we were being shadowed by a U-boat pack between four and six strong, and they were biding their time and positioning themselves for a concerted attack.

It was late afternoon, but darkness fell early in those northern latitudes. On the bridge, Captain Patterson was making plans of his own. That night he asked permission of the convoy commander for *Matiana* to make her own way. His request was granted. Unleashed from the convoy, *Matiana* turned south. Captain Patterson ordered the Chief Engineer to lay the whip to those twenty-year-old turbines and it seemed as though the *Matiana* would shake herself to pieces. It wasn't long before the Chief Engineer was pleading with the Captain to reduce speed. The Chief Engineer was a Scotsman who was well regarded at British India, and Captain Patterson in particular had a high opinion of him.

'God, you bloody plumbers are all the same,' the Captain grumbled. But he ordered a reduction to ten knots; still the ship shivered in protest.

Matiana had a First World War vintage 4.7-inch gun mounted on the stern and I was put in nominal charge of a crew of 'DEMS' – Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships – gunners, who were Army personnel put aboard to give the ship some small capability to defend herself. On the presumption that some or all of the DEMS gunners would quickly be killed in action I was required to understudy every part of the gun's operation: as a trainer to range the gun, a gunlayer, a hand to show

the shell into the breech, another to follow up with the charge, and a third to fire the gun by pulling the lanyard. During our firing exercises it was decreed that one hand after another had been killed, leaving the last man standing to do everything, and I was eventually able to maintain a decent rate of fire as a one-man gun crew.

As the days passed the atmosphere of trepidation aboard *Matiana* began to dissipate, the weather improved and even the passengers who'd been prostrated by seasickness during the storms began to enjoy the voyage. Two weeks out we sighted the rocky volcanic peaks of the Cape Verde Islands and dropped anchor to bunker before making for the British naval base at Freetown in Sierra Leone. We sailed on southwards towards the Cape of Good Hope with the sun shining, the sea calm and the war fading memory. When not on watch, our time was spent learning the rudiments of our craft. Sometimes we were formally tutored in aspects of seamanship, in such arcana as Aldis lamp operations and sail signals, but for the most part it was on-the-job training. We would be required to take noon sightings, with a senior officer hovering at our shoulders to make sure we used the sextant properly. Sometimes it could be interesting, but often it was downright tedious, day after day. As the most junior cadet I was on the twelve to four watch, and there's nothing worse than being called at 11:30 pm for the midnight to 4 am watch when you've got to get dressed and go out into the humidity and dampness, and much of the time it's pouring with rain.

The First Mate, Mr Jones, was a bit of a sadist who, I think, might have enjoyed a cockfight. One day, in order to break the monotony, he suggested:

'Why don't you cadets have a little boxing session?'

We agreed. Boxing gloves were produced.

'Just to make it interesting .. .' said Mr Jones – and he tied our ankles together, with about six inches of slack. This was just going to be a slogging match, and I might have objected but for the fact that they tied me to Wade Smith, whom I had grown to heartily dislike. There wasn't much manoeuvring space, but if you move your body around quickly enough you can do quite well at close quarters. Much depended on getting an early punch in. I hit him really hard, down he went, and I managed to get another one in before he'd stood up properly. And that was the end of my bout. Such fights were to become common aboard ship, and with my compact shape and aggressive style, I was never beaten.

We bunkered in Cape Town and sailed on into the Indian Ocean. Once again the tensions returned, and I scanned the sea relentlessly while on gun watch. German surface raiders – armed merchant cruisers – were on the loose, and shipboard rumour said there were dozens of them and they were everywhere. Luckily, we never sighted one. We put into Mombasa, and for a young man who had just left home, everything was fresh, exciting and new. We steamed across the Indian Ocean to Colombo, where once again I had the opportunity to get rolling drunk in a series of waterfront bars; a group of us hired a rickshaw to get back to *Matiana*, anchored out in Colombo Bay, and we so harried the poor rickshaw wallah that he ran straight off the wharf and dumped us spluttering in the sea. Captain Patterson was choleric with rage and forced each of us to part with five shillings to pay for the rickshaw, which probably lies at the bottom of Colombo Harbour to this day. I protested that I was the most junior and least culpable man aboard the vessel, and that five shillings was a lot of money, but the Captain was immovable.

