‘A Welshman’s Introduction to War’ – Letters from the Arctic Convoys- by S.J. Davies

On the 12th Feb 1944, 28-year-old Ivor Davies sent a letter from *HMS Berwick*, writing from an undisclosed location:

> “I’ve had to be at Action Stations before now for nearly 23 hrs of the day for 3/=, . . . have [known] the sea to wash right over the decks on to the Fore Bridge & soak me, my clothes actually freeze on me, my balaclava frozen round my face quite stiff, afraid to take off my glasses to wipe my nose for fear of the cold, you dare not touch a piece of iron with bare hands in case it takes off the skin. I can still . . . say I’ve got the best wife in the world . . . & even pray for her with my cap off, hanging on for dear life to the life lines with tears all but rolling out of my eyes.”

Ivor wrote to his wife Ivy, using a ‘privilege envelope’ at less risk of being censored on board the ship, but still subject to examination by the Chief Postal Censor (see Figure 1). Writing about the weather, which ran the risk of revealing location, was strictly forbidden (see letters of 8 Dec 1943; 6th Jan & 10th Feb 1944). Unopened by the censor, this communication got through.

So what brought this Welshman from rural Carmarthenshire to the middle of Arctic waters, leaving his wife, newborn child and toddler son behind. What was he doing here in the dark winter months of the Second World War from 1943-1944?

Political context to the Arctic Convoys

During the Second World War, the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in June 1941. Winston Churchill met Stalin's demands for help and Britain provided supplies, with significant support from its allies. The quickest and most direct route was the sea-passage from Britain via Icelandic waters, around northern Norway to the ice-free Soviet port of Murmansk and, when possible, to the less navigable port of Archangel (Plant, A., 2017; Bennett, 2013, p.52; Ruegg and Hague, p.8-10).

"The first convoy sailed in September 1941" (Plant, A., 2017). Ivor's, "route passed through a narrow funnel between the Arctic ice pack and German bases in Norway, and was very dangerous, especially in winter when the ice came further south. Many of the convoys were attacked by German

submarines, aircraft and warships" (Plant, ibid). In 1942, the year before Ivor set sail, convoy PQ17 was almost destroyed (See Trelford, D, *PQ17: Arctic Convoy Disaster*).

Ivor Davies served in the Royal Navy as part of the escort screen providing cover for convoy ships carrying supplies to the Soviet Union and completing the return journey back to the United Kingdom. This posting may have been an unwelcome prospect for Ivor and family because:

"During the 12 months from March 1942 to March 1943 the Arctic convoys became a byword for the horrors of the war at sea. Ten convoys (265 merchant ships) were sent to the Soviet Union, plus 11 independently routed vessels. Sixty of the merchant vessels would not reach their destination and a further 22 ships were lost on the return leg . . . through enemy action, mines and harsh seas" (Bennett, G.H., 2013, p.53).

The four million tons of supplies delivered to the Russians included tanks and aircraft, as well trucks, tractors, telephone wire, train engines and footwear.

Significantly, "Winston Churchill wrote that the only thing that ever frightened him during the war was the U-boat peril" (Whinney, p. 94). He also described the route taken by

the convoys as, “the worst journey in the world” (Bennett, G.H., 2013, p.52).

Brief Biography- Ivor Davies

Ivor was born on 23 November 1915. He came from a working class family, who lived in a two-up two-down cottage without water and electricity. The building was originally just a hut used by workers from a small nearby quarry. Ivor’s mother Mary renamed the cottage, “Bryn Teilo” after the 6th Century Welsh saint (Davies, P.G., e-mail, 09 Jan 2019).

Ivor’s father, Benjamin Davies, was a quarryman in Mynyddygarreg, near Kidwelly. Sources also referred to him as a ‘powderman’ since he used explosives to bring down slabs of silica at the quarry face (Davies, P.G., e-mail, 09 Jan 2019; Davies, D.P., family trees A & B). His wife Mary Margretta Davies (née Richards) had been in domestic service before they met. She reared chickens, turkeys and a goat from their cottage.

Ivor’s mother, Mary Davies, had four sons. Ivor’s eldest brother, Gwynfor, and his youngest, John, were born within a 9 year period of each other (from 1911 to 1920). So from his childhood, Ivor was used to sharing a confined space with his three brothers.

By the time Ivor was of working age, economic prospects in Kidwelly were not hopeful. In Wales, the unemployment rate for insured males reached almost forty-three percent. Many were forced to abandon home, and between 1925 and 1939, 390,000 people moved, drawn particularly to the Midlands and the south-east of England looking for a future (Janet Davies, p.61).

Ivor, in turn, left Wales in 1937. He moved to High Wycombe to start his police career, having been turned down by the force in Birmingham, closer to home [Photo 1- Ivor in uniform holding his firstborn son]. Although the convoy journeys were Ivor's introduction to 'Foreign Land', they were not therefore his first experience of being in a new country and learning its language.

A year after the start of the Second Word War, Ivor married Ivy Bowdrey, a Londoner. Their first son Peter Davies was born in January 1942 and their second son, Paul Davies was born in early November 1943, immediately before Ivor joined the *Berwick*.

