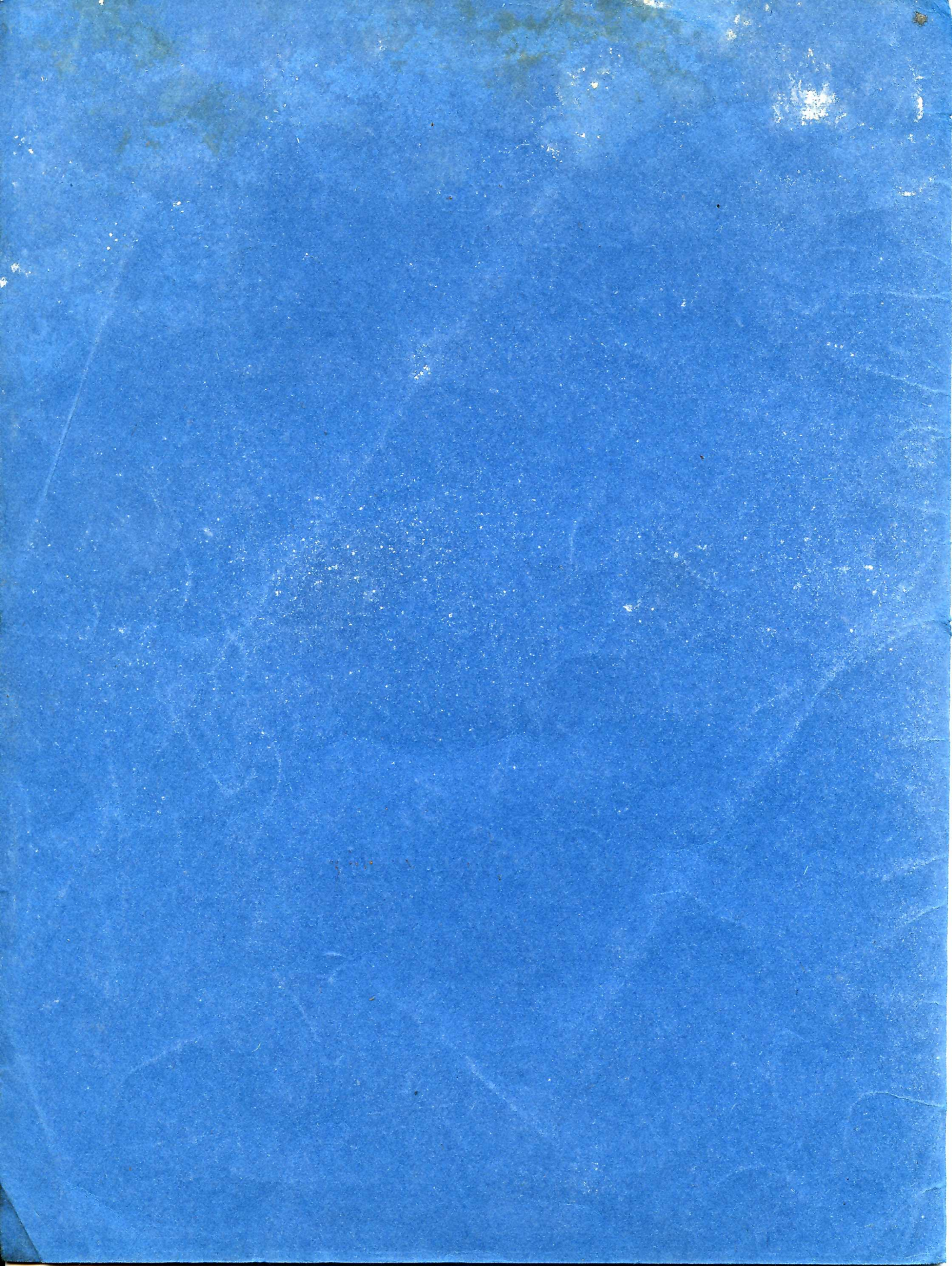
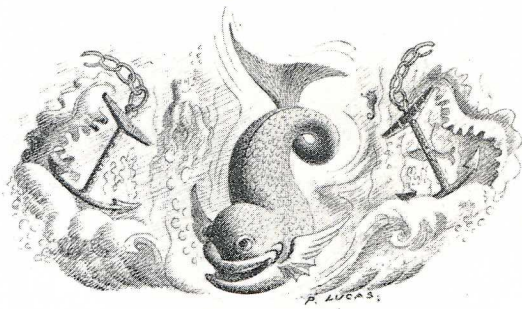


The
Royal Navy at Poole
1940-1945

A Souvenir.





Illustrated by
LEADING SEAMAN LUCAS, R.N.

Edited by
LIEUT. H. M. LINEHAN, R.N.V.R.

It was fun while it lasted.

1940 - 1945

DESPITE its near 70,000 population and a 99-miles high-water-mark, Poole is not so widely known as its proud inhabitants would wish. It is not a Portsmouth, a Plymouth or even a Wilhelms-haven, but in the course of seven centuries of recorded history its name has, from time to time, been writ large in the country's maritime records.

Legend has it that King Alfred's ships were built upon its shores. If so, then it is the birthplace of the Royal Navy. Certainly it contributed men and ships to many wars with France, and took no small part in the fight against the Spanish Armada.

In the first World War it became an important mine-sweeping base, accommodating some 150 North Sea trawlers. Small wonder, then, that when the war against Nazism began, the Admiralty once again looked upon strategically well placed Poole as a base for its little ships.

Listen, then, to the story of the Poole Navy, the officers, ratings and W.R.N.S. of which claim to have achieved as much as those in any British port and to have far outstripped most.

From Dunkirk to D-Day when pressure of work was so great that at times it was more a case of staving off disaster than exercising effective control. Suffice to say control was exercised and disaster averted during the greatest amphibious operation of all time.

The storm burst with the fall of France. Improvised arrangements had to be made. The harbour defended or denied to the enemy should defence fail. Its facilities made available for returning personnel from the Expeditionary Force and refugees from France and Belgium.