In each port we took on or discharged general cargo – in all the time I was on her, I had very little idea what *Matiana* was carrying. Some two months out from Liverpool we were approaching Calcutta up the broad, mud-brown Hooghly River. My first disturbing impression of Calcutta was of dilapidated shacks fringing open sewers, and fragments of humanity picking through the filth. The network of docks in Calcutta was impressive enough once you got used to the smell, but it looked as though it had been dropped in the middle of a vast slum where skeletal people swarmed and holy cows

had right of way. Downtown Calcutta was full of bars and restaurants catering for British, Australian and New Zealand soldiers, sailors and airmen. The British India Company was well respected in Calcutta and it was advisable to wear the company uniform when going ashore, although it did not prevent one from being besieged by professional beggars, many of whom were mothers who had their children deliberately deformed to improve their earnings potential.

Mr Bailey announced that he was going ashore to meet an Anglo-Indian lady friend, and under his parental guidance, I tagged along. It almost looked like Bailey had a second home in Calcutta because after dinner at one of the best restaurants in town we ended up at his lady friend's house for the night in the company of her extremely attractive eighteen-year-old daughter, who taught me many things I did not know. Nonetheless I was not sad to leave the awfulness of Calcutta as the *Matiana* retraced its outward route with stops at Madras, Colombo, Mombasa and Cape Town. There we picked up some of the British India Line's senior management figures, and one of the managers' wives was having an affair with the First Mate. I was detailed to loiter outside Mr Jones's cabin keeping watch while he ate and this lady loitered within, and it was an onerous duty because they were at it every day, and for long periods. After Freetown we crossed the Atlantic to Trinidad and Bermuda before joining a convoy at Halifax and re-crossing the ocean to Avonmouth, whence I returned six months out from Liverpool a seasoned seafarer and a man of the world, seventeen years of age.

The Bristow home in Portsmouth had been broken up, with Dad in Malta running the Valetta docks, Mum evacuated to the country and Muriel away at boarding school. I thought I might be due some leave, but the British India Line thought differently. I was indeed sent to Portsmouth, but not to Whale Island, where I joined a short gunnery course. We were put in a domed room with a gun and had to blast away at silhouettes of aeroplanes projected across the ceiling. We were taught how to lay off our aim, and I did quite well in practice. The Oerlikon we learned to fire was a lovely gun – never used to jam. It would move pretty smartly left and right, but it was harder to change the elevation. Within weeks *Matiana* was once again at sea, but rather than having been equipped with Oerlikons, an old twelve-pounder anti-aircraft gun had been mounted on the foreward deck in Newport. We assembled in convoy off the Scottish coast and once again ploughed westward, to disperse 1,000 miles out when the greatest danger from U-boats was said to have passed. Our destination was Halifax, and once released from the convoy *Matiana* ran unescorted through the fog towards the coast of Labrador. Perhaps 500 miles from Halifax Captain Patterson ordered slow ahead; damage to the ship from near-misses by bombs and other incidents and accidents was becoming critical, and the Chief Engineer opined that if we maintained full speed for much longer, we would drive her under the waves. Off the Canadian coast we were taken in tow by a powerful tug, and two more joined her in the evening. We were boarded by six men wearing yellow hard hats and dark blue boiler suits, who inspected the bow and held conferences with the ship's engineers. It was decided that it was safe enough to continue the tow northwards and up the great St Lawrence River to Montreal, where they had the means to build *Matiana* a new bow. There, the apprentices, the carpenter, two quartermasters and all the officers were accommodated in great luxury in the five-star Hotel Montreal. Everything we needed was paid for with coupons provided by the shipping company. We were gathered together in one of the large lounges to be addressed by the Captain, who warned us that we'd better behave ourselves – if we let the company down we would be moved to much inferior accommodation. We were as good as gold, and passed from the perils of the sea into a cocoon of luxury.