Source material - the letters

It is thanks to Ivy Bowdrey that Ivor's letters have survived, because she kept his correspondence, safely stored, for her entire lifetime. Other paperwork posted by Ivor in the same envelopes was also stowed, such as letters from family members (including Ivor's mother) and friends.

Ivor's previously unpublished letters are complex. Luckily, with his service record available we can piece together chronology where the date is not accurately given. Examples include human error with year dates at the start of a New Year and tops of letters being missing. December 1943-Feb 1944 letters unearthed so far suggest Ivor wrote regularly each week except during active escort duty, when he was more sporadic (See Figure 2).

Interestingly, all the surviving letters written to Ivor during the war by his mother Mary suggest she wrote to him in English, rather than Welsh. A census from the year Mary was born (1891) confirmed that 54.4% of the general population of Wales over the age of two spoke Welsh (Davies, J., p.54). However, there were great regional variations and the concentration of Welsh speakers in Ivor's rural home district

would have been far higher. That 65% of the population of the Carmarthen district could speak Welsh in 1971 is testament to the persistence of the Welsh language in this area (Davies, J., p.70).

Welsh was definitely Mary's first language and was likewise Ivor's 'mother tongue'. Mary's choice of written language could relate to censorship and wanting letters to get through unimpeded (see Johnes, M). Also, Ivor habitually shared letters with Ivy for their news content. Mary knew her daughter-in-law was a monoglot English speaker and could have been trying to be inclusive (Davies, P.G., e-mails, 19 July & 20 Aug 2017).

HMS Collingwood

Ivor's Certificate of Service in the Royal Navy shows his training at *Collingwood* shore base began on 5 August 1943, just three years after he married Ivy Bowdrey. Ivor was twenty-seven years old when he left for *Collingwood*.

During his early days of training, Ivor's mother wrote from Kidwelly (see Figure 3) with words of spiritual encouragement:

> "Oh Ivor dear you have had to go to the navy to enjoy . . . [the] word of God. Yes dear, . . . it is good to the ones that love him. Our John will alway[s] say it [was] his prayer that brought him from France, he prayed with his face in the sands of Dunkirk to ask God to take him home safe & home he come" (Davies, M., 1943, p.4-5).

'Our John' refers to Ivor's younger brother born in 1920. Mary's letter showed her to be a woman of strong religious faith and part of the local chapel community, along with Ivor's father, who was a deacon (Davies, P.G. , e-mail, 8 July 2019).

Post-*Collingwood*, Ivor maintained his chapel roots. On Christmas Eve 1943 he wrote, "I am going to Chapel tomorrow morning, there's a special liberty boat to take us ashore . . . . [Eric] is the only Chapel man amongst the boys, so we have decided to go together." In the New Year, he wrote to Ivy, "What a bundle of letters, four from you & plenty of newspapers & also a small parcel from Sall containing a nice letter & a small Bible, she writes lovely letters" (Davies, I., 6 January 1944).[1] Sarah (or 'Sal') his Welsh aunt was a regular correspondent. Ivor also mentioned helping set up for church,

[1] Hereafter, references to all Ivor Davies's letters abbreviated to ID.

but says, “I wasn’t too pleased with the sermon, the singing was nice, but there was no depth at all . . . , too simple” (ID, 9 Jan 1944).

Ivor, a Methodist on his service record, sent uncharacteristically firm instructions home regarding his new-born son:

> “First of all there’s the baby’s christening, this is where I dictate, he is not to be Christened till I come home, . . . it will be done on the first Sunday I am there, nothing would hurt my feelings more than to think the baby was Christened & I was not there. It will all be done at the Parish Church like Peter” (ID, 12 Jan 1944).

At sea, duties came before religious observance:

> “I was rather disappointed this morning I was unable to go to church, I was on Watch it wasn’t too bad though, there’s quite a lot of beautiful scenery here one can admire, quite different to what I have ever seen, I wish I could describe it all to you, but it’s just not allowed” (ID, 23 Jan 1944).

Ivor was not uncritical of the different preaching he heard, “I went to Church this morning & it was packed out, some had to be turned away, he is a nice man the Padre but I don’t like his sermons a lot, he is rather poor, although in himself I am sure he is genuine, the R. C. [Roman Catholic] Padre has left due to some illness or other, I am sorry as he was a real good old stick” (ID, 13 Feb 44). Nonetheless, Ivor continued to attend (see ID, 20 Feb 1944).

Joining *HMS Berwick*

What was Ivor’s reaction to being on *HMS Berwick*, with its shared quarters having been brought up in a family of six? At first he found the sleeping arrangements hard:

> “Since I arrived on board this ship it has been all one mad rush for me . . . I don’t seem to be able to think right so I best start off as from when I left Stockheath. I left there Wednesday 24th, was issued with warm clothing & it is warm clothing too, my pants is a sort of knitted wool ½ inch thick, & gloves the same then a thick scarf & a ‘Balaclava’ so I am well away for the cold, they call this cruiser the Queen of the Arctic, but I am blowed if I feel like the king” (ID, undated letter A, 1943).