The Admiralty sent two seamen with local knowledge. Captain Casey, C.B.E., D.S.O., D.S.C., R.D., R.N.R., and Lt.-Commander Vandy, R.N.R., from Portland, to do their best. Their only resource was the authority of the Royal Navy. With one eye on Heath Robinson and the other on Admiralty specifications they set to work. Wire rope, six miles of it, was requisitioned, if such a word can be applied to something that was freely given. A boom was improvised. Torpedo war heads set in concrete were used for mines with firing circuits improvised by local electricians.

Obstacles to stop aircraft landing on the water and tank barriers were strung along the shore. All the time an avalanche of coasters of all Nationalities flooded the port, some carrying refugees, some seeking refuge themselves. Suspicion everywhere, for with men of many nations none knew who was to be trusted. A battery of 6-inch guns was installed on Brownsea Island and later handed over to the Army. War came very near when two Dutch coasters, making their accustomed passage through the harbour under the charge of Poole pilots, were sunk in the Swash Channel by magnetic mines.

Poole was fortunate in avoiding destruction by enemy aircraft. Nevertheless, 456 H.E. and 10,000 incendiary bombs fell in the area of the port. A decoy was established on Brownsea and had an outstanding success on Whit Sunday, 1942, when it took the full brunt of a sharp raid on Poole. It saved the town, something for which the citizens of Poole were extremely grateful. In June, 1942, the yacht Sona, accommodation ship of the base, was sunk by a delayed action bomb. Although most of N.O.I/c's staff were aboard none were injured. After this the base personnel were dispersed in lodgings in the town until the base was closed down.

In 1942, tip and run raiders menaced shipping, and one of the examination vessels was brought into port in a sinking condition. The victualling store on the quay was destroyed, fortunately the staff had left at the time. The decline in enemy activity later that year, heralded a quiet period, but in the late summer the first flotilla of landing craft arrived to exercise with Commandos.

Strange reports circulated. Work at Ham Common, a new hard. Work at Ridge, slipways at Bolsons and the Dorset Yacht Co., new moorings trots. Thames barges arrived with their sterns cut away for beach landings, a few L.C.T.S. They were followed by every known form of landing craft.

The Stars and Stripes appeared. Soon they equalled the White Ensigns. The harbour was never still.

Ships berthed three and four and even seven abreast in the dock. The passage between the quays resembled the eye of a needle, but it was negotiated by young officers experiencing their first command, sometimes their first spell on the bridge.

Amidst all this activity the merchant trade of the port carried on without interruption even if some times at inconvenience.

Exercise followed exercise. Curious names were heard. Exercise "Pirate." Exercise "Pluto." Finally, exercise "OVERLORD." None knew if it were rumour or fact, but there was something harder behind the orders now. Insistence and drive. Disregard for all normal ideas. Every berth, every buoy in the harbour was occupied, some times triple-occupied. Work was driven harder and faster every day.

June the 4th, 1944. Part of the great fleet sailed. Then the gale delay, alterations, rapid improvisation, difficulties overcome by common sense and initiative. Weather still very bad. The fleet sailed in spite of everything, 320 vessels of all sizes, for the most part in the hands of young and inexperienced officers and crews.

Only one failed to cross the bar at the appointed time. Only one young seaman was absent from his post.

It was the real thing, but no practice had ever run so smoothly. A short lull, then, once more super-heated pressure as supplies poured across the Channel. Craft to repair and refit. New construction to take the place of casualties. Mistakes there were in plenty. But not once during that period did anything occur which could have been described as a blunder. Nothing which could have impeded for an instant the success of the Armies on the other side.

Finally, VE-Day. Free beer, free gangway, free for all. A warm pleasant day, good natured jollification everywhere.

The Poole Navy had done its duty.



Commander Hastings, O.B.E., R.N., the Naval Officer-in-Charge of the base discusses some question of Naval procedure with a seaman, while Lieutenant Fox, R.N.V.R., the executive Officer of the base looks bored. Commander Hastings, usually referred to as the "old man," had a fierce bark as becomes a Naval Officer tempered by a kind heart which endeared him to all.



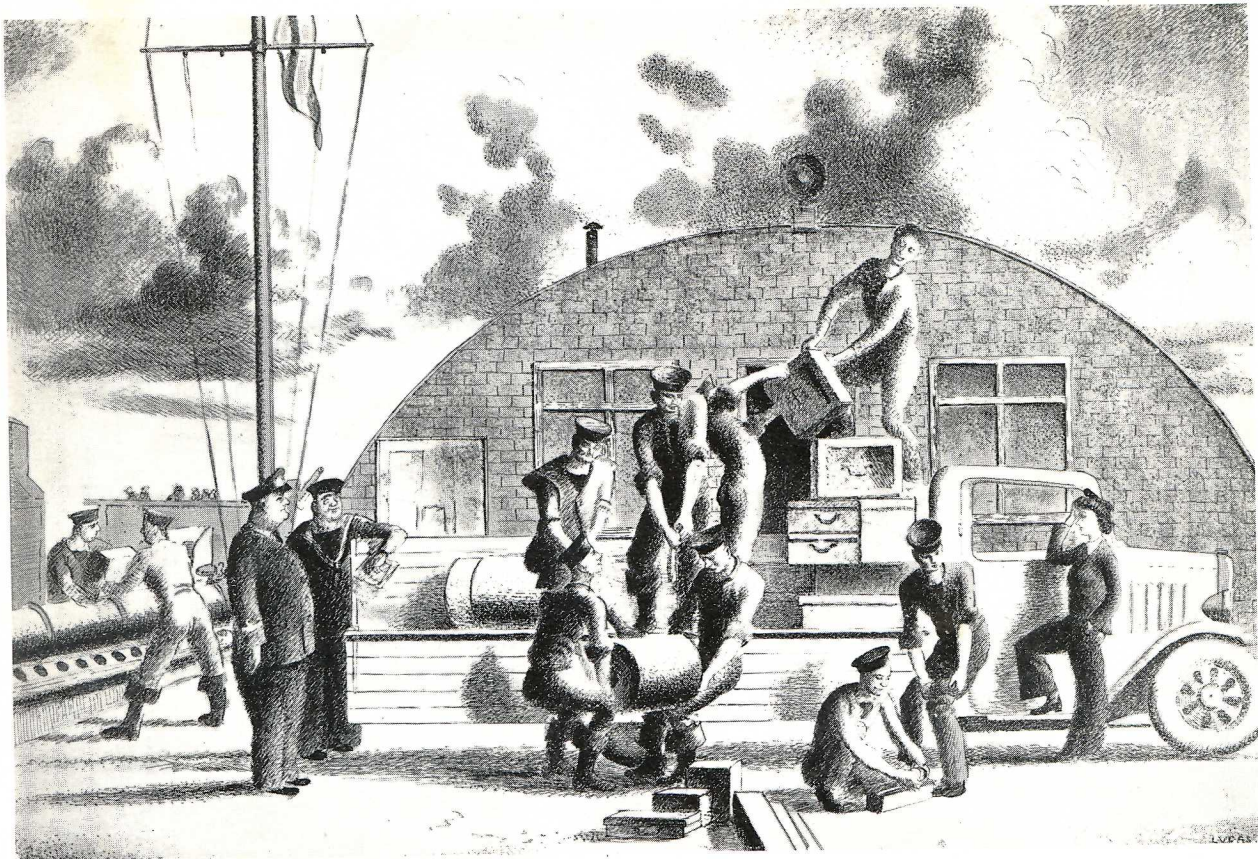
P.O. Calver, R.P.O. of the base. He never said an unkind word about anyone or to anyone and never had any nonsense either. He supervised the accommodation of many thousands of men with efficiency and tact and was universally popular. The X.O. in the centre gives instructions for painting ship to the seaman appearing round the corner.



