

to relieve the *Barham* of the duties of Senior Naval Officer (Afloat).

Something like new hope sprang up in the ship as we prepared to tear ourselves away and Haifa Orders (Troubles and Snags) and Haifa Additional Dud Evolution Schemes (Short Title—Hotashades) were bundled up and returned with heartfelt thanks to the *Arethusa*.

## CHAPTER VIII

## PORT SAID

*AJAX* arrived at this canal-side city on 2nd November. A day later came our first experience of Egyptian officialdom. We watched our mail, after passing within a few yards of *Ajax*, delivered into the avid hands of the Egyptian Post Office, who, being good Mohammedans and obeying regulations to the letter, sent it straight up to Haifa. A few months' experience of Egypt suggests that her contribution to the League of Nations will not, as yet, be surprisingly large.

*Ajax* had been detailed to relieve *Barham*, and after a short period for turnover, we duly became Senior Naval Officer (Afloat) . . . (? was there a Senior Naval Officer (Submerged)). Apart from a large amount of extra cyphering, this didn't mean very much. Our squadron consisted of one destroyer, the *Active*, which lay tucked away out of sight near Navy House, and various submarines which drew alongside for a brief day or two before or after their passage through the Canal.

Aside from that, our duties could hardly be described as arduous, and during this break in exercise routine we got a chance to see something of "the sink of Asia."

As a city Port Said has little to its credit. It sucks its life-blood out of the canal traffic like a leech on an artery. The tourist-attracting shops, the restaurants and the cabarets keep the town's heart beating. Permanent residents are either merchants or Canal employees—whose salaries, like those of their Panama Canal colleagues, made them the most influential element in Port Said.

At first sight the "City of Scarlet Sin" seems to be one long water-front, which at night is lit by huge overhead limelights,

like some arterial road in England. Indeed, night seems really to be the best time to look at this bottle-neck city—bottle-neck in more ways than one. The water-front is ablaze with neon lights, among which that of Simon Artz, General Store, stands out as the most conspicuous. Down the streets leading away from the canal, Indians, Japanese and Arabs vie with each other to sell you scent, amber or cameras. While farther along cabarets invite you to test Port Said's reputation.

There is a large French colony in Port Said (as administration of the Canal is in their hands), and during our stay the *contre-torpilleur* *Guepard* was in harbour. A tennis match, played against them, was won. Officers also got up a game of donkey polo at the sporting club.

Meanwhile, Italian ship after Italian ship went past laden with excited wops, whose enthusiasm took the form of an incessant caterwauling. "Il Duce," "Il Duce," "Il Duce" were the only sounds recognized out of the babel announcing the arrival of yet another. The Italian Consulate was on the front and the staff appeared to have nothing better to do except to shout "Mussolini" across to the visiting team, who flung back this challenge to their shouting capacity with a thousand dynamic "Duces." This rather uninspiring exchange of remarks took place on the arrival of every Italian ship and continued till its departure. As there were many days in which over five Italian ships passed through, Port Said residents got less than their usual slumber. One old gentleman of my acquaintance, who owned the top flat of one of the water-front buildings, used to be especially irritated. On the arrival of each ship he would shamle out on to his verandah, fix it with a glassy stare, mutter "Damned impertinence" five times, and then, shrugging his sad old shoulders, he would slam shut his windows, determined to keep "Il Duce" out of at least one Englishman's castle.

As opposed to this *bravura* display by the Italians the only show put up by the British Navy was of a totally different nature. This consisted of the arrival of the *Durban* on 12th November and her departure the following day with *Hastings* in tow. This sloop, which paid off shortly after she ran

aground in the Red Sea, seemed a sorry, crumpled and rusty advertisement for the British Navy. The *Durban*, with *Hastings* in tow, left in the early morning, looking like a dog with a can on its tail.

## EGYPT—THE POLITICAL SITUATION

EGYPT at this time was in a turmoil of student riots—an outcrop of the general dissatisfaction in the country over the political state of affairs. The following extracts from a report received later on summarize the situation and suggest some facets of the Egyptian character which we came to know so much better as the months went by :

The students' demonstrations started on 13th November and continued intermittently during the first two weeks of December. Instigated in the first instance by the Wafd, they had served their purpose and had now become an embarrassment. But the Wafd were unable to stop them and the "tail" now began to "wag the dog." Student leaders, too, such as Farid Zaaluk and Nourredin Tarraf, were now beginning to take a lead, and soon the political chiefs found themselves being forced together under menace by the students. When it became apparent that a union of all the parties would alone appease the students, Maitre Makram Ebcid, Dr. Ahmed Maher, and others, commenced *pourparlers* with Mohammed Pasha Mahmoud. The latter, who had never been sincere in his "call" to the parties, now found that he was to be taken at his word. But as the formation of a National *bloc* seemed certain to him to involve the fall of the Nessim cabinet, an end for which he has for some time been striving, and also partly through fear of the students, he allowed himself to be persuaded to compromise on the important principle of "independence before Constitution."