He continued:

> "I met all the ex-policemen . . . with me at the *Collingwood*, & my goodness was I glad, as I really felt like a stranger in a foreign land so thank goodness I have got some pals here & a few on the same Mess Deck, but I don't know it all seems very strange, we eat & sleep all in the same place & of course sling our hammocks, but last night I couldn't find room for mine so I had to sleep on the table, I thought of you in your cosy bed & me on a hard table, anyhow I will get use[d] to it in time & tonight I hope to be able to sling my hammock" (ID, undated letter A, 1943).

Another new recruit had to resort to the table some months later (see ID, 07 Jan 1944).

The hammock certainly took some getting used to, "About the ship, I still find my hammock strange to sleep in, I don't seem to be able to get comfortable in it, I daresay I will eventually, but I've got a horrible feeling I shall fall out of the blessed thing all the time" (ID, undated letter B, 1943). By December, 1943, Ivor had started to settle in, "I've got, just one [blanket] . . . & that's enough at night, you don't understand,

it's nice & warm where I sleep & in some parts of the ship its too warm to sleep, of course it's a different story when we have to go up on deck" (ID, 8th Dec, 1943). By Christmas, air quality became one of the main issues in a confined space:

> "Honestly I don't get enough exercise or fresh air these days, when I work below the upper deck, it's all electric light & fans for fresh air, so I try & keep up on deck, but the weather isn't always favourable. Of course we do see a little daylight below the upper deck, we have got the port holes which are about a foot in diameter, but that's not enough light" (ID, 26 Dec 1943).

For Ivor, joining the navy was not a choice of vocation, but rather a necessity of war. Perhaps partly for this reason, he struggled with 'discipline for discipline's sake'. On one occasion, he unknowingly stowed his hammock in the wrong place with the result that he had to report to the Police Office with another 'offender':

> "The two of us were taken up before the Officer of the Watch on the Quarter Deck . . . believe me I had a job to keep a straight face, my name was called out, then I had to take off my cap & take one step forward, then the P.O read the charge, I just said I didn't know I was

> wrong & that I was new to the ship, both of us were cautioned. Now I ask you, isn't all that daft . . . When I was in the Police Force & hard up for a case I never use[d]to bother my head with petty things, discipline or no discipline" (ID, 10 Jan, 1944).

Facilities on *HMS Berwick*

So what did Ivor make of this cruiser, having never been away to sea before? In spite of the limited space, he was overwhelmed by the range of facilities provided for the ordinary seaman:

> "It's entirely different to what I expected, there doesn't seem to be room to turn round, yet there's everything here, even a small Picture House & a canteen. Once more I had to go before the Dr & Dentist, Padre, Captain & goodness knows who, the Dentist is going to fill some teeth for me, . . . it's marvellous what they carry on board a ship. Nothing is forgotten" (ID, undated letter A, 1943).

Ivor added a school to this list in another early letter from the *Berwick*, commenting, "it's hardly credible . . . I don't think one can realise it unless you have a look round"

(ID, undated letter B 1943). A December letter detailed a 'scullery-sized' canteen used for a shop, e.g. for toothpaste and soap. A library sold paper and ink and a recreation room was, "where the chaps go for a game of cards & a tune on the piano, & there's also a soda fountain there." Ivor explained, "the ship's company is made up into four watches & if it's my watch ashore I can go to the pictures, of course if it's full up early I am just unlucky." The cinema capacity was 100 (ID, 13th Dec 1943). Ivor had good reason to visit the Dr and Dentist because of ongoing problems with his false teeth, which led to indigestion.

As Ivor discovered, the *HMS Berwick* had some specialised facilities, "we had on board today . . . an operation, believe them two Doctors never had a lot of room to operate, I don't know what the operation was, but it appears to me that these Doctors have to be well up in everything as no doubt they have a variety of jobs, but it struck me as being funny to think that an operation was going on in that little place & still life going on quite normal on board" (ID, 13th Dec 1943).

With its comprehensive medical facilities, *HMS Berwick* became a 'hospital' ship for surgical operations (IWM (1944) Medicine at Sea [object description]). The above patient would not necessarily have been a crew member, there being patient transfers from other vessels within the convoy. There is

a dramatic photo, entitled ‘Medicine at Sea’, of a man with peritonitis being airlifted on to *HMS Berwick* from destroyer HMS Cambrian just six months after Ivor left ship (IWM, 1944).

On the whole, Ivor was happy with his Mess:

> “My Mess is a pretty good one, plenty to eat . . . bacon & egg yesterday for breakfast & today we had cold ham, then the chaps on the Mess are a pretty good crowd, only there’s too many of them approx 50, still I don’t mind [now] that I’ve been used to stepping on one another’s toes. My biggest worry is my kit, there’s no lockers so all my stuff has to be kept in my kit bag” (ID, undated letter E 1943).

Cockroaches were still a fact of life, “Sat morning as usual is clean ship, . . . you could eat your food off the deck, everything is clean here, a bit different to *Collingwood*, I have seen some cockroaches but none in the food, & I don’t want to see any” (ID, 15 Jan 1944).