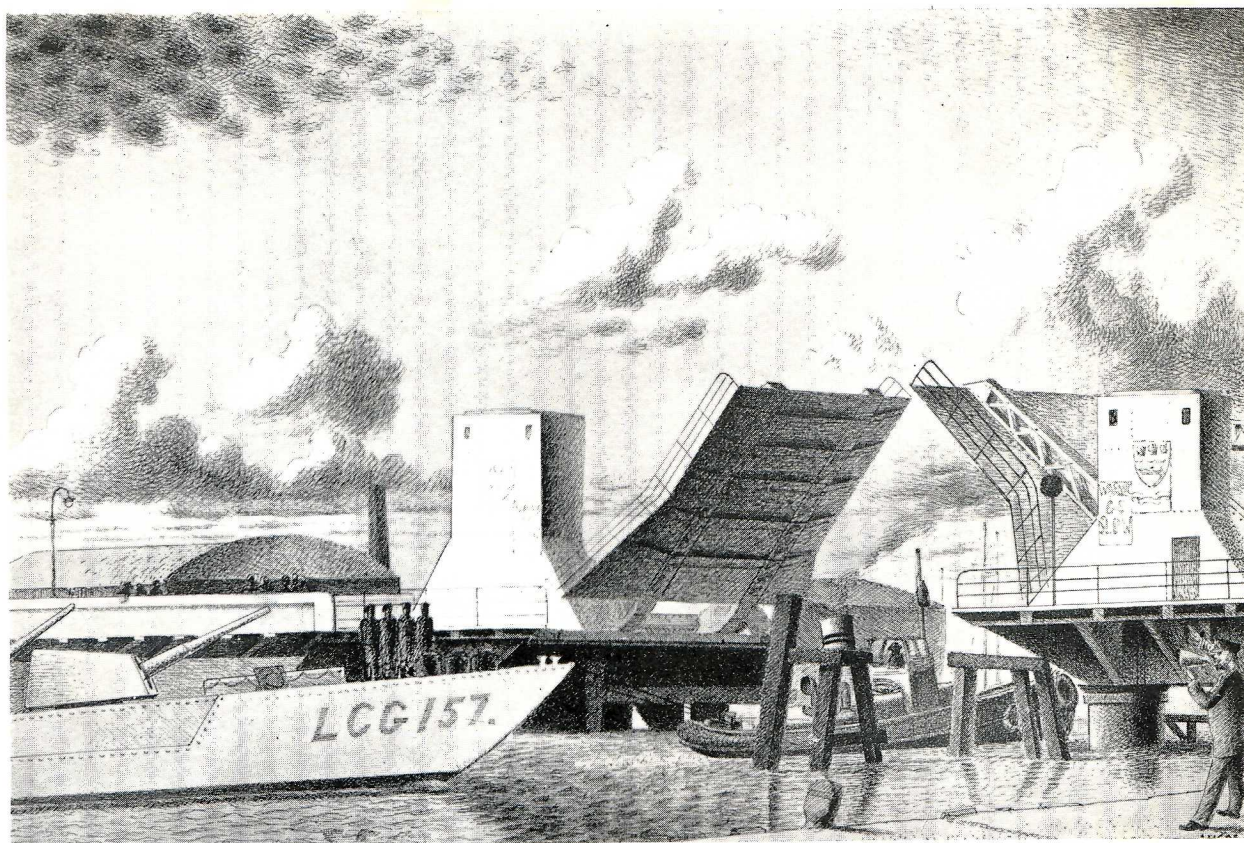
A couple of "gash, two and a balfers having a loaf on the Quay." While matlots join their ship. Lieut.-Commander Kenneth Ivens, R.N.V.R., usually known as "Shocker," and Lieut.-Commander Norman Dartnell, R.N.V.R., Assistant Naval Officer in Charge.



