

## The Lucky 'WAGER'

By former Sto. I. E. W. Elwick

No, this is not the story of a case of one-upmanship with a turf accountant. It is the story of a Royal Navy fleet destroyer, ordered under the 1941 Emergency Programme and laid down at John Brown's shipyard at Clydebank: launched 1/11/43 and completed 14/4/44.

As an Engineer's writer, I was handed a draft chit in Portsmouth Barracks which read HMS Spartiate 'for disposal'. (How was the RN going to dispose of me?) It turned out that HMS Spartiate was a small office on St. Enoch's station, Glasgow, where they allocated us to our various ships.

My original draft was to be to HMS Valentine, but after a short time a Canadian pre-commissioning party came and took over, and that destroyer commissioned HMCS Algonquin. I was moved into the next office in the Admiralty offices to join Lt (E) T H Butlin and stand by the next destroyer being built. Now prior to commissioning, a vessel is referred to by its engine number, and in the case of Wager, that was J1602.

Slowly, more and more of the pre-commissioning party arrived to join the Engineer Officer and myself until the day came to proceed for the 'tail of the bank' trials, when the ship is put through its paces by dockyard personnel with the RN crew looking on. The acceptance trials completed, the ship then commissions and is accepted in the Royal Navy, in this case as HMS Wager; her pennant list was R98, later changed to D30.

After a spell at Rosyth to have our radar equipment fitted, we headed to Scapa to start our working up period. This was completed on the 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1944, when we left Scapa for operation Hoops. This was a strike by the Escort Carrier Squadron against shipping off the South Norwegian coast. An enemy merchant was damaged and others near-missed. Two flying boats and three enemy fighters were shot down and an oil tank on shore was hit. We lost four aircraft. We returned to Scapa on the 9<sup>th</sup> May.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> May, we left Scapa for operation Potluck. This operation was planned as another strike against shipping on the Norwegian coast (between Rorvik and Frohavet) by the Escort Carrier Squadron, the main object being to create a diversion for Operation Brawn, being carried out simultaneously further north. In this it was completely successful, as Vice Admiral, Second in Command's force remained apparently undetected in their operating area for about 48 hours.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> May, we left Scapa for operation Tiger Claw, but this had to be altered because of weather conditions, with 40 foot rollers coming at us that were truly awe-inspiring. Instead of Tiger Claw, we carried out operation Lombard, a strike against enemy shipping in the Aalesund area. We returned to Scapa on the 2<sup>nd</sup> June.

Perhaps this would be a good time to explain that at the time we hadn't got a clue where we had been or what was happening. The only information we got was what the captain

told us over the tannoy. All the time, we were holding station some distance from the strike force that we were screening. The carriers looked like small rectangles on the horizon, while the aircraft were just tiny black dots going along the flight decks, taking off and landing.

Operation Kruschen was our next trip, which was against shipping off the Norwegian coast. We left Scapa on the 7<sup>th</sup> June and returned on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Wager should have been the duty destroyer, but this was when she had her first bit of luck. We were ordered alongside HMS Maidstone, our depot ship, for a boiler clean, and our place was taken by HMS Wizard.

During the night, apparently the shore asdics got a ping, so they opened the boom defence and let Wizard out. She proceeded to the given position and dropped depth charges, which cleared the ping. Then, she was ordered back and to anchor outside the boom defence. The order was given to 'let go both', meaning for the cable party to drop both anchors, which they did. But the depth charge boys misunderstood and let go two more depth charges, and the engine room also misunderstood and gave 'slow astern both' causing the ship to drag the anchors. Sitting back thus, Wizard was blown up by her own depth charges.

In the morning, the Engineer Officer wrote a letter of condolence and asked me to take it over and deliver it to the EO on the Wizard. By this time she was on the floating dock in Scapa. Having delivered the letter, I walked back along the upper deck to about level with the sick bay and found the quarter deck dipped down at an angle; that was where she had caught the full blast of her own depth charges.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> June, we left Scapa for Skaalefiord to rendezvous with the cruiser HMS Jamaica and the destroyer HMS Whelp. This was to be operation Ploughshare (DB). The object was to take stores and relief personnel to Spitzbergen in the Arctic Circle, arriving 20<sup>th</sup> June.

It took seven hours to do the unloading, and it was during this time that the skipper spoke to us over the tannoy and told us what was happening. Cracking a funny, he said it was purely psychological and it wasn't really cold—we just thought it was! Walking about the ship with our oilskins over our overcoats, we found it very hard to believe.