Getting lost on board

There were some disadvantages to this strange new environment:

> "It was horrible to start off with, really all strange faces, & I didn't know my way round & if I asked some-one they would say: - up midship or some nautical term which I wouldn't understand, you may think it's easy to find your way round but it's like dumping a stranger in the centre of London, but instead of having roads you have decks & hatches & ladders, I will eventually get use[d] to it all one day" (ID, 29 Nov 1943).

The disorientation Ivor described was one of the classic risks to seamen during this period. Being familiar with the geography of the ship and ascertaining alternative emergency routes was an important part of personal safety. This was easier in theory than practice post-1941 because many men set out on a completely unfamiliar ship. They were at risk of being blitzed in port and hit by missile or mine as soon as they departed from the United Kingdom. With large ships, like the *Berwick*, many seamen could only orientate themselves effectively around their own workstations and sleeping quarters (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p. 66-67).

Disorientation could be a real problem if a ship were torpedoed or sunk by other means. The best available statistics, which the Bennetts recommends treating cautiously, suggest that during this period almost seventy percent of ships sank in

the first fifteen minutes of being hit, in one study, and that almost forty-eight percent sank in the first fifteen minutes, in a second study (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p. 77). Crew below decks on the torpedoed ship *Khedive Ismail* had less than two minutes to escape, and many perished (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p.72). Clearly, it would be important for seamen like Ivor to try to get out very quickly. A second letter highlights the risks of disorientation:

> "I walked round for about 10 minutes this morning with a bar of soap, I have only just been shown where to take it but I am dashed if I could find my way back, I kept on going round in circles till I finished up on deck & then start off from my original place & then I found it" (ID, undated letter B 1943).

The sinking of Royal Navy ships tended to produce greater casualties than merchant ships. One key reason was that if you compared two ships of similar size, the merchant vessel usually carried smaller crews than the warship (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p.214). In addition to this, Royal Navy ships comprised a greater number of men trained in specialised roles which involved being below deck- e.g. operating technical equipment. Their action stations might necessitate working in

confined spaces, behind watertight doors designed to stop even damaged ships from sinking (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p.214).

Unfortunately, it was this very feature that made it difficult for Royal Navy seamen, like Ivor, to abandon ship because men in lower compartments might never receive or hear the evacuation order. Watertight doors could become inoperable if distorted or warped by structural stress or fire damage, if they had to be opened against the adverse list of a damaged ship, or using an oil-covered handle (Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p.215). The Leading Stoker of *HMS Zambezi*, another Welsh veteran, explains the struggle to reach the open deck from below (*Arctic Convoys*, 2013; cf. Bennett, G.H. & R., 1999, p.63).

Being at Sea

So how did Ivor react to the physical environment of being at sea, having come from a police, not naval, background? He commented:

> "I still cannot quite get over this blessed sea-sickness, I haven't exactly been sick, but I felt drunk & just couldn't walk right, & then on top of it all a thick head. I will get right one day though. I was thinking of you at

> about 4 o' clock this morning, I bet you were all nicely tucked away in a warm bed & there I was up on deck with a pair of binoculars round my neck" (ID, 11 Dec 1943).

Twelve days later, Ivor reported, "I think I have by now got over my sea sickness, as a matter of fact I rather like that rolling feeling, but it's funny when we are anchored again I seem to want to walk with a sway. I shall be a proper sailor when I come home" (ID, 23 Dec 1943). The motion of the ship could be severe:

> "Our big teapot is tied on to the deckhead . . . .we don't leave it on the table or it would fall over . . . I remember sometime back we were at sea & they piped, 'the ship's is now changing course & will roll heavily'. Oh my goodness did we know it, my stomach kept on moving up & down, in the finish I had to go fetch it all up, & believe me I was glad to see us on a nice steady course" (ID, 07 Jan 1944).

Heading out to sea again (likely off the coast of Iceland) Ivor mentioned:

> "We had some new chaps on board & one of them I actually saw fetching up blood, poor devil did I feel sorry for him, Eric was bad too, he is my partner now as look-out, & I reckon that every half hour he was on the glasses [binoculars] he was sick (ID, Jan 22 1944). Another Welsh veteran was similarly afflicted" (*Arctic Convoys*, 2013).

In February Ivor shared, "I was pretty rough the first few days, I couldn't keep a thing down & it's funny but all the lads were the same" (ID, 10 Feb 1944). This is written three days after the *Berwick* provided cruiser cover for convoy (RA 56) returning from Russia. Open sea appeared to be a problem again.

Duties on *HMS Berwick*

One job Ivor mentioned being repeatedly given on board was applying or removing paint (sometimes pitch). In an early letter from the *Berwick* he commented, "I don't like . . . going over the side to paint, you talk about your Dad painting out of doors, well what about painting the side of a ship up here, my bones got frozen, & there's not snow yet, damn good

job when I can draw my Rum" (ID, undated letter B 1943). Months later, he commented, "As for the Rum I don't like it one bit; if it wasn't for the fact that at times I have to face some real cold weather I would stop it" (ID, 10 Feb 1944).