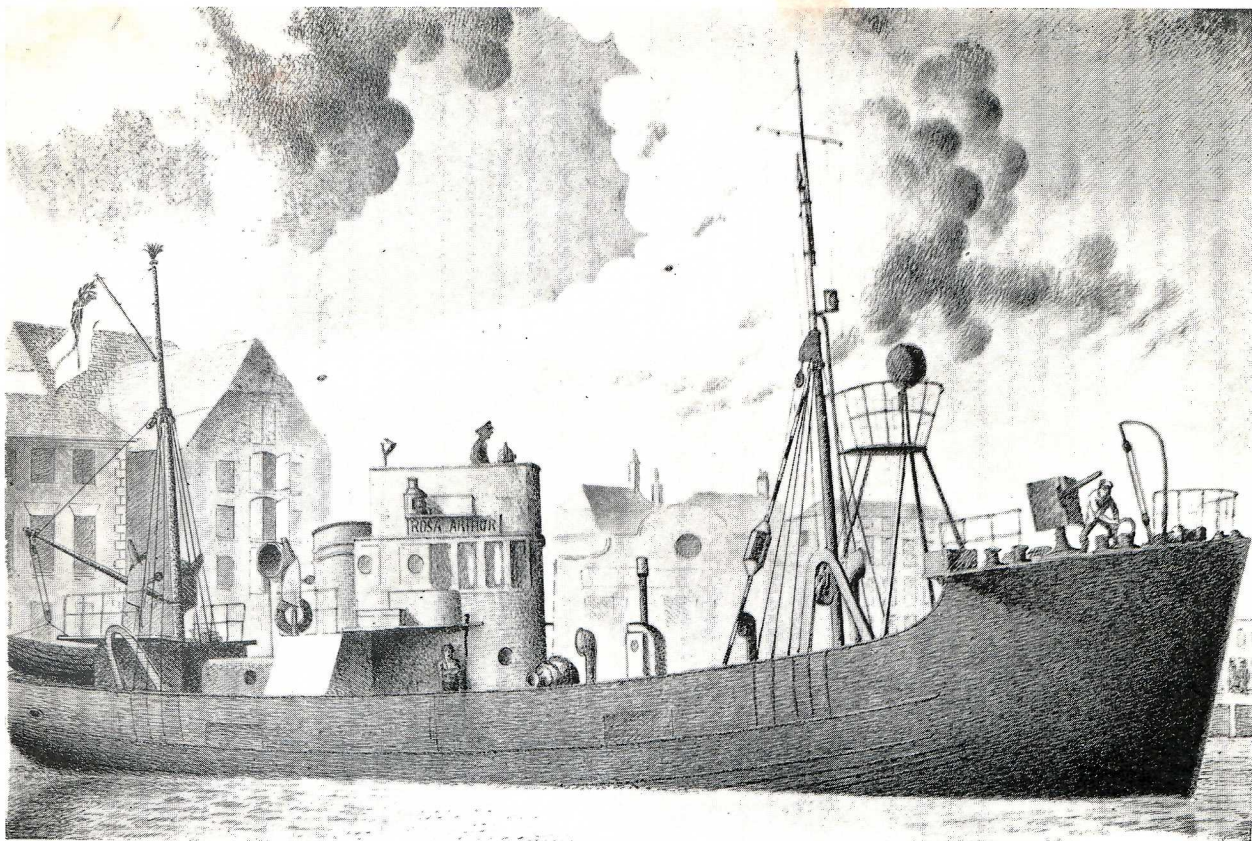
Three unidentified base officers. The Wren Officer in the background bears a resemblance to 2nd Officer Ridout, W.R.N.S., the third and last secretary of the base. The officer on the right wears the same lace as Commissioned-gunner Hawes and the officer in the middle might be the Berthing Master.



There were few more exacting tasks performed by the base staff than de-arming and re-arming of ships in for repair. Poole was a major repair base on the South Coast and the number of vessels dealt with exceeded four figures. Each one had to be de-armed and the ammunition taken by transport to the magazines on Hospital Island. The guns were serviced, repaired and maintained by the commissioned gunner and his staff of gunnery ratings. At times the gunner had more than 200 guns over 20 millimetres in his charge.



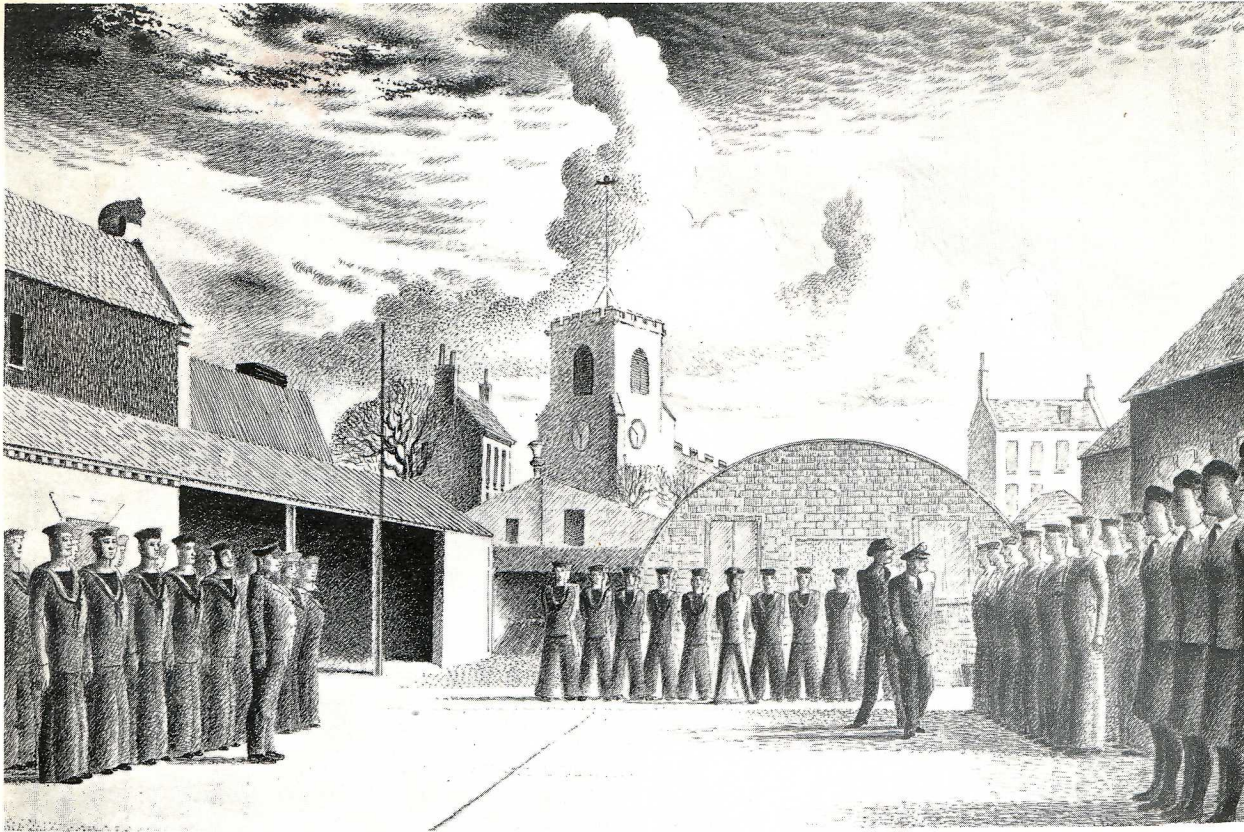
Poole Bridge is a comparatively modern amenity of the town but it proved a major headache to the Naval authorities. Important repair facilities and berths were located above the bridge, and it was essential to move large numbers of craft up and down. Pre D-Day, grave concern was felt that if the bridge were bombed it would cut off these facilities but there was no answer and the risk had to be accepted. It is not an easy bridge to navigate and landing craft are difficult to handle. The Naval tugs Kelpy, Primate, Nat 108, Allan and Lama did heroic work getting their awkward tows safely through.