At sea I had become friends with the chief radio operator and the ship's electrical engineer, Sparks and Lofty. Sparks, the radio operator, was a Scot from somewhere near Inverness and he spoke with a lovely north Scottish accent. Lofty the electrician was from Glasgow, a six foot four giant of a man. It was said aboard ship that it was his skill alone that kept the ship working and the engines running. Sparks MacIntosh was keen to visit Ottawa, where he had heard there were many fine buildings.

including the Canadian parliament. The best way to get there was to hire a car, but neither I nor Lofty had ever driven before. Never mind – how hard could it be? We bowled up at a car hire office in downtown Montreal and had no difficulty in obtaining temporary Canadian driving licences, despite having had no previous experience. And what fun it was learning to drive! MacIntosh announced that he couldn't do all the work, and in a quiet piece of Canadian countryside Lofty and I learned the rudiments of driving an Oldsmobile with a manual gearchange. My first turn to drive came at night on roads that were shiny, slippery and wet, but I was driving as though I'd been doing it all my life or so MacIntosh said.

Ottawa was a flashback to England before the blackout, but with beautiful and imposing French style buildings. Back in Montreal we made a trip to McGill University, where we joined a sightseeing tour on which I met a young lady whose name was Lesley. She was two or three years older than me and came from Kingston, Ontario, where her mother served in a cake shop and her father was the foreman of a garage. Lesley was the first in my sailor's collection of girls in every port. A relationship developed, and all too soon the subject of marriage came up on the grounds that she believed herself to be pregnant! Shock and confusion reigned. In those days, marriage was the only acceptable way forward in such a situation, but it seemed far too soon for me to take on all the responsibilities that marriage entailed. I was torn about 'doing the decent thing', and it was with no little relief that we discovered in time that it was a false alarm.

Every day we watched the work on *Matiana* proceed. They had effectively cut off the entire bow of the ship and were welding on a new one. The day that Lesley gave me the glad tidings, the Captain called all the officers and cadets together to tell us that the new bow would be completed and tested in a few days time. He advised everyone to dispose of their commitments in Montreal and prepare to sail. We had filled in much of the time usefully by taking courses in astro-navigation and ship construction, and getting an introduction to engine room watch-keeping procedures in preparation for the day when the deck apprentices would start three-month stints as assistants to the Officer of the Watch down below.

With the ship preparing to sail back to the war, I would like to say that my thoughts were with those who had been suffering while we enjoyed the comforts of the Hotel Montreal, but it wouldn't be true. My horizons stretched no further than I could see. My job was all the world to me. With the callousness of youth, I gave barely a thought to my parents and what they might be going through. It intrigues me now how little I knew, how little I cared, about life beyond the *Matiana*.

As a finishing touch to the new bow, the ship's sides were painted in a glossy black with a three inch white line just below the gunwale, and she got a new coat of red antifouling paint on all underwater surfaces at the same time. We were given a great send-off. *Matiana* floated out of dock and was towed by two tugs into the channel of the St Lawrence. Shipboard rumour had it we were heading for the Pacific, and indeed we were heading south, staying about 150 miles off the American coast. Every day it got warmer. By the time we were abeam Boston we had changed our blues for white tropical gear, looking and feeling clean and neat. We settled into a regular pattern of work starting with a four-hour watch of which the last two hours were spent in lifeboat maintenance, changing the fresh water and emergency rations, chipping and scraping and applying red lead oxide patches of corrosion. As we entered the Caribbean the apprentices were given a briefing on what to expect when the ship came under the control of the Panama Canal authorities. In fact, there was little or nothing for the apprentices to do except watch the big diesel engines on the dockside, the 'mules' pulling the ship through the locks. The rain teemed down incessantly, and somewhere on our passage through the canal we stopped in a lake where we were invaded by long boat traders selling everything from pet monkeys and parrots to their sisters' telephone numbers in Panama City.