Ivor initially found these manual jobs hard, and thought the skills of all the ex-police on board could be better used. The seamanship qualifications (the R.P.O) were uppermost in his mind when he added, "we just have to do these jobs & laugh over it, . . . I don't mind doing dirty or hard work as long as I am being taught something" (ID, undated C 1943). Ivor's description of one assignment depicted the massive scale of this 'County' class cruiser, "My job this morning was painting the funnel, can you imagine me on top of that funnel with a paint pot, you could almost get a bus down it, it was plastered with paint, have a look at that photo & see" (ID, 12 Feb 1944).

Some of Ivor's duties involved loading supplies on to the *Berwick*. Accidents could easily happen with this work:

> "This afternoon . . . we were stacking some boxes up, & they weighed well over a cwt, . . . using two pulleys . . . & we had got one right up when the rope round it slipped off & it slung towards me, I made one jump but it just caught me & threw me on my back. Fortunately

> all I had was a little bruise on my back, the P.O. in charge had the wind up good & proper. 'Good God Lofty are you alright' he said. I know I changed colour & so did he. We didn't take anymore chances after that, but we still managed to do our stacking" (ID, 07 Jan 1944).

One of the challenges was that goods had to be secured firmly enough to endure a rolling ship on the open sea, "Almost everything on board is secured to the deck, nothing is left lying about" (ID 07 Jan 1944). Two days later, Ivor met a Newbury policeman who, "had dropped a heavy box on his foot & broken the bone in his toe" (ID, 9 Jan 1944).

Ivor never explicitly referenced the ice-breaking duties so vividly recalled by other Welsh veterans, yet ice was a major hazard for all convoy vessels (*Arctic Convoys*, 2013). As they got further north spray from the sea would hit the superstructure and armament threatening to make a solid ice fence of the guard-rails. Men both on and off watch duty resorted to using pickaxes and hammers to chip it off. This was hard, tough, labour in the freezing cold for men and officers alike (Whinney, p. 155; cf. *Arctic Convoys*, 2013). Whilst they might protest, men realised that keeping the top-weight of ice

under control was vital. It prevented the ship from capsizing, killing all (Whinney, p.155; cf. Bennett, G.H., 2013, p.53).

We have an engineer's testimony that, as with other Russian convoy ships, the constant build-up of Arctic ice was a problem for *HMS Berwick* in 1943, this being worsened by limited daylight hours. The whole ship's company, including the engineer, were involved in the time-intensive job of chipping away at the *Berwick's* super-structure to keep her stable. Indeed, the ship was recalled to Rosyth, near Edinburgh, at one stage to have a de-icing steam pipe system fitted to stop the gun mountings from freezing solid and keep the armament mobile (Darling, L.C., 2000). If this engineer was actively involved in ice-breaking duties on the *Berwick*, it is likely Ivor would have been too, but may have self-censored any references to conceal his location.

Ivor frequently talked about his Watch duties on *HMS Berwick*. The main threat he was looking for was U-boats, which would be hard to see on the surface at night. With just its conning tower above water, the vessel might reach the edges of the convoy or even penetrate its grid of rows and columns without being spotted. Before specialised radar, the night surface attack was particularly appealing because unless a u-boat was fully submerged neither sonar nor ASDIC systems

could detect it. The ‘wolf pack’ strategy was deadly because U-boats would torpedo the convoy from different points as part of a co-ordinated attack (Walling, p.18).

Ivor used his glasses to look through binoculars in the cold and his comment about Gunnery training on 13th Feb 1944 told us his eyesight was not perfect. His night watch would be made particularly difficult by wolf-pack tactics. This entailed avoiding the moonlit side of the ships, taking cover in the shadows. The ‘wolf pack’ would regroup after an attack then report to headquarters (Walling, p.18).

The cold was a real issue with four-hour Watch duties from Midnight. Ivor’s extreme pleasure at being given warm clothing and outrage when important items of clothing, such as his skin-saving woollen gloves and balaclava, were stolen, are significant here (see ID 07 & 24 Jan 1944; cf. *Arctic Convoys*, 2013). Theft on board ship was so prevalent that Ivor took extra precautions, “I’ve got a sheep-skin coat & I’ve marked that with my name right across the back & the first one that pinches that . . . I shall just hit him & take him along to the Police Office, they are a damn rotten lot” (24 Jan 1944; cf. 02 Feb 1944). [Photo 2- Ivor on board the *Berwick*]. Ironic then, that Ivor’s family remembered him arriving home with a woollen

naval jumper labelled ‘Able Seaman Bradshaw’ inside (Davies, P.G., e-mail, 8 July 2019).

Watch duties were an extremely serious business. When a young Scot from Ivor’s Mess overslept, he missed his ‘anchor watch’ duties from 12 midnight to 4am and received 14 days punishment, including late-night scrubbing duties. Ivor commented, “Still that’s discipline, & of course him not getting up in time meant that the other chap was kept there till he turned up” (ID, 8 Jan 1944).