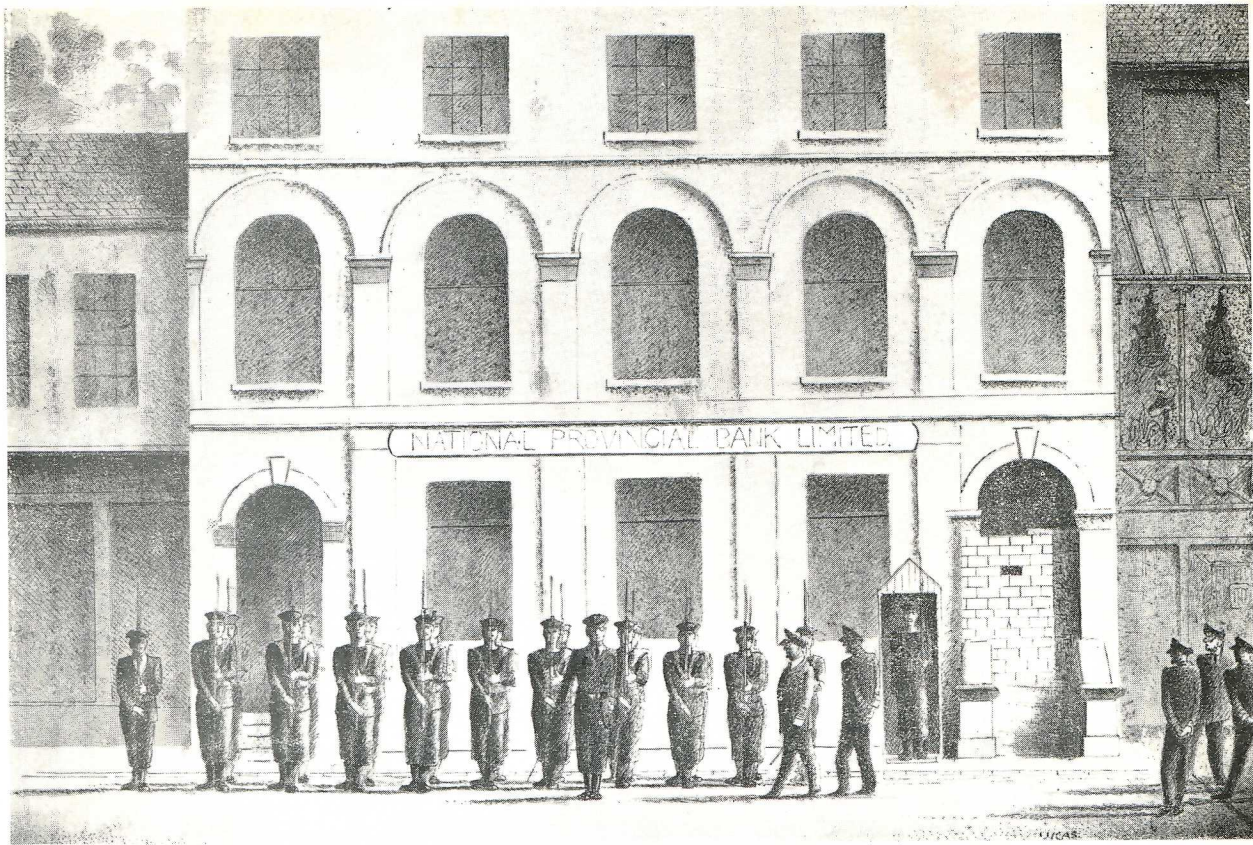
The examination service was manned throughout the war by trawlers, first three, but for the most part two working watch and watch. H.M.S. Rosa Arthur (Lt.-Commander Spencer, R.N.V.R.) and H.M.S. Roger Robert (Lieut. Bengitson, R.N.V.R.). They were small, deep draft ships, able to keep the sea in all weathers. The two crews seldom met although they passed within a stone's throw every forty-eight hours on relief. Every vessel entering the port was examined and passed. They were in radio and visual touch with the base and were the eyes of the operations staff.