The other political leaders, than whom none was more joyful to emerge from "the wilderness" than Ismail Pasha Sidky, had perforce to come into line. On about the 9th of

the month the United Front, as it is called, came into being, and after twelve years' incessant warfare the political leaders of Egypt were (officially) united in complete harmony.

The purpose of the United Front was to demand the restoration of the 1923 Constitution, and the signing of the 1930 Nahas-Henderson draft treaty. To these ends memorials were composed to King Fuad and the British Government, asking the former for the Constitution and the latter for the treaty. They were couched in moderate and dignified language but necessarily took some time to compose. In the interim, Nessim Pasha, finding himself suddenly faced with a union of all parties and unable, as he thought, to obtain the restoration of the Constitution, felt that he could no longer remain in office.

On 11th December, therefore, at a Cabinet meeting, the decision was taken to resign. On the evening of the same day, the Residency, hearing that the Prime Minister intended to resign on the Constitutional issue, pointed out to him through an intermediary, that neither in Sir Samuel Hoare's Guildhall speech, nor in his statement in Parliament on 5th December, was any veto on the 1923 Constitution envisaged; it was a mere expression of disapproval, and if the Prime Minister wished to ask King Fuad for the restoration of the Constitution, there would be no objection on the part of H.M. Government.

Nessim Pasha, who had always considered British disapproval as tantamount to a veto, called a Cabinet meeting on the following morning (12th December). The decision to resign was reversed, and a letter was composed to King Fuad, praying for the restoration of the 1923 Constitution.

At about noon the Prime Minister set out and presented this petition to the King. It referred to the King's expression in April, that it was his "dearest wish" that the Constitution should be returned, and His Majesty had no other course but to sign the Decree of Restoration. Thus was he hoist with his own petard, and there was probably no angrier man that day in Africa. (NOTE—It may be remembered that in April 1935, in order to embarrass the British Government by a threat

of a probable return to power of the Wafd, the King in a letter to his Prime Minister stated that it was his "dearest wish" that the 1923 Constitution should be restored. The King, in actual fact, dislikes the Wafd and the 1923 Constitution about equally.)

The last touch of comedy was added to the affair when Nessim Pasha emerged from the Palace at about one o'clock and met the "United Front" deputation arriving, just one hour too late, with their petition to the King.

The news of Nessim Pasha's resignation had been published in *La Bourse* on the evening of 11th, and the public were confidently expecting it. They were now startled to hear not only that the Premier did not intend to resign but that the Constitution had been restored. The students were jubilant and proud that their gallant struggles with lamp-posts and tramcars had not only brought Egyptian politicians into unity, but had forced the British Government to surrender on the Constitutional question.

Nahas Pasha hurried round to congratulate the Prime Minister, and the latter had to undergo perhaps one of the hardest trials of his career when the Wafd leader affectionately embraced him. The other leaders of the United Front, however, did not feel in kissing mood. They had overcome their misgivings and antipathy to the Wafd in order to join the United Front, and they now found themselves out-maneuvred and with no specific *raison d'être*. Indeed, Mohammed Pasha Mahmoud had already begun to intrigue. By continuing to incite the students to disorder, he did his utmost to discredit Nahas Pasha, who had promised to use every endeavour to persuade the boys to return to their studies. He also hoped to hasten the fall of the Nessim Cabinet and to break up the United Front. In these intentions he had the hearty good wishes of the Palace.

#### PUBLIC SECURITY AND THE STUDENTS

The students continued to parade the streets during the months of December 1935, shouting death and damnation to

the British, "Down with Hoare," and even, in some cases, "Down with Hore-Belisha." They demonstrated their hatred of Great Britain by damaging Egyptian Government property, wrecking the cars of the Belgian tram company and smashing the lamp-posts of the French gas company. The Director of the latter concern complained to the Government of the danger from the escape of gas and stated that "eventually the escape of gas would exceed the supply." What explanation he vouchsafed for this peculiar scientific phenomenon is not stated.

Student riots and anti-British feeling were confined more or less to Cairo. On the other hand, the Alexandria of the moment was said to be a combination of London, Paris and Monte Carlo. "Cabarets," said Reuter, "are at their most brilliant," qualifying it with—"all naval officers and men departing at midnight to fulfil leave obligations."

Despite the war atmosphere, we all felt like taking a share in "Alexandria's best winter season since the war." On 18th November, therefore, when we sailed from Port Said to join the main body of the Mediterranean Fleet, there was an air of hopeful expectancy in the ship—akin to that expressed by Laurel and Hardy prior to receiving a custard pie on the snout. "We can take it," we assured ourselves, gazing vaguely and not a little apprehensively into the future. And did we?

## CHAPTER X

### ALEXANDRIA

EVERYTHING in Egypt is flat—the desert, the housetops and the beer. Flat, that is, until you examine it more closely. That was why on entering Alexandria it was uncommonly hard to pick out where the harbour ended and the land began.

It was not difficult, however, to size up the extent of His Majesty's Navy then present. Over fifty British warships of all sizes and shapes filled every corner of Alexandria's extensive harbour. In addition to a fairway to the docks only a stretch of water suitable for the Imperial Airways flying-boats to land was left clear. The rest was British Fleet.