When we steamed out of Panama I was under the impression that we were to pick up Australia

infantry and nurses to take them to Papua New Guinea, so on my next watch I was surprised to see from the charts that we were heading north. As it turned out, we were making for Long Beach, south of Los Angeles, to refuel and provision. At that time America was not in the war, but their hospitality and generosity towards British merchant seamen was overwhelming. They couldn't do enough to make us welcome. Several film stars invited the officers and cadets of the *Matiana* into their homes. One party went to the home of the actor Ralph Bellamy, and my group found themselves lounging beside Tyrone Power's swimming pool in the Hollywood hills, cigar in one hand and cocktail in the other. Power, whose father was English, was an Anglophile who believed strongly that America should get into the war on Britain's side, and he was happy to arrange some rest and recreation for weary British sailors at his mansion in his absence. He was then at the height of his powers as an actor, world-famous for swashbuckling romantic leads in films such as *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Black Rose*. Nor was he all show. A year after our visit, when America was indeed at war, he joined the US Marines and trained as a pilot, flying wounded Marines out of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. His house had marble floors and enormous, opulently furnished living rooms where we could make ourselves comfortable. Everywhere there were beautiful cut-glass and porcelain ashtrays with handmade lighters inlaid with rubies and diamonds – Power was a heavy smoker who got through three or four packs of cigarettes a day and died at the age of forty-four from heart disease. Our buffet lunch was a Hollywood fantasy of food, and the impression it made on a teenager from the land of austerity can be gauged from the fact that I can see it before me now. There were six tables. One was devoted to a suckling pig, which had been spit-roasted and accorded the finishing flourish of a cooked apple in its mouth. Around the pig lay every sort of cooked vegetable. The centrepiece of the next table was a piece of beautifully dressed salmon surrounded by imaginatively arranged salads. The dessert tables were virtually collapsing under the weight of sweetmeats of every colour, and all this laid out for about twenty-four men of the *Matiana*.

Next day we upped anchor and left San Pedro harbour with wistful glances towards the Hollywood Hills, but we were to find that wherever we encountered Americans we were met with kindness and generosity. They seemed to know more about the war than I did, but then, I was always at sea. In the space of 250 days, we spent 192 days under way. Between November 1940 and December 1941 the *Matiana* seldom stayed in port for more than two or three days at a time. In fourteen months she covered 51,200 nautical miles and stopped in ten different ports, before arriving in Honolulu in November 1941 to refuel and provision en route for Australia. We were carrying troops destined to be transhipped to places like Papua and Singapore, and as had become our habit, we were making the voyage alone and without escort. In retrospect, this was a sound decision. The ship survived the war when half of British India's 100-strong fleet did not. Sometimes I thought that long ocean voyages carried a high risk of submarine attack for a lone ship, but I was not in a position to make an issue of it. Working four hours on, four off did not give one time to think of much else but doing one's laundry and trying to get enough sleep.

We arrived in Honolulu to find the port chock-a-block with big passenger ships. The *Matiana* was tied up alongside one of the great white Matteson liners, and on board her the word rationing had never been heard – cigarettes, cigars, chocolate, silk stockings, ladies' underwear, shirts and tropical weight trousers were all available in abundance at unbelievably low prices, or in trade for hard liquor. The City of Honolulu did everything it could to make us feel welcome. Captain Patterson explained that the officers and cadets were to be guests of leading citizens of the town. Unfortunately, while the deck and engineering officers were collected by their hosts in cars and lavishly entertained in their homes, the Lascar crew were left to make their own arrangements for shore leave – a fair reflection of the demarcation practices of the time. The Lascars, Indian seamen who performed the most menial tasks, were a breed apart. They were bossed by their own bosun, the 'serang', and his deputy, who were

usually his son, and they were ordered about casually by the officers and cadets. They did their work uncomplainingly and without shirking, and throughout my time in the merchant navy I don't recall Lascar ever letting me down. We took them for granted.