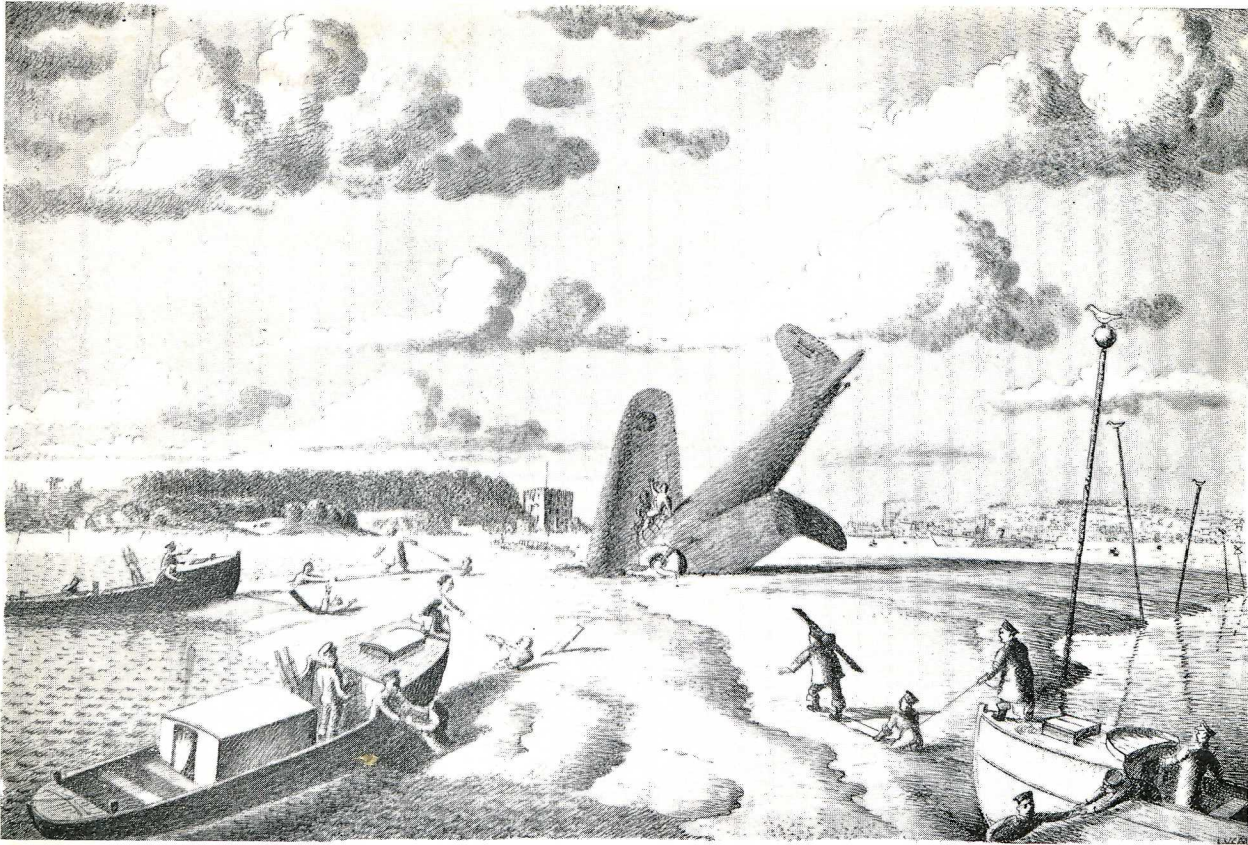
N.O.I/c. was responsible for good order and discipline of all Royal Navy and Royal Marine personnel in the port. P.O. Higgs, R.N., was appointed for full-time duty in the town and was supported each night by a strong patrol from the ship's company. Smartly turned out with clean white webb equipment they were a regular sight every evening in the High Street during the war. Conduct was generally good and very little serious disturbance took place.



“Hands to Divisions.” Every Sunday morning at 10.30 the “pipe” came over the loud bailer as the church parties returned from St. James’ Church. The bands fell in three sides of a square in Wood’s yard. The Wrens’ Division are in their accustomed place on the right of the yard. The Base division at the top of the yard and Divisions from craft in the harbour, who always made a point of attending, are on the left.



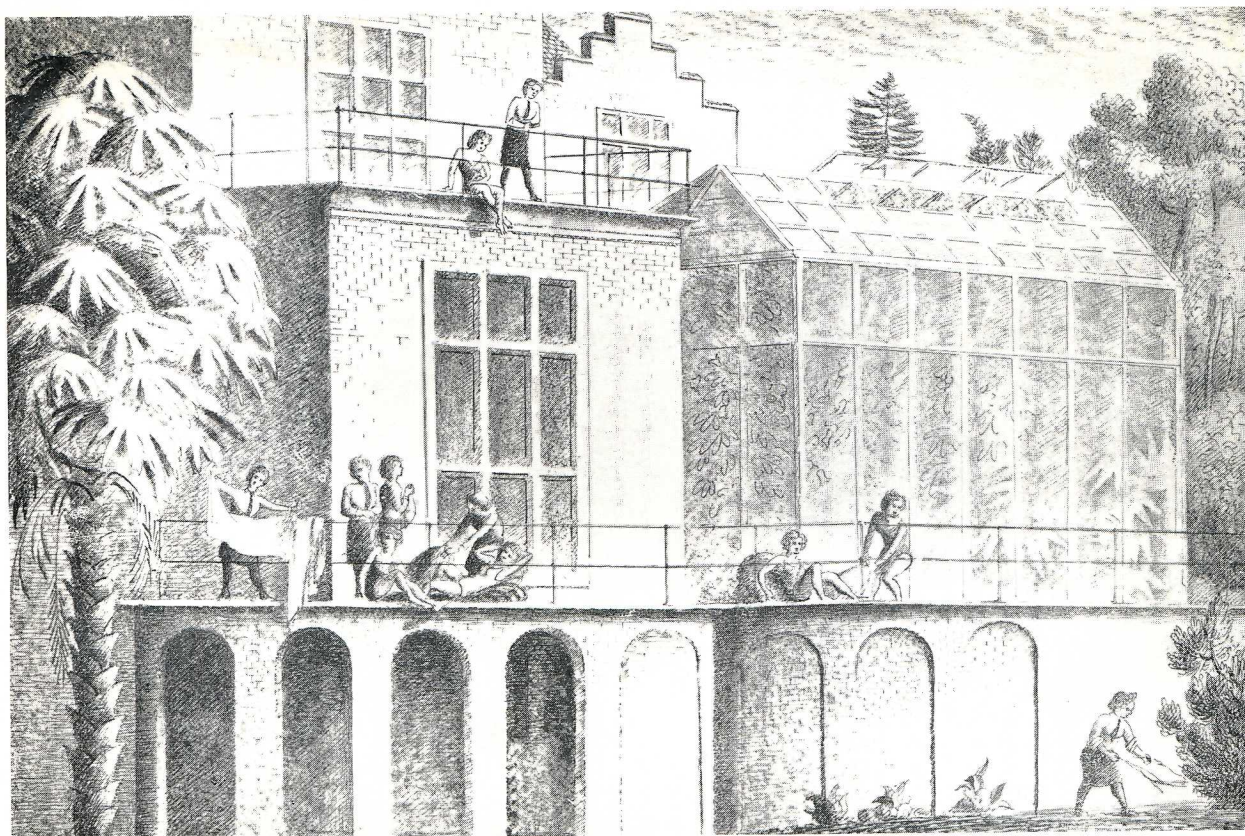
It fell to the N.O.I.c. staff to receive and entertain with due honour, all flag officers and important Naval personages visiting Poole. When C.-in-C. from Portsmouth or F.O. I/c. from Portland visited the base, a guard of honour was mounted outside Naval Centre. The guard invariably contained a large proportion of "stripies," veterans of many years service, and on one occasion the officer-in-charge was able to report to C.-in-C. that there was a father and son in his guard.