To say the least, it looked impressive. So memorable, in fact, that the Commander-in-Chief decided on giving us a good chance of observing his fleet at anchor and allotted us "Y" berth. Apart from a blue-funnelled Fleet Auxiliary, we were farthest away, out of all the warships then in harbour, from the landing jetty. The Ugly Duckling was evidently going to have to swim.

But this was not for long. We arrived on 19th November and on 21st November a Big Shoot had been scheduled for the purpose of impressing Egypt with Britain's might. We had two days in which to get our first ideas of the land of the Pharaohs.

#### EXIT AUSONIA

On our way ashore we passed a battered wreck that looked like a "Q" ship on a Day of Rest. This was the *Ausonia*. Many stories were, and are still, in circulation about this Roman liner.

## ALEXANDRIA

It seems she was entering harbour when she caught on fire. With the blaze going well, she continued into port and anchored in the middle of the British Fleet. A fire-party was immediately sent over from the *Queen Elizabeth*, but by this time the furnace was out of control. Tugs were therefore requisitioned, her cable was cut and she was beached out of harm's way near Ras-el-Tin.

The true answer will probably never be known, but at one stage she was reputed to be bearing down on the *Bellerophon*. This R.F.A. was so choc-a-bloc with mines and other high explosives that, had they hit, there is no doubt the Mediterranean Fleet and most of Alexandria would have been blown to high heaven. This, however, was narrowly avoided. Some people have held this against the *Ausonia*.

Another sideline on the incident was the abandoning of the ship's wine store. For many days afterwards the phrase "overcome by fumes" had a double meaning. Especially for the various rescue parties, who had a large experience of this peculiar malady.

#### DISCORD IN EGYPT

There is no doubt that Alexandria liked the Navy. Never since the war had piastres been flung in the gutters in such profusion. This, no doubt, explained why most of the population slept there.

Greek restaurants, French cinemas, Armenian hairdressers, Indian silk shops, German bookshops, Italian beer bars and cabarets more international than the League of Nations were all doing "boom" business. Arab taxi-drivers consistently proved scrap-iron to be worth its weight in gold—provided the said scrap-iron could shatter its way down to No. 6 or No. 14 gate. Here, in the most cosmopolitan city visited during the Commission, swirled a nightmare mixture of all the vivid colour, the surprising smells, the bewildering noises and the strange dramatic glamour of Europe, of Asia and of Egypt herself, whose silly modern surface has only to be scratched to reveal an age-old mystery and a civilization that flourished when London was a swamp.

With characteristic thoroughness the Navy took over a derelict hotel at £4 a night and turned it into a Fleet Club. There is no doubt of the real success that Claridge's enjoyed. If, of a night-time, it did lack the lure of a Bella Vista—at least you could eat and drink more cheaply there than anywhere else in Alexandria. Turnover was so large that, short of providing free beer, it was almost impossible for Claridge's to avoid making a profit.

But while Claridge's cut their charges, commercial clubs and restaurants did not. "Le Petit Coin de France," where you could get the best food in the city, trebled its prices. The august Union Club was enabled, through the modest subscription asked of the officers, to renovate its curtains, its carpets and its paintwork. In cabarets the "coupe" regime held an unruffled if not undisputed sway. Here, as Hamlet said way back in 1600, was a racket. "Coupes" for the benefit of those without first-hand experience, consisted of fizzy lemonade disguised as Dry Monopole and served in a champagne glass. They retailed at 15 piastres, which was just over 3 shillings . . . and "coupe" was the battle-cry of the cabaret women. This peculiar habit has not so far spread to South America, and it is to be hoped that it will never reach Chile, where a high standard of entertaining can be maintained on a bottle of tenpenny wine.

Few people realized that of all the money which the Fleet poured into Egypt, only a small percentage went to the gypies themselves. On the surface that statement seems false. It is only when you come to realize that in Alexandria there was scarcely a shop, bar, restaurant or cinema that was not in foreign hands, that you begin to sense the peculiar condition of modern Egypt. English, French, Italians and Levantines run the commerce of Egypt. Though slavery has been abolished, Egypt yet remains a nation enslaved.

Imagine a gypsy in England. This gypsy, after a surfeit of cornish pasties and London Gin (or some such British meal), proceeds to smash a few plate-glass windows, push over a couple of buses and dislocate the Underground Railway. What happens? Is he taken along to a special

Egyptian court where an emissary of Pharaoh dispenses justice amid the fumes of Abdullah cigarettes? Not a bit of it. He finds himself in Bow Street police station cooling a hot head in an English bucket, and later on he finds the Magistrate relieving him of many, many piastres for the trouble he has caused.