As a cadet in his second year, I was at the bottom of the hospitality list. My host was a young man about my age, who was an ensign in the US submarine service. He took me on a fascinating tour of the island of Oahu, on which Honolulu and Pearl Harbor lie. We drove all over looking at the sprawling military bases, visiting the aquarium and seeing the latest radar station before ending up in the submarine pens in Pearl Harbor, where my host proudly announced that his father was the admiral commanding the whole submarine force in Honolulu. The entire island exuded a feeling of prosperity and friendliness, and I felt as far removed from the war as I could be.

Matiana was overdue some engine maintenance work, but to the regret of all of us on board it was decided to postpone the work to a later day. On the afternoon of 30 November 1941 she cast off from the Matteson liner and with tugs fussing about her made her way to blue water en route to Australia. Seven days later, 350 aircraft from the Imperial Japanese Navy's Carrier Strike Force rained devastation on Pearl Harbor, sinking five battleships, three destroyers and a minelayer, destroying 188 aircraft before they could get off the ground and killing more than 4,000 men. When the news reached the *Matiana* it didn't take Captain Patterson long to work out that we may have sailed right past the Japanese battle fleet, and it was possible that the only reason we'd not been attacked was because they didn't want to disclose their presence. Once again, speed was increased to the maximum and we rattled across the Pacific at twelve knots. We docked in Melbourne, where we picked up a contingent of Cameron Highlanders and some nurses. Christmas found us in Fremantle, where the ship's cook baked a huge Christmas cake as a present to the town, and we paraded it down the main street before it was taken off to be distributed to the children.

It was made known that when we reached our next port, Calcutta, we would be transferred to other ships while *Matiana* was laid up for major engineering work. Heavily armed German raiders disguised as merchantmen were sinking ships all over the Indian Ocean. One of them, the *Kormoran*, had sunk the Australian cruiser HMAS *Sydney* just ninety miles off Fremantle a few weeks earlier, and there were known to be at least half a dozen others operating in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. The Japanese had just sunk the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* off Singapore, and everywhere the war was going badly. It was with relief that we sighted land at the mouth of the Hooghly River off Calcutta just after New Year 1942, and once again we steamed into the foul-smelling Kidderpore Docks.

I signed off *Matiana* on 5 January 1942 and was instructed to report to SS *Ellenga*, which was due to dock later that week. She was a disappointing comedown from *Matiana*. She was a 5,000-ton coaster built in 1911 and now seriously down-at-heel. She had a majority Indian crew and was engaged on the Calcutta – Rangoon mail run, and was busily shipping troops into Burma to stem the advance of the Japanese. The chaotic evacuation of civilians from Rangoon had been going on for three weeks. *Ellenga* was taking Indian troops in the opposite direction and returning with the last of the evacuees. The Captain was a dour old Scotsman who hardly spoke a word to anyone. *Ellenga* was supposed to have been able to make sixteen knots in her heyday but ten was about all she could manage by 1942. We steamed down through the Bay of Bengal with perhaps 1,000 troops on board, the 'tween decks rigged up with mattresses and hammocks and portaloos all over. The Rangoon trip took two or three days, and we turned up the wide Irrawaddy River towards the Burmese capital with every eye peeled for the Japanese fighters and bombers that were attacking daily. *Ellenga* was just about the biggest ship that could berth in the dock in Rangoon – there were larger ships there but they had anchored in the river and were loaded by lighter. The city itself was a mess. Just about the only civilians left were looters, and everywhere the fires started by Japanese planes were burning with no one to fight them. We took on board some Indian wounded and a few hundred refugees, including

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