We left Spitzbergen on the 20<sup>th</sup> June and arrived back at Scapa on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Scapa was never the most hospitable of places at the best of times, but on that occasion we were glad to be back there.

On 30<sup>th</sup> June, we left Scapa with HMS Wakeful, escorting HMS Howe to the Clyde, where we were granted embarkation leave. And so ended our service with the Home Fleet.

We became attached to the 27<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, and on the 26<sup>th</sup> July we sailed from Greenock, with Wakeful, escorting the liner Stirling Castle which was

taking the civilian population of Gibraltar back to the Rock. On the 1<sup>st</sup> August, Wager and Wakeful left Gibraltar for Algiers.

Wager and Wakeful left Algiers on the 13<sup>th</sup> August and were waiting outside when out come the battleship Ramillies, which we escorted to join the allied fleet assembled for the South of France landings. The destroyers turned away and headed for Malta, on to Alexandria and Port Said, then through the Suez Canal to Aden. After a couple of days stay, we went on via Colombo to Trincomalee. This was to be our base for our service with the Eastern Fleet, later to be designated the East Indies Fleet.

Runs ashore in Trincomalee at first were rather hectic, as the Fleet Canteen was not used to such large numbers of ratings and beer had to be rationed to two bottles per man.

The fleet carriers and their escorts and destroyer screen were split into two strike forces, and on one occasion we had got back and tied up to the buoys when we were ordered to refuel and catch up with the strike force that has just gone out. Unfortunately, we sat back over the buoy and took a chip out of one of the propellers. This caused terrible vibration and the strike force had to slow down to our speed. A seaman PO went up the mast and secured a rope which was attached to the winch and tightened up, which stopped most of the mast movement, but it was noticed later that it had in fact started to pull the galley away from the upper deck.

Arrangements were made for us to proceed to Bombay for repairs. We left Bombay on the 18<sup>th</sup> November and arrived back at Trincomalee on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

On one of the strikes which we went on, the captain told us that the target was the oilfields at Sabang. This was the only occasion when I ever saw any sign of land in the distance. Large clouds of black smoke could be seen, so that attack had obviously been successful. Normally, the force was well clear of land.

It was while we were at Trincomalee that the Engineer Officer was promoted to Lieut. Comm. (E).

We left Trincomalee on the 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, for strikes against Palembang, which apparently were very successful, then instead of returning to Trinco., we found ourselves arriving at Freemantle on 4<sup>th</sup> February. After refuelling, we sailed for Sydney, arriving on 10<sup>th</sup> February. We then had a busy replenishment period and of course wonderful shore leave.

While at Sydney, the Engineer Officer was promoted to Commander (E) and drafted on HMS Kempenfelt, the flotilla leader, as Flotilla Engineer Officer. His place was taken by Lieut. (E) R G Bastow, from HMS King George V.

Leaving Sydney on the 28<sup>th</sup> February, we sailed for Manus in the Admiralty Islands. This was to be the base for what was known as the Fleet Train. Here it was very hot and humid, and we had quite a while to wait for the US Admiral King to agree to let the BPF

take part in operations. Eventually, we were given the job of strafing the airfields on the Sakishimo Gunto, which meant long periods at sea, well out of sight of land. Also, refuelling and store replenishment were done at sea.

During this time, we went to action stations just before sunrise in the morning and just before sunset in the evening. These were the vulnerable times for kamikaze attacks. I only witnessed two such attacks. The first was a high level one when the pilot put his plane into a dive at the fleet and opened up the throttle. The fleet altered course slightly and it crashed into the sea, sending up a huge column of water. The second came in out of the sun, passing over us mast high. No sooner had it got over than the fleet opened fire and hit its bomb load, blowing it to smithereens.

During this period, our biggest enemy was boredom. Just steaming up and down, holding station, this had to be expected and materials were available to do leatherwork, half sole and heel shoes, etc., and officers were instructed to show us how to do the work.

By now, as regards supplies, things were getting serious. For a couple of days, our main meal was corned beef and tinned diced beetroot on our mess.

Below decks, it was thought unusual that the navy should run out of 'Pussers' peas, dehydrated potatoes and carrots, in fact unthinkable, so something was drastically wrong. Indeed it was—the Fleet Train, mentioned earlier, was unable to cope with the fleet's demand.