In Egypt, however, foreigners breaking the law were tried by foreigners in their own courts. Such a state of affairs would be unbelievable if it hadn't happened to exist. It was brought to an end by the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty. Some natural indignation on the part of the Egyptians can, therefore, be understood when they observed the peace-loving British converting their country into an armed camp. With the army in Cairo and the Western Desert, with over 50 warships in the harbour of Alexandria, and with Aboukir changed into a clearing-house for British aircraft, Egypt may have been safe for the Egyptians. It also happened to be pretty secure for the British; and eminent Arabs, removing their fezes, scratched their heads and reckoned they might have been consulted first. One Miles Lampson, they figured out, went a long way—from Cairo to Khartoum, in fact, and a good bit sideways. And how about Russell Pasha, who was ruthlessly cleaning up the drug traffic? Who asked him to poke his nose into the hashish of ancient Egypt?

The answer to all these questions resulted in the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936. The Residency became the Embassy, the British army was "commissioned for the defence of Egypt" and Egyptian justice was catapulted into its first solo flight.

Whether this is an improvement remains to be seen. In essentials the *status quo* stays put. British influence is as great if not greater than before. Egyptian officials are still renowned for their corruptness, but—and it is a big But—Egypt has come of age. Fit or unfit, she is now an independent country. Will the average Egyptian grow to man's estate? Or will national character stay, as at present, a peculiar and rather pathetic instance of arrested development at about the age of 16 years?

## ENTERTAINMENT AT SEA

Having regard to Egypt's adolescent outlook, the late Admiral Sir W. W. Fisher decided that a large-sized Naval Shoot was just the thing to impress the gypsies. A big drama, ranging from the antics of 4-inch destroyer gunnery, through the more serious 8-inch efforts and leading up to the climax of the giant "15-inchers," was staged for 21st November. Whether this show achieved its purpose among the Egyptians was never known, but it is possible that some kind of naval pantomime would have had a greater appeal—or perhaps the gypsies considered, as so many of us did, that the whole affair was just a circus.

Whatever the verdict, there is no doubt that *Berwick* and *Ajax* came out of it very well. We had to play the part of host and act as a sort of mobile grandstand. *Berwick* was allocated 80 guests, we were given 60, and this included the Press. It is here that we write in big letters:

ENTER FLOYD GIBBONS

OR

HOW THE BRITISH WERE BALLYHOODED.

Floyd Gibbons, one-eyed ace reporter for the Hearst Press of the U.S.A., had no invitation to this English shooting party. The O.O.W., however, waved aside that qualification and allowed him on board. In this he was probably wise as a report of the shoot would have been cabled to America anyway, whether Gibbons had been on board or not . . . only that report might have been much less friendly than it turned out to be.

Floyd Gibbons looked like a gangster. He had a leathery face, a mouth like Will Rogers, a rasping voice and one eye. He was tough. No one knew what had happened to the other eye. It was hardly likely it had "offended" him and that he had "plucked it out" for the purpose of "entering heaven." There was little news-value in heaven. Hearst would prefer to have him cover hell.

I met him at the cocktail party which preceded lunch and the afternoon's shoot. Unaware that he was not invited, I asked Reuter's representative to bring him into the Gun-room for lunch. Most of the "Press boys" and some of the more flippant-looking Egyptian guests also came. But it was Floyd Gibbons who kept the party amused.

Hearst had given him a roving commission and he'd just been down to Abyssinia. He had gone firstly to the Italian side. Here, unable to get his cables through, he had used his own portable radio transmitter and thus managed to get through one or two "scoops" uncensored. He then went over to the Ethiopian side, met Haile Selassie and discovered that life in Addis Ababa was so desultory that foreign correspondents were throwing coins into the rabble in the main square so as to get a battle they could report on.

After lunch I took Floyd Gibbons and Kenneth Anderson (Reuter) up on the bridge, where they had a fine view of the afternoon's manoeuvres. Something that he saw then may have suggested some of the surprising statements in Gibbons' cable that evening and which I was startled to find awaiting me at breakfast the next morning. The following is a full copy and should be read at full speed:

"Biggest guns of British Navy dash big fifteen inchers hurling thousands of tons hot metal ten miles and more through air, went to work this afternoon in Eastern Mediterranean in greatest naval show ever staged off this port since the British blew the stink off it back in 1804.

"English High Commissioner for Egypt Sir Miles Lampson and Admiral Sir W. W. Fisher commanding British Naval forces Mediterranean presented ear-shattering exhibition of John Bull's might for carefully selected audience composed representatives Egyptian Royal family, Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, ex-ministers, Egyptian notables and former officials and the only American newspaper correspondent who has been permitted to observe British Navy actually firing long-range projectiles. I got in by mistake. Egyptian Press invited but refused attend being all out on strike today to

protest against killing and wounding of Egyptian students in Cairo riots. Press all other nationalities barred because that would include Italians and considerate British did not think naval display would be nice thing for Italian boys to see so avoided discrimination by barring all foreigners.

"British Admiralty London sidestepped my cabled request for invitation, Lampson said he couldn't think of such a thing and Admiral Fisher turned me down so flat I bounced but I managed to crash in partly by mistake because I happened to be wearing English hat. This is second time in three days this hat has passed me off as Britisher but first time not so pleasant because rioting Egyptian students Cairo Monday started to give me 'the goods' until I produced American passport and they warned me against wearing this hat which is only lid I have. But somehow or other that English sombrero made it possible for me mingle with crowd English correspondents and Egyptian officials and get onboard English cruiser *Ajax* Alexandria this morning and steam out to sea and witness greatest naval exercises and manœuvres close and long range firing destroyer attacks, air attacks, smoke screens few non-British observers have ever seen.