Ivor found it particularly tough in late January- early February 1944, when he is attending his seamanship class during the day and performing Watch duties at night (See letters of 23 Jan & 27 Jan 1944). He mentioned studying ‘Torpedo Work’ and being anxious to pass the exams for financial reasons. Despite all this, he managed to write home about *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, being ‘a good read’ (02 Feb 1944).

Christmas on *HMS Berwick*

On Christmas Eve Ivor wrote to Ivy:

> "I feel terrible, . . . not a drink, not even the smell of one . . . . It's not like Xmas, it's just like any other day of the week. We have been given two apples each & some assorted biscuits & I am sure that doesn't remind me of Xmas. Then tonight they sang carols, I felt like carols I can tell you, I hope to goodness that I shall never have another Xmas like this" (ID, 24 Dec 1943).

Ivor's love of food ensured a better mood on Christmas day. Having, "Turkey, pork, stuffing, peas, roast potatoes, Xmas Pudding & custards, lovely too," he fared better than another Welsh Veteran (cf. *Arctic Convoys*, 2013). "The Divisional Officer came round & gave each mess 150cigs. The chaps decorated the place up with flags & coloured lights. The afternoon I spent having a chat with Eric, Jack & Reg." Ivor was keen to observe the Captain, "going round with all the officers wishing everybody a Merry Xmas" and ensuring he called into the Sick Bay.

In lieu of a traditional nativity scene, the joyful news of a newborn was sent by other means, "By the way Jack's wife had a baby boy last Weds & his people sent him a telegram, he hasn't had it yet but it was flashed to him from another ship . . . He is thrilled with it all" (ID 25 Dec 1943). The term 'flashed' suggested the use of Morse Code, not Semaphore (flags), for

which Ivor did the requisite training in 1944 (see Walling, p.12; ID, 14th Jan & 13th Feb 1944; cf. *Arctic Convoys*, 2013).

On 26 December 1943, Ivor omitted to mention *HMS Berwick* was put on standby against the fearsome German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst,* whose 'Channel dash' had been Hitler's triumph (Dimbleby, J., p.273-275). However, he did tell us what happened when he was confident that his 'stale' news would get through the censor:

> "this was our Boxing Day greeting, 'the ship is under hour's sailing orders', what it was we didn't know, but we guessed it was something operational, eventually we found out that it was the *Scharnhorst*, thank goodness that she went under, otherwise we would no doubt have been in the thick of it, we were kept informed all the time how the battle was going & when we knew that she was on fire we knew that we wouldn't sail" (ID, 20 Feb 1944).

For Ivor, the victor's Boxing Day elation was tempered by knowledge that with every ship sunk there are losses on both the German and Allied sides (cf. Walling, p.259-260):

> "Well what do you think of the British Navy now, one more German Battle Ship gone under, you should have heard the cheering here last night when the Commander gave the news over the loudspeakers we got all the first hand information here, I could tell you quite a bit about it all, but . . . I will leave it to the Press & Wireless, but it must have been hell let lo[o]se, wonderful to watch, but not so good to be in, & it's all at the cost of lives" (ID, 27 Dec 1943).

Ironically, despite his closer proximity to battle, Ivor was reliant on the newspapers for full details of the ship's demise:

> "I was very pleased that you sent me those two papers about the sinking of the *Scharnhorst*, it was all very interesting as I hadn't heard any of the details, I knew about it before you did, but I wanted . . . the full details" (ID, 6 Jan 1944).

HMS Berwick's **Convoy Runs**

From November 1943 to the end of February 1944, Ivor supported the convoys, being attached to four convoy runs. Personally, these were troubling times, with the news that his

newborn son was battling with pneumonia. A week later Ivor was diagnosed with 'nervous gastritis' (ID, 17 & 24 Jan 1944; Davies, P.G., e-mail 17 Jan 2019).

Ships travelling in convoy were normally placed half a nautical mile (1,000 yards) apart, with 500 yards between each ship and the one behind. If you took a medium-sized convoy of eight columns, each with six rows of ships, the area covered would be four miles by three and a half miles. This expands to nearly thirty-six square miles if you include the escort screen (Walling, p.11). *HMS Berwick*, an armed ship, would have been part of this escort screen. Cruisers were not part of the convoy formation. They kept a distance of approximately thirty to forty miles behind, guarding against attack from German surface ships (Trelford, Dan. PQ17: Arctic Convoy Disaster).

Convoy JW 56A set out from Loch Ewe on 12 January ahead of its escort ships. It comprised approximately twenty ships, minesweepers, corvettes, destroyers and a sloop which were a mixture of nationalities – one Dutch, thirteen American, five British and one Norwegian. This convoy signalled to report delays, since it ran into heavy storms off the Faroe Islands on 15 January, and many of the ships set off for Akureyri, North Iceland, where they took shelter until January 21 (Ruegg and Hague, p.59). The *Berwick* jointly escorted four weather-

damaged merchant ships, which had returned to Loch Ewe, to Iceland reporting to Eyia Fiord on 21 January (ADM 199/77). From here Ivor wrote Ivy a short letter, "all I can tell you is that it is a strange land, I can't describe it to you, or say anything about the people, but I have seen some very interesting things & wonderful scenery, but I wish I could understand the languages" (ID, 21 Jan 1944).