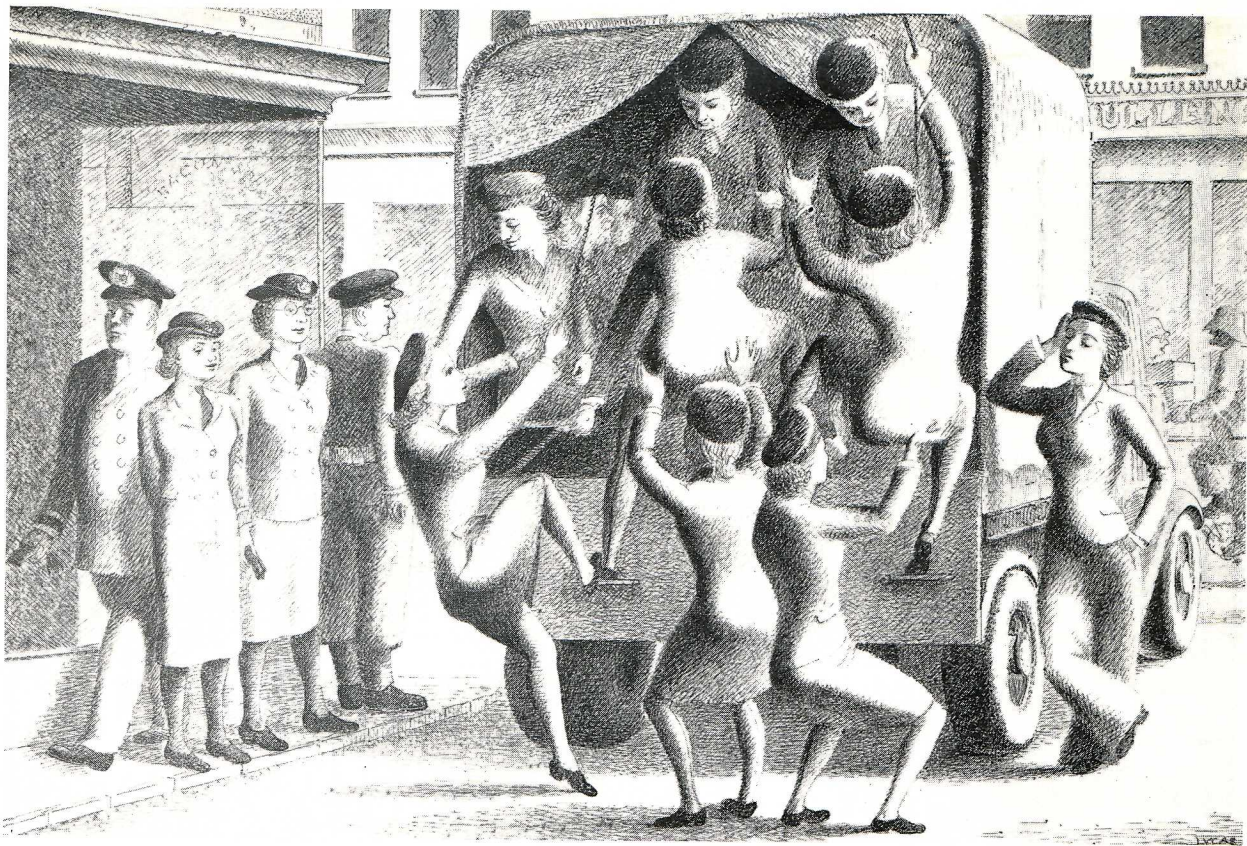
Lt.-Commander Vandy, O.B.E., R.N.R., established a unique reputation for his mooring party. A seaman of life-long experience, with his party, fishermen from Poole and the East and West coast ports they became a law unto themselves. Their skill and knowledge of the harbour was so great that few dared to challenge. They were nominally in charge of moorings but all difficult jobs in the harbour fell to their lot. They were equipped with Poole gondoliers and skylarks, strong, able boats well suited to Poole Harbour. When there was work to be done, daylight or dark made little difference to the mooring party.



In all recorded history of the Royal Navy, good English beer, the inn, tavern or pub. have been the principal relaxation of Jack ashore. It was not by chance that Poole Quay had many friendly houses within a stone's throw of the water-front, for it has been the haunt of sea-faring men for centuries. Many thousands of matlots will remember their pint at the King Charles, Jolly Sailor, Portsmouth Hoy, Antelope and a dozen other "ports of call."



Mount House, Parkstone, the Wrens Hostel was the largest accommodation establishment in the base. It always played a leading part in the corporate life of the N.O.I.c. staff. A large red brick mansion it provided excellent facilities for entertaining and many boisterous dances and parties were given by the Wrens. The Wren Officers Ward Room was a regular place for entertaining distinguished visitors and succeeding C.-in-C.'s and F.O.I.C.'s lunched there. At times more than seventy-five Wrens were victualled aboard but some of these slept out in requisitioned houses near by.



Sharp at 12.30, seven days a week, transport arrived to take the Wrens of the forenoon watch to dinner at Mount House. A few minutes of indescribable confusion and 25 or 30 young ladies scrambled over the tailboard in an unseaman-like fashion; settled themselves on the benches and were whisked away to their quarters. The scene was re-enacted at 1800 hours for the afternoon watch. It seldom failed to attract a small crowd of spectators in the High Street.

MOUNT HOUSE

J. R. ANDREWS.

Let him refute it who dare! It was the women of Britain who won the war.

Somewhat sweeping, you say? Well, can any honest man deny that they kept the Poole Navy afloat? What tearing of hair, expressions of bewilderment and utter chaos because "My Wren is on leave!"

And what it cost sometimes to live up to that splendid exhortation "England expects . . ."

Much water has flowed under Poole Bridge since that day in September, 1942, when Mount House was invaded, and reduced, or raised, (its a free country!) to the status of W.R.N.S. Hostel.

The blitz had been weathered, so had the threat of invasion of our shores. Official minds were thinking of the day, far off it seemed, when we should be putting that same fear into German hearts.