"Show started shortly before noon some fifteen to twenty miles outside Alexandria. *Ajax* took position alone near unit identified as Fourth Destroyer flotilla which immediately started popping off with four point seven guns at target being towed some five miles away. Sun bright brisk breeze choppy sea running over blue Mediterranean causing destroyers roll pitch decks awash but British gunners rubber boots to knees and bare from waist upwards displaying flamboyant tattooing manned guns and slammed out shells bracketing target sending jets white water high in air all round target which towed by five hundred foot line by auxiliary steamer on which I would not like to have been.

"Steaming farther out we next encountered four ten thousand ton cruisers county class who immediately opened fire with high angle double turret eight inch pieces at target which now moving across horizon nine miles away and again towers white water rose from surface sea as arriving shells

all round all sides of target completely obliterated it from view of observers' binoculars.

"Cruisers with full load excited highly impressed Egyptians and notables now steamed towards target taking up position quarter mile distant when our glass picked up new arrivals steaming over horizon out of grey blue mists. First they appeared vague indistinct in distance, their blue grey and darker grey merging them both with sky and sea. Finally they materialized as five of Britain's mightiest men-of-war. Five huge battleships in line led by *Queen Elizabeth* flying flag Admiral Fisher. Following came *Revenge* *Barham* *Valiant* and *Ramillies* all England's heaviest and toughest bull-dogs of the sea, they were somewhere between nine and eleven miles away from target and my glasses able to pick up tall top heavy upper structure pyramided about forward tripod mast.

"Suddenly we saw stabs of orange colored flames from both forward and after turrets *Queen Elizabeth* followed by billows brownish black smoke and immediately more flashes and more smoke from the four heavy battle wagons following her. But there was not a sound—simple serene silence, brilliant sunlight blue waves crested with white caps. We turned binoculars to left and suddenly that towed target twelve hundred feet off our bow leapt into vision seemingly all too close particularly with knowledge that twenty tons red hot metal was at that moment sailing away and due to arrive at any moment at that point almost under our noses. With glasses glued on target we waited breathlessly. It seemed minutes but it could not have been that long. Suddenly enormous geysers of seawater leapt airwards one hundred feet in front of target then one hundred feet behind then all round. There was terrific upheaval seawater as concentration of shell smothered target in perfect cloudburst of spray. Target composed of black lattice work one hundred and twenty feet long and reaching thirty feet above surface of sea.

"Salvo after salvo of those shells one ton each and landing in groups of twenty at a time, four guns from each of the five ships firing at a time, continued to keep sea in constant turmoil upheaval around moving target frequently completely



obliterating it from sight, though at times I detected direct hits which sent splinters wooden braces flying skywards black timbers sharply silhouetted against clouds white foam spray. Silence following five minutes this continued rapid firing so thick you could cut it with knife but it was gradually slowly dispersed by constant indistinct droaning from overhead high above in apparently empty sky of fleecy white clouds against blue ceiling of Mediterranean. Then drone increased to buzz and suddenly changed to roar as squadron after squadron of speedy fighting planes and bombers nose-diving with engines full on broke through white clouds and descended like swarm bees not only on line of battleships but on two cruisers carrying distinguished Egyptian guests whose red tarbush capped heads soon bobbing about all neck twisting directions black silken fez tassels swinging all ways as owners ducked and finally shook heads in bewilderment surrender this unexpected demonstration potential destruction.

"It was fitting nerve tinglish conclusion to this dramatic rehearsal of what Britain holds in store here in Alexandria harbor for whatever power that threatens Suez canal jugular vein and roadway her Empire east and west. There's fifty thousand men and four hundred thousand tons steel clad dynamite with guns loaded and steam up and decks cleared for action. Sorry so late but only just got ashore and so far as I know this is first time any American correspondent ever saw British target practices. Gibbons."

So this was one of the results of Hearst interrupting his deep-sea fishing holiday off Florida and sending him over to Europe at short notice! (Floyd Gibbons was still in America when we had arrived at Haifa in October—this was only late November.)

Over a year later Floyd Gibbons was again in the news as the first foreign correspondent to broadcast an account of the situation from Madrid while Franco's guns were already raising merry hell in the suburbs. He must have made a lot of money out of writing, for I discovered one of his novels on the bookstall at the foot of the Barracca lift in Malta.

Only the choicer novels take that bookstall as their mausoleum. Such is fame. . . .

#### FIRE-EATER'S FURY

We had still been a mere five days in Alexandria when we found ourselves taking part in yet another comedy. Only this time the laugh was on us. Admiral Sir W. W. Fisher decided to walk round Divisions. This he did on 24th November. He gave us a full hour's notice.

So much were we in the Admiral's mind that he returned on 29th November to witness a shoot from *Ajax*. It was on this occasion that a Midshipman yawned—and pretty soon regretted it when he found himself scaling the mast by order of the Commander-in-Chief.