On 22nd Jan 1944 he wrote:

> "I have just returned off shore & now I feel very pleased with my old self, I was able to get you that gift & it's all wrapped up in paper & locked up . . . If I had about £7=0=0 on me I would have given you a real treat but I didn't have the money . . . , but if I should come here again . . . I will get it. It's a very expensive place, one can buy plenty of clothes coupon-free, but most of it is English & more than double the price you pay at home . . . . There's plenty of nice cakes exceptionally sweet, we don't get a lot of sweet stuff on board so they go down very nice. You should see the little children, they come running after us shouting for money, of course it's all in their own language, but one of them . . . said, "penny" I gave him some, but I suppose they would rather have their money as they can spend it. I

> also got some views of the place, they were not quite what I would have liked, but it was the best I could find."

In fact, Ivor was so carried away trying to list his friend Eric's onshore purchases, the letter got censored (ID 22 Jan 1944). A later letter suggests Ivy's present was some kind of animal fur, "By now you should have received my parcel to settle your curiosity . . . if you cover the skin side with a piece of coloured Satin it would make a lovely rug for Paul's pram, it's lovely & white & will wash so I was told" (ID 20 Feb 1944; cf. ID, 09 Feb 1944).

HMS Berwick set out with the convoy from Iceland on 23 January, However, reoccurring dynamo problems meant she was ordered back to Akureyri that same day for repairs (Kindell; Admiralty: ADM 199/ 77 & 199/2027).

A week later, the *Berwick* escorted another eastbound convoy (JW 56B) part-way to Russia. Sailing from Loch Ewe on 22nd Jan, it comprised seventeen ships, fourteen of which were American and three British in addition to local escorts, such as minesweeper ships, and cruisers (Ruegg and Hague, p.60). Ivor's account of the terrain mirrors that of other Welsh veterans:

> "I heard my brother Gwyn say about Mountains of waves & didn't believe it possible but it's true, & eating your dinner & hanging on tight to your plate, & sometimes find you dinner all in a heap on the other chap's plate, that's not exaggerating . . . the old ship does everything bar turn over, I just hang on tight & hope for the best, of course one is quite safe but it's not a very comfortable feeling, water all over the Mess, when you sling you hammock you get into it with you boots on & then take them off after getting in" (ID 29 Jan 1944; cf. *Arctic Convoys*, 2013).

The 900-mile stretch between the coasts of Greenland and Norway is one of the most turbulent seas in the world. A relentless succession of gales, bearing rain and icy precipitation, sweep north-eastward. These lash-up the sea into waves of a tremendous height, which in turn batter the rocky Norwegian coast. Once these storms enter the Barents Sea via the North Cape and they are forced into the upper atmosphere, their destructive energy is spent (Schofield, p.15).

Fifteen U boats were sent to attack convoy JW 56B, spotted by aircraft on its way to Russia. The enemy remarked

upon the escort's tenacity, but overstated their 'kills', claiming a total of seven destroyers (rather than two – one damaged one actually sunk) and four merchant ships (rather than three actually sunk) from convoys JW 56A and JW 56B. On 1 February convoy JW 56B reached the Kola Inlet, with the Archangel ships landing on 2 February (Schofield p.184; Ruegg and Hague, p.60).

The letter of 31st Jan 1944 was likely sent from Iceland (logbooks, *HMS Berwick*):

> "It was Pay Day today . . . I picked up the large sum of 32/=, I feel quite flush & if I changed it to go ashore it will be worth about 15/= so I best stay put on board, besides now that I have been there the novelty has worn off, I could go every other day but I don't bother, it isn't like England where you can go & sit down somewhere & read a daily paper & go & have a quiet drink, their customs are entirely different to ours."

A week passed between the above letter and the next. The two eastbound convoys JW 56A and JW 56B merged into one large westbound convoy for the return journey. Sailing on 3 February, they supplemented their combined escorts with three extra destroyers. Of the thirty-nine ships that sailed as

part of convoy RA 56, the majority were American, (twenty), seventeen were British, with one ship from Panama and the other from Norway (Ruegg & Hague p.60). Ivor's ship set out from Akureyri, Iceland, straight into a storm to meet the homebound convoy, providing escort cover from 5-7 February before being diverted to Hvalfiord, Iceland in lieu of *HMS Bermuda* whose captain required urgent hospital treatment (ADM 199/2027).

Certainly, this weekend would have been an anxious time for Ivor. Enemy intercepts prove the u-boat force knew about the sailing of the convoy, this being confirmed by aircraft sighting on 6 December. However, because of a lucky mistake about the direction of travel being reported as East rather than West, the unscathed convoy arrived in Scotland on 11 February (Ruegg and Hague, p. 61; Schofield, p.185).