Consequently, we found that from a nucleus of twenty or so, our numbers rapidly reached the seventy mark.

Mealtimes were reminiscent of feeding time at the London Zoo but with "Wrens" in place of tigers! The jollifications at breakfast—a meal always singled out for special confusion—had to be experienced to be properly appreciated! Sleepy, agitated and it must be owned, angry individuals, rushing hither and thither in frantic search of crockery, tea, marmalade!

Baths were a matter of speculation. Success depended on one's ability to rise early and use energy and initiative in being first on the scene. To say that demand exceeded supply is putting it mildly! A few lucky ones did get a lukewarm wash occasionally.

The myriad of notices exhorting us to "Think of the Second Front. Save water," became slightly irksome. Minor troubles are laughable now, but not so at the time.

* * * * *

As time passed, ships of war were accumulated in the Harbour in large numbers and work increased correspondingly.

It would be impossible to give credit to any particular branch, because all worked to absolute capacity.

The Operational side carried a heavy burden, working by day and by night for many weeks before the great day. Writers toiled for long hours, always suffering on account of understaffing. Countless vessels were victualled, stored and refitted; armed and ammunitioned by willing transport drivers. In the Mail Office, the F.M.O's were submerged beneath mountainous bags of mail.

The small staff in the house, short of utensils and cooking space, were hard pressed.

First Aid and Fire Parties were formed with dreadful pictures of the shape of things to come at the back of their minds. The prospect of an Emergency Clearing Station in the Chapel was not cheering, but an essential safeguard.

Consciously or unconsciously, the prospect of the opening of a "Second Front" hung heavily upon us. Certainly it was to be the climax of several years' work. It was no more alluring for that. Such operations lose their savour when one's friends and acquaintances will be participating.

Small wonder all were "on edge" when the Great Day dawned and our own portion of the invasion fleet was off into the blue. As everyone knows, things turned out better than we had dared to hope.

The crisis passed, lightness of spirit prevailed again in Mount House. Dhobeying fluttered gaily on the balconies. From open doors and windows came the strains of radio. In the garden, lightly-clad figures slumbered in the sun. But our numbers started to decrease.

How long ago this now seems! Sad to relate, the time has come for all of us to be on our way. Whither we know not, and whither we care not—or do we?

Hard work, unhappiness, laughter and fun, grumbling and growling, singing and shouting, the eternal blure of the radio. Old House, include us in your memories!

Half a hundred souls, snatched up in the torrent of war and flung piecemeal together to live our youth as best we may. Think of us when we are gone, for one thing is certain: where ever we may go and whatever we may do, we will remember you.

The Rise and Fall of The Poole Navy.

COMMANDER DARTNEL, R.N.V.R.

In Poole Harbour and Studland yachters and such-like did sport,
Then war came and bungled up yachting and Poole Navy took over the port.
They received refugees from Belgium and brought back the soldiers from France.
At first this navy's complement consisted of only a few.
But as the war proceeded it grew and it grew and it grew.
This growth was all very natural, to cope with the task to come :
Of sailing the forces on D-Day and finally beating the Hun.
The staff all lived in a beautiful yacht, tied up alongside the quay,
The only thing wrong with this home from home was she had no duty free.
One night in May '42, at the end of an enemy raid,
A Heinkel dropped an egg and she was truly laid.
On Brownsea was built a secret device for fooling the enemy raiders,
But Mrs. Christie, the owner, said the matlots were the real invaders.
The uncrowned King of the island, a man with hair on his chest,
Did much to allay her suspicions—how he did it I cannot suggest.
The buoys and the moorings were tended by Vandy an old sea dog.
He could salvage a plane before breakfast or find his way home in a fog.
Operations, the hub of the wheel, were in the hands of three—
Morphey, the Wrens big heart throb, Guy Preston and wee MacKenzie.
A.N.O.I/c. cum P.M.S.O. and Lord high everything else ; shared a room with his chief.
When the "owner" went on leave he was the comic relief,
Hastings was in charge of all. Pukka R.N. was he.
He never blotted his copy book and he won the O.B.E.
The Wrens were many and lived in state on top of a hill with a view.
Some were fat and some were thin and some were beautiful, too.
Passive defence and transport were tackled with main and might.
As well as lots of other things by the Bishop by day and night.
There are many other claimants worthy of mention here,
Hawes the rotund gunner whose face was full of cheer,
Cramer was his henchman, known by his rusty voice,
Caused no doubt by many years of eating vanilla ice.
Another one who graced the base and don't call me a mocker,
Had a perfect craze for shooting and a spaniel known as Shocker.
The matlots kept their Sabith at divisions in Wood's yard,
The X.O. saw they did it, turned out like a royal guard.
But now most have departed leaving much as they grew.
Just a few little Wrens without a nest and only a skeleton crew.
In a nissen hut down by the quay, with the red rust showing through,
And the last of Poole's proud navy will go without a cheer.
Then Franco Willis and Jo-Jo will drown their sorrow in beer.

* * * *

Long years have past.
The little Wrens that sang so sweetly in among the bushes
Are matrons now with children in bassinets they pushes.
You see them mingle with the crowd in High Street or the Beehive,
Telling the kids how they won the war way back in '45.
And all the kids with one accord will clap their hands with glee
Bar little Ted, his mouth jam-red who'll say, "You're telling me."
Then, grandpapa will frown a little and say these kids are shocking.
Give me the days when I was at sea in the Rosa Arthur rocking
Children they were nice to know, said "thank you," "if you please,"
And I had my tot which meant a lot, as well as my duty frees.



THE LAST SIGNAL.

POOLE GENERAL No. 467.

From :-N.O.I/c. POOLE.

I hope to see you all tomorrow, Sunday, 15th July, 1945, as previously arranged, and to say goodbye to you personally. I also, in this my last Poole General signal, wish to express my appreciation for all the loyalty and help you have given me and for the fine spirit of comradeship in which you have carried out your duties. You have all worked so well together as a team, maintained good discipline and made this base an efficient and happy one. You may well be proud of the services to the Country which you have rendered here at Poole. I congratulate you all, and wish you every success and happiness in the future. God bless and good luck.

141414B.

HAND

P/L

MMB.

TOR 1445.

14.7.45.