On return from this exercise we were scheduled to sail for Haifa and the 3rd Cruiser Squadron. Fate, however, stepped in and conveniently wrapped a wire round our screw. It was June 1936 before we sighted Haifa again—though the screw was cleared some time before that date.

#### SANTA CLAUS IN EGYPT

"You wait—it'll all be over by Christmas" seems to be a popular phrase in connection with the wars we wage. At the start of the Crimean War in October 1853, of the Boer War on 12th October 1899, and of the Great War on 4th August 1914, men cheerfully assured each other that by Christmas "the war would be won and they'd be home again." Well—it wasn't and they weren't.

In keeping with this tradition we clapped ourselves on the back, on our way to Haifa, and expressed the opinion that we, too, would be back among the sun-drenched isles of the South Pacific, basking in tropic climes while succulent flying fish conveniently alighted in the ship's frying-pans and presented themselves for supper. So we thought. Events happened otherwise. On 18th December we were still at sea for exercises and 25th December 1935 found us alongside *Sussex* under a moody Egyptian sky.

Still, it was something to be alongside and not out at "Y" berth. Moreover, *Sussex*, fresh from her Australian adventures, was one of the more popular ships of the Foreign Legion. Much hospitality was exchanged with this vessel and a certain amount of tight-rope walking between the two ships took place on Christmas Day (combined with a certain amount of falling into the harbour). On Christmas afternoon there was a football match between *Ajax* and *Exeter*, where before a motley crowd *Ajax* won.

An extension of leave was granted over the Christmas and New Year period and Alexandria's gaiety did another feverish spurt.

1935 did not leave us, however, without another disaster. On New Year's eve the *City of Khartoum*—an Imperial Airways flying-boat—crashed a couple of miles outside the harbour and all lives, with the exception of the pilot's, were lost. This tragedy was the keener because *City of Khartoum* had already circled the flare-path and was preparing to land when the three engines cut out for lack of petrol.

The Commanding Officer of the *Brazen* displayed great initiative over this affair. He was waiting for a friend, due in the *City of Khartoum*, on the Imperial Airways landing-steps. When the machine was three-quarters of an hour overdue, he felt things had gone too far. He returned on board, raised steam and asked permission to leave harbour to search for the aircraft. As no permission arrived, he left without it, and, indeed, only got his authority when outside the harbour. *Brilliant* helped in the search and eventually picked up the pilot, who was found swimming towards the break-water.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE WAR IN ABYSSINIA AND THE FLEET CONCENTRATION

A BRIEF account of the circumstances leading up to the Italo-Abyssinian War and an outline of the campaign, is of interest to most of us, in view of the relation which these matters had to our movements during the Commission.

In the latter part of the last century, the Italians, who were far behind Britain and France in the "race for Africa," first cast covetous eyes at the cool and fertile highlands of Abyssinia.

Eritrea to the north and Somaliland to the south, they already possessed, but these colonies, though providing several ports and a great length of coast-line, were low-lying and unhealthy, and therefore unsuitable as outlets for the growing Italian population.

The Italian expeditionary force which pushed on conquest-bound into Tigre, the northern province of Abyssinia, met with initial success in 1895, but it miscalculated the strength of the Abyssinian people and the difficulty of keeping lines of communications open in that mountainous country.

In 1896 an army of 120,000 Abyssinians, commanded by the great Emperor Menelik, surrounded the entire Italian force at Adowa and inflicted a crushing defeat upon the invaders.

This called a halt to Italian colonial progression and a treaty was signed fixing the boundaries of the Abyssinian "Empire."

Nearly forty years later, Italy, whose prestige had suffered a damaging blow, was to seek revenge.

The rise of Mussolini with his Fascist regime saw Italy grow rapidly in power during the post-war years. By the end of

1934 it was apparent that the Duce intended to start his programme of colonial expansion by the conquest of Abyssinia, which he regarded as Italy's destiny, according to a number of bombastic public utterances made to the Black-shirts.

In December 1934 a clash occurred at Wal Wal, a watering-place for tribesmen on the boundary between Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland, over the delimitation of the frontier. Hundreds of casualties were inflicted on both sides in spite of the presence of an Anglo-Ethiopian Boundary Commission. This led to threats and demands for compensation on the part of Abyssinia and relations grew worse and worse. At the beginning of 1935 Mussolini started to pour soldiers, labourers and war material into Eritrea and Somaliland via the ports of Massawa and Mogadiscio respectively.

Soon vast Italian armies, mechanized to the highest degree and supplemented by large numbers of aeroplanes, were assembling on the northern and southern frontiers of Abyssinia. A continuous stream of Italian troop-ships and transports passed through the Suez Canal crowded with regulars and Blackshirts vociferously acclaiming "Il Duce." No attack could be made until the autumn, as the rains render all highways in Abyssinia impassable between the months of June and September.

Heedless of world opinion, Mussolini pushed on his war preparations and on 11th September 1935 Britain gave her dramatic lead to the League of Nations by concentrating her fleets in the Mediterranean, with an eye to "Military Sanctions."