This might be a suitable time to explain about the feeding arrangements. On the capital ships it was general messing, which meant some poor devils had to tackle the job of peeling sufficient potatoes for, say, 2,000 officers and men. On destroyers it was canteen messing, when each mess catered for themselves, so the spud peeling was a small, friendly affair, started by someone saying, "Right lads, what about squaring 'em up?" And this was a fair description of some of the lads' efforts.

Another important thing in the tropics was water. In this, it could be said that the Wager was 'lucky' as she was the first destroyer to be fitted with what was known as 'the gland steam evacuation system'. An equal pressure of steam was applied to the outside of the glands on the engine and the lot evacuated through an ejector condenser and the water returned to the make-up feed tank (water for the boilers). This meant the temperature in the engine room was a few degrees lower than in other ships.

This caused us to have considerable correspondence with the Admiral Superintendent Contract Built Ship (ASCBS) at Newcastle-on-Tyne, requesting facts and figures like how often did water have to be rationed.

Perhaps I should explain that the evaporator plant could not be run continuously; it had to be shut down and the brine blown out, and then started again. This took time, and checks had to be made by taking a sample in a test tube and putting a drop of acid in it. If it turned milky, there was still salt in the water, but if the test showed a slight milky

reaction, then the duty ERA would say it was ok to discharge to ship's tanks. This was the water for drinking, showers, etc. Only when the acid test caused no reaction at all could it be discharged to MUF because any trace of salt in the feed water would cause priming in the boilers.

Back to our travels—we dropped back to Leyte and took on some supplies and, with HMS Whelp, we escorted HMS Illustrious heading south, re-fuelling at Manus and proceeding on to Sydney. There we parted company with the fleet carrier, which was returning to the UK for repairs, and Whelp and Wager went across to Portland dockyard in Auckland, New Zealand, for a refit. This was a very welcome break after the weeks up in the Pacific.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> July, the refit completed, we bade farewell to Auckland and headed back up, as we thought, to rejoin the fleet. To our surprise, we met up with HMS Duke of York, the flagship of the BPF, and proceeded to refuel from her, Wager on the port side, Whelp on the starboard side. The captain told us over the tannoy that our next landfall would be the island of Guam, the occasion of our visit being for Admiral Fraser to confer on honorary knighthood on Admiral Chester Nimitz, USN.

What we didn't know, below decks, was what was happening in the real world. In fact, the top brass knew that the war was going to come to an abrupt end. The same day that we re-fuelled from the flagship, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima; the day before we arrived at Guam, the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

Those of us liberty men who went ashore on the first day had the chance to be taken across the island to Gab Gab Bowl to see the American army show *This is the Army*, which had an all-male cast. After the war, it came over to the Paladium and did a season there.

We left Guam and proceeded at a steady pace till we were told to join the rest of the allied Fleet in Tokyo Bay because the Japanese were ready to surrender. An old coaster came out bringing the Japanese officials to receive instructions for the surrender the following day.

On the following morning, Wager was the duty destroyer and had to go into Tokyo harbour and patrol up and down. The first thing to notice was the brilliant paintwork of the hospital ship lying alongside. The rest of the harbour was a complete and utter shambles. Large sections of jetty timber floating about had to be prised away from the ship's side in case they were booby traps. Half-built ships had been sent down the slipways and were half-submerged in the water.

One of the prisoners of war taken onto the hospital ship passed away and we had to supply the firing squad for the funeral, and six Japanese officers had to carry the coffin, draped in the Union Jack, to the graveside.

Our stay in Tokyo was very short-lived.

Ah, there goes 'Special sea-dutymen to your stations. Hands to station for leaving harbour.' I have to go down to the engine room now to record the engine movements. The Engineer Officer will be standing beside me, checking that the telegraphs transmitted from the bridge are complied with correctly. The Chief Engine Room Artificer will also be present.

We were ordered to proceed with all haste to join Rear Admiral Harcourt's force which was re-occupying Hong Kong. During our stay there, we had two duties to perform. Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser had to go up to Canton for a meeting with Generalissimo Chiang Kai Chek and he chose Wager to take him as far as we could; two air sea rescue vessels followed behind to take him the final part of the journey. The river up to Canton is very shallow. The water is a muddy yellow colour and at times we lost the river bank on either side in the heat haze.

On the forecastle, a seaman was taking soundings and, when the skipper decided it was not safe for us to proceed further, the Admiral went onto one of the small craft and continued his journey. We waited for him to come back, and then we returned to Hong Kong.