The fact that Ivor hadn't washed for two days or shaved, "for over a week", is untypical suggesting it was a difficult run. He told Ivy, "when we were at sea this time & the old ship rolling away like anything & we had to hang on to the life lines for prayers my thoughts & prayers were for you, you mean all to me in life" (ID, 9 Feb, 1944). By Ivor's account, it had been a hard trip:

> "Darling please forgive me for not writing to you when I am at sea, honestly I feel like nothing on earth, hardly any sleep & shifts which are all over the show, more often than not I sleep in my clothes & by all account[s] we should in case of an emergency" (ID, 10 Feb 1944).

He continued:

> "I can't tell you where I went to this trip . . . but I have never in the whole of my life travelled so much . . . what I have seen of Foreign Land anybody is welcome to it, I don't think there's anywhere so picturesque as England so you haven't missed anything & where I went to an Englishman isn't very much like[d], but they could take our money very well, they were certainly not backward in that direction, & cane us good & proper."

The abundant clothes sold without coupons did not tempt Ivor; stockings for Ivy would have cost two-thirds of his week's wages.

HMS Berwick's history with Iceland may explain Ivor's comment about hostility towards the English. The ship had played an important strategic role in the war, assisting with the occupation of Iceland by allied troops as part of Winston

Churchill's operation *Fork* on 8 May 1940. She was one of two cruisers and two destroyers which seized the island (Walling, p.29-30).

On 13 February 1944 Ivor wrote from the Orkney Islands (Scapa Flow), excited about the possibilities for buying an unusual present for Ivy on his next travels to Iceland:

> "By the way if I go to the same place again I will try & afford you a seal skin handbag, they run about £4=0=0, the one you've got is trash alongside it, I was shown some beauties & gloves to match, by hook or by crook . . . I will save my pennies & get you one . . . Still there's no telling where we will go next, I have no idea, it can be anywhere."

Ivor went out for 'big eats' on Saturday 19 February, the day before Convoy JW 57 sailed from Loch Ewe. There were 45 ships in total, over two-thirds of which were American, twelve British and one Dutch. Distant cruiser escorts including the *Berwick* were additional to this number (Ruegg and Hague, p.61). Part of the convoy's remit was to deliver three Russian-manned coastal minesweepers to Stalin's Northern fleet, along

with three patrol craft (Walling, p.263). On 20 February 1944 Ivor observed from Scapa Flow (*HMS Berwick*, logbooks):

> "it's really lovely here today, the port hole is open there's a lovely ripple on the water & now & again I can see a drifter steering past going to the different ships & behind all this there's a very beautiful background which I must not describe, some people would give pounds to see this, but I would give pounds to be at home, but there doesn't seem to be any hopes."

Ivor clearly missed home and was frustrated that, "I don't even have the chance to play the part of a father or a husband . . . & there's you having to be both a mother & father" (ID, 20 Feb 1944).

During the last week of February, there is a significant absence of letters. Welsh veteran James Row gave a harrowing account of the destroyer *Mahratta* being sunk the night before *HMS Berwick* reached the scene, on 26th (Ruegg and Hague, p. 62; Kindell). Row's ship listened to the dying over a radio telephone, which in some respects he claims was worse than seeing them (*Arctic Convoys*, 2013).

Conclusion

Ivor corresponded regularly with family, friends and neighbours throughout this period. His letters to Ivy are our main source of information about this Welshman's Arctic experiences. Ivor's involvement as a convoy escort from December 1943 to mid-March 1944 is of particular interest.

Ivor was once praised by his ship's surgeon, who detected his hybrid Welsh/Buckinghamshire 'twang', for being, "One of those Welshmen that has adapted yourself to the English Language" (ID, 9th Jan 44). Indeed, it could be said that Ivor's strength in dealing with an alien, dangerous, life at sea lay in his previous experiences of mobility and ability to adapt, having adjusted to English culture through economic necessity. Ivor did not escape the harsh conditions associated with surviving an Arctic winter under attack, in appalling weather conditions. However, he outlived his convoy journeys.

Ivor continued to live in High Wycombe, but remained fiercely proud of his Welsh heritage. He took every opportunity to switch effortlessly into his native tongue whenever he chanced upon one of his extensive network of Welsh-speaking acquaintances up until his death, in 1989. Ivor's sons spent many happy months with their Welsh grandparents, at one

point attending school in Wales. In 2018 Ivor's son Paul published the novel *Cockles and Muscles* in which his grandparents are fictionalised as 'the Prossers' (Davies, P.G.).

Some conclude that the greatest contribution made by the convoys was political, though the supplies that got through (including a cargo of 7,000 aircraft and 5,000 tanks) certainly helped bolster the Red Army's resources. A stoic commitment to the convoy runs proved to Stalin that the Allies were serious about a firm political alliance with the Soviet Union in order to defeat Hitler. The convoys also made a strategic contribution in diverting precious German air and naval resources from other key areas, such as the eastern front and Mediterranean (Plant, 2017; Bennett, 2013, p.55).

The strength of Ivor's first-hand account is not its contribution to understanding military strategy or its insight into specific air or U-boat attacks. He was subject to censorship and, unlike other veterans, regrettably Ivor's testimony was not recorded post-war. It is his dedication to letter-writing and police officer's attention to detail which make Ivor a valuable source of information about the convoys from the lived experience of the time.

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