We all know, only too well, how Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria and Haifa were prepared for war during that hectic and uncertain autumn when Italy, enraged at Britain's action, seemed on the point of attacking her as well as Abyssinia.

At the end of September the long-awaited blow fell and, on the trifling pretext of a frontier incident, Marshal De Bono, with an army of 150,000 men, started to advance into Abyssinia from the north, while Marshal Graziani with a smaller

army advanced from the south. The Italians made rapid progress into the plains of Ogaden in the south during the first few days, aeroplanes proving effective in the open country, but their advance was checked by a waterless desert.

The northern advance was also successful and within a fortnight Italy was celebrating the fall of Adowa, scene of her humiliation. Southwards towards Addis Ababa pushed De Bono's army and Makale was the next town to fall. There the advance was halted by desperate Abyssinian resistance, in which the Emperor Haile Selassie himself bore a part, aided by the increasing mountainous character of the country. A drive by Graziani northwards towards Harrar to cut the country's only railway was unsuccessful and by the end of 1935 the situation was a virtual deadlock. Italian aeroplanes and mechanized forces were, for the moment, unable to prevail against the elusive, guerrilla tactics adopted by their opponents. Italy's position at this time, with economic sanctions applied against her by the League of Nations, was not favourable.

The arrival of Marshal Badoglio to replace De Bono in the supreme command was an indication that Mussolini was dissatisfied with the progress of the war. It was soon apparent that the most strenuous efforts were to be made to achieve decisive results before the rain commenced in May. Large-scale offensives were launched simultaneously on north and south fronts in January 1936 and, for the first time in this campaign, mustard gas was dropped by Italian aeroplanes over a wide area on the northern front. The Abyssinians, totally unprotected against gas, were soon on the retreat and spectacular advances were made by Italian columns to Gondar and Lake Tana in the north-west and to the shores of Lake Rudolf, along the frontier of Kenya, in the south-west.

During February and March the Abyssinian forces held out desperately against the main attack by Badoglio's northern army, but gradually they were driven back.

With the fall of Magdala in April, the route lay open to Addis Ababa, which the Italians reached a few days later,

their mechanized columns moving swiftly once the main mountain barriers were passed.

The capture of Addis Ababa on 5th May meant the end to all organized resistance on the part of the Abyssinians. Harrar, Diredawa and the remaining unconquered area along the railway line were soon taken.

The railway had not been cut during the whole campaign, and had remained the only line of communication between the capital and the outside world.

By the end of May nearly the whole of Abyssinia, except the western province, was under Italian control, including Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, whose water is vital for the irrigation of Egypt and the Sudan cotton-fields.

It's an ill wind that blows no one any good and the sudden end to this struggle brought the finish of sanctions and the British Fleet was able to disperse at the beginning of June and return to its normal stations.

#### THE BASE DEFENCES

Early in September 1935 many Naval, Military and R.A.F. units suddenly found themselves "under orders." Owing to the special issues of tropical clothing, junior officers and men knew that they were destined for a warm climate, and as our relations with Italy were strained because of Mussolini's aggressive attitude towards Abyssinia, it was generally surmised that this destination was somewhere between Malta and Aden. Whether Great Britain was clenching her mailed fist primarily in support of the League of Nations, or whether she considered her Imperial Communications were threatened, it is not the object of this article to consider.

The majority of these units found themselves at Alexandria, and very soon that large commercial port contained a bigger concentration of naval and other units than has been seen since the Great War. The period immediately proceeding the completion of our naval concentration at Alexandria, and the installation of anti-aircraft, underwater and coast defences—when the tension with Italy was at its height—

was most critical, and it is doubtful if many of us have considered what might have happened.

Great Britain was unprepared for war, the Mediterranean Fleet was cruising in the Eastern Mediterranean and its only base for repairs, stores, and communications, etc., was Malta, which would have been untenable in the event of war with Italy. It was possible, too, that our line of communication through the Central and Western Mediterranean would be so severely interfered with, that the establishment of another base for the Fleet farther East would be impossible. More and more dependent does a modern fleet become on a well-equipped and well-defended base, yet the possibility of the Mediterranean Fleet having to operate from one or more unequipped and undefended anchorages loomed very large at this period.

Alexandria was most conveniently situated from a geographical point of view and lent itself fairly easily to defence by coast artillery and underwater defences; the installation of A.A. defences was simplified by the fact that the anchorage was situated at very nearly the maximum range of the nearest Italian air bases; attacking aircraft were therefore limited to a direct approach, along which topographical conditions allowed the main effort of the ground defences to be concentrated.