Priority was given to collecting ex-prisoners-of-war and internees and getting them on their way home. Therefore, our second duty was to go with the light fleet carrier HMS Unicorn down to Hai Phong, in French Indo-China to collect prisoners-of-war. Now, the harbour there is shallow and the carrier had to lay off, so we went in as far as we could then an LCT from the carrier ferried them out to us, and they sat on the upper deck.

We asked the first ones on board if there were any British among them and the answer was no; the British hadn't been able to live on the handful of rice a day which was the ration, and only the Asians had survived.

Our lads handed round cigarettes. Another attempt to be hospitable was slices of bread and butter with strawberry jam, which was immediately stopped by Surgeon Lt. Gayman, our ship's doctor, who told the lads that such rich food would kill the lot. The doctor on the Unicorn would arrange their diet.

When they had all got on Board, we took them out and transferred them to the carrier which proceeded to Shanghai, while we returned on our own to Hong Kong.

Our journey home was to start with the 27<sup>th</sup> flotilla on their own, sailing to Darwin in Northern Australia. Now this was about the maximum distance for these destroyers with full tanks of fuel.

For this part of our journey home, the flotilla steamed line abreast. Every morning, I had to go aft to collect a piece of paper from the chief stoker with the figure of the fuel remaining written on it, and take it up and hand it to the skipper on the bridge at 8am. This gave me something to do. One morning I arrived on the bridge to find the skipper

almost tearing his beard out. I asked the duty signal man what was wrong with the old man, and he said he had just been ruled wrong in the quiz.

Now I must explain that they were holding a quiz, with D27 on the flotilla leader, HMS Kempenfelt, giving out the questions over the short wave radio, and the destroyers had to give the answers by flag hoisting. This gave the bunting tossers something to do. I asked the signalman what was the question and he said, "What did Cleopatra die of?" The skipper said "Snake bite—run up snake bite," so that was done. He was ruled wrong because Cleopatra was stung by an asp. An asp doesn't bite; it stings. The CO was not a happy man.

We all made Darwin alright and refuelled, then proceeded on down past the Great Barrier Reef to Sydney. There, the depot ship HMS Maidstone was waiting for us. Kempenfelt tied up alongside her, we tied up to her and another destroyer was on the outside of us.

It was early evening and I was getting ready to go ashore when there was a terrific explosion. The Wager lifted up and dropped down again. I quickly put on my boiler suit and rushed up on to the upper deck. There were flames and smoke coming from Kempenfelt's bofors gun deck. Commander Butlin, my former EO, was crouched down spraying a hose on the forward torpedo war heads. I ran over to him and he said, "Here Elwick, keep these other war heads cool," and handed me the hose pipe.

What had happened was the starboard torpedo had launched itself in the parked position, smashed into the bofors gun deck, the war head split, the 400lb of TNT got ignited by the electrical sparks and it sent the torpedo body back, knocking the chocks off the end of the tube and sending it forward through the engine room cowling, through the boiler room cowling, through three small offices and the end where the propeller had been was stuck in the funnel. Again the Wager was lucky—it happened to the ship next door.

On the way home, escorting HMS Duke of York, they picked up a faint radio signal, apparently from Christmas Island, calling for medical supplies and food. Both Wager and Whelp got the order to swing round in a bay and drop a depth charge each. Out came the buckets with holes in the bottom and ropes on the handles, which was normal routine after depth charge trials, as we doubled back to scoop up the dead and stunned fish. Getting back to the spot, there were only a few sprat-size fish there, no fish for the islanders to catch.

We continued our journey back home via Suez to Portsmouth, to pay off into the reserve in Porchester Creek. I suppose it was fitting that Wager and Whelp should be tied up alongside each other.

For those interested in the armament of those destroyers, they had four 4.7 inch guns, twin oerlikons (these replaced the searchlight), twin bofors, eight 21 inch torpedo tubes and four depth charge throwers, two on each side of the quarterdeck.

For the mechanically minded, they were fitted with two Admiralty three drum type boilers, Parson impulse reaction improved turnbines with single reductions gearing and underslung single flow condensers. The propellers were made of manganese bronze.

At the start, I assured you this was nothing to do with gambling. The Wager was, in fact, named after Admiral Sir Charles Wager (1666-1743), First Lord of the Admiralty, 1733-1743.