The first personnel for the defences of Alexandria arrived on 14th September 1935 in the transport *Neuralia* and consisted of 250 Royal Marines and 600 Army ranks; the Royal Marines consisted of the Landing and Transport Company of the M.N.B.D.O., and the Army units of one A.A. battery R.A., one Searchlight Company R.E., with their necessary R.C.S., R.A.S.C., R.A.M.C. and R.A.O.C. detachments. The tractors, lorries, guns and searchlights arrived shortly afterwards in S.S. *Bellerophon*, which had been hurriedly loaded by the troops, at Portsmouth, before sailing. The R.M. unit was known as H.M.S. *President III*—one of the few "ships" ever commissioned and commanded by a R.M. Officer. The force was quickly disembarked from *Neuralia*, which returned home, and the troops were temporarily

quartered in H.M. Ships *Woolwich* and *Resource*, and at Mustapha.

The object of this force was to provide A.A. defences ashore at any anchorage which the Commander-in-Chief might require for use by the Fleet—A.A. defence had priority over all other shore defences. The force was capable of loading, transporting across country, installing and maintaining these A.A. defences wherever they might be required.

Preliminary work was immediately commenced on reconnoitring battery positions, preparing gun-pits, building O.P's, selecting camp-sites, etc., for the defences of Alexandria, the equipment and personnel for which were known to be arriving in the near future.

On 26th September 1935, H.T. *Lancashire* arrived at Alexandria with the Royal Naval personnel for the installation of underwater defences, Port War Signal Station, 1,400 Royal Marines, and additional Army details under the command of a Brigadier R.M. This force was known as H.M.S. *President IV*, in which *President III* was ultimately absorbed to form the "Base Defences, Mediterranean." The R.M. units in *Lancashire* included 6-inch, 4-inch and pom-pom coast defence batteries, an A.A. battery and Searchlight Company, together with additional transport personnel, a Workshop Section, and the necessary administrative units. The store-ships S.S. *Atreus* and *Bencruachan* arrived shortly afterwards.

Heavy tractors, trailers, gun-transporters and lorries were soon to be seen passing to and fro along the streets of Alexandria; camps sprang up almost overnight in widely separated areas, and guns and searchlights began to arrive at their pre-arranged positions.

Few of the personnel of the Fleet ever realized to what extent Alexandria was finally defended; the following gives a very brief idea of the lay-out of the defences:

- 6-inch battery at Agami with coast-defence searchlights.
  - 6-inch battery at Ras-el-Tin with coast-defence searchlights.
  - 4-inch battery at Mex with coast-defence searchlights.
  - Pom-pom battery at Shirou with coast-defence searchlights.
- The requirements of A.A. shore defences call for dispersion

of the 3-inch two-gun sections, and they were disposed in a narrow ellipse round Alexandria, Mustapha, Silsila, Ras-el-Tin, Mex, Agami, Dekhela and along the southern shore of Lake Mariout. The Searchlight positions were even more scattered, and there were approximately 20 of these, each commanded by a corporal and 12 men. Two at least of these positions were supplied daily with food and water by camel transport owing to the nature of the ground. Listening posts in connection with these defences were situated as far distant as Mersa-Matruh and Burg-el-Arabe.

In addition to these defences at Alexandria, personnel of the Base Defences were absent in connection with the installation of coast defences at Mersa-Matruh, Haifa, Port Said, Suez and Port Sudan, and its Headquarters in *Lancashire* was therefore dealing at this period with a very large area.

Reserve ammunition and stores of the Base Defences were concentrated in store huts at Dekhela, where a R.M. guard of 150 men was continuously maintained.

The maintenance of communications, and the daily administration of units so widely dispersed was naturally a big problem; nearly 300 miles of telephone cable was laid in Alexandria alone, and the motor-transport drivers and their vehicles were called upon for continuous hard work.

As time progressed, permanent hutments and cookhouses were erected in most of the larger camps, and these began to take the form of small towns rather than the hastily erected encampments which appeared initially. Canteens were established in all camps, and every little comfort that the ingenuity of the officers and men could devise was added to make life easier. The two great enemies were insects and sand, and although these were very troublesome in the early days, they were fighting a losing battle when the camps were finally evacuated in July 1936. The order for evacuation was received in the camps on 9th July 1936, and within four weeks every man, gun, searchlight, lorry, etc., was once again in England.

Throughout the period of strained relations with Italy certain units of the defences were ready to sail at short notice

to any other anchorage which the Commander-in-Chief might require for the use of the Fleet and which would require defences. These units were known as the "Port X Force," and the majority of their stores remained in S.S. *Bellerophon* and *Bencruachan*; 150 of the personnel of this force were continuously embarked in H.T. *Lancashire* for maintenance purposes, and the remainder were always ready for immediate embarkation.

To the majority of the personnel in the Fleet the "Base Defences" called to their mind a white ship—the *Lancashire*—which rarely went to sea, and contained a large body of Royal Marines who had nothing to do. I hope that this very brief description of the Base Defences will help to dispel that idea, and also emphasize the fact that ships are of little value in war, however efficient they and their ships' companies may be, unless they have a well-defended base from which to operate.

### PART III

CHAPTER XII	MALTA, JANUARY 1936
XIII	EXERCISES
XIV	MALTA HOLIDAY
XV	TROUBLE IN PALESTINE
XVI	PORT SAID, SECOND VISIT—REGATTA—DISPERSAL
XVII	MALTA, LAST VISIT—SPANISH STRIFE