Douglas Reeman

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Douglas Reeman writes:

'As someone whose books are published in sixteen languages, I am always being asked to account for the perennial appeal of the sea story, and its enduring interest for people of so many nationalities and cultures.

'I have thought about it a great deal, both when I served at sea, and later when I became a professional writer. It would seem that the eternal and sometimes elusive triangle of man, ship and ocean, particularly under the stress of war, produces the best qualities of courage and compassion, irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the conflict. In war it is inevitable that only one side can triumph but honour and self-sacrifice are not the attributes of the victors alone.

'The sea has no understanding of righteous or unjust causes, and cares nothing for the flags of battle. It is the common enemy, respected by all who serve on it, ignored only at their peril.'

so by Douglas Reeman in Pan

The Iron Pirate

For my Kim,
for all the help
and all the love
you freely give.

Life to be sure is nothing much to lose,
But young men think it is, and we were young.

Engraved on a memorial in the Old Naval Cemetery at Vis in the Adriatic, in 1944.

A different battleground: the same sacrifice.

Author's Note

Minesweeping . . . a war without glory, where death lurked beneath the sea or floated from the air. A war without mercy or discrimination. The mine was impartial and gave no warning.

The men who fought this lonely battle did so knowing it was an essential one. Every day each channel had to be swept, otherwise the country's lifelines were clogged and the vital cargoes could not move.

They were a mixture of young men and old sailors; many of the latter had spent much of their lives trawling for fish, most of the others had been schoolboys before the war.

To keep the sealanes open, four hundred minesweepers, 'the little ships', paid the price, and nearly five thousand officers and men died doing it.

D.R.

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Officers

The sky above Dover harbour was a clear washed-out blue, so that the afternoon sunshine gave an illusion of warmth and peace. Just an occasional fleecy cloud drifting on a fresh south-easterly breeze, but none of the too-familiar vapour trails which betrayed the silent air battles, the pinpoints of flame as friend or enemy fell into the Channel.

It was April 1943, only a few days old, and the harbour, like the weather, appeared to be resting. There were not many warships of any size moored to the jetties; most of them went to safer harbours, *round the corner* as the sailors termed it, in the Thames or Medway, or in the East Coast base of Harwich.

Here there was little peace for long. Sneak raids by fighter-bombers, or the deafening arrival of the great shells fired from Cap Gris-Nez to land in the town or amongst some coastal convoy as it scuttled through the Channel.

Lying side by side at one wall were two fleet minesweepers, their ensigns and Jacks lifting and rippling in the breeze to make bright patches of colour against the drab grey and camouflage dazzle paint. They were twins, and to a landsman might appear to be small, foreshortened frigates.

Straight-stemmed, with a spartan superstructure of bridge and solitary funnel making them look businesslike, only the clutter of minesweeping gear and derricks right aft on the cut-down quarterdeck marked them apart from any of the escort vessels.

There was no visible sign of life on board. Sunday afternoon, and make-and-mend for the duty watch, a chance to snatch some rest after weeks of sweeping the deadly mines, often within sight of the French coast.

Dover Castle with its bombproof headquarters beneath stood guard over the harbour and its approaches. For at this point the enemy were just twenty miles distant – a jarring thought, if anyone still needed reminding.

In his cabin in the outboard fleet minesweeper, Lieutenant Commander Ian Ransome unclipped a scuttle and opened it to let the weak sunshine play across his face. It was good to be leaving the long nights behind, even if the risks might be extended accordingly. He narrowed his eyes to study that part of the town which was visible from his cabin. A defiant, battered place on the very elbow of Hellfire Corner, as the newspapers named it. His mouth moved slightly in a smile. *Shit Street* was the sailors' nickname. The smile made him look younger, like a shadow passing away.

He saw his reflection in the scuttle's polished glass and ran his fingers through his hair. It was dark, and although not originally curly it had somehow become so. Too many days and nights up there on an open bridge, in salt spray and in all weathers. He turned and looked at his cabin. Small, and yet spacious compared with his tiny hutch behind the bridge, where he could snatch an hour and still be ready instantly when the alarm bells tore a man's heart apart.

He saw the calendar propped on his little desk and it all came crowding back again. The fourth of April 1943. He had been in command of this ship, his ship, for one year exactly.

He stared round, his ears seeking some familiar sound to distract him. But the ship was quiet, with only the far-off murmur of one of the Chief's generators to give a hint of life.

Ransome sat down at the desk and stared at the clip of signals which had awaited their return to Dover. He had known they would be in harbour for this day. They would have shared a solemn drink in the wardroom, perhaps invited some of the old hands to enliven the occasion.

His reefer hung carelessly from the only other chair, the two-

and-a-half wavy lines of gold lace on its sleeves. The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. A wartime navy; the amateurs who were now the true professionals. On the jacket's breast above the pocket was a single blue and white ribbon. The Distinguished Service Cross. For gallantry, they had said. He smiled again, but it was sadder than before. For surviving, was nearer the truth. He pulled up the sleeve of his grey fisherman's jersey and studied his watch. Nearly time. It made him feel sick. Uneasy. Perhaps a year was too long in any ship. Or was it the job? He had gone into minesweepers almost immediately after entering the navy at the outbreak of war.

He reached out and opened a small cupboard, so that the untouched bottle of Scotch seemed to wink at him in the reflected sunlight. He had been hoarding it for today.

He toyed with the idea of pouring a glass right now, and to hell with everything. Later perhaps. He might even invite the skipper from their sister ship *Ranger* aboard to join him. Even as he considered it he knew he would not.

He began to fill one of his pipes with fierce, jabbing thrusts from an old jar he had found in a junk shop at Plymouth.

Nobody had been to blame. It had happened before. Others would die because of that momentary distraction. Lack of vigilance? Who could tell?

It was often said that the danger from sudden air-attack was at its greatest when a ship was making for harbour.

They had been doing just that after weeks of sweeping, with let-ups only to refuel and take on extra ammunition. No matter how skilled his men had become there were some who had been thinking of a run ashore, a brassy pub behind the blackout curtains where just for a few hours they could dream or make-believe.

David Rule had been an excellent first lieutenant in every sense. He had never tried to gain popularity by being soft, but even at the defaulters' table he had usually managed to end the day without malice.

Ransome knew he had not always been easy to work with; he had been at it a long time. In war even six months could be an eternity, and Ransome had been sweeping mines for three years.

That was when he had not been needed for escort work, for picking up convoy survivors and anything else a senior officer might dream up. But Rule's cheerful disposition, impudence when he thought it was needed, had made them into an unbreakable team.

Ransome looked at the ship's crest on the white bulkhead. HMS *Rob Roy*, built by John Brown's on Clydebank just two years before the Germans had slammed into Poland, built when men cared about their craft, before ships were flung together, almost overnight it seemed, to try and balance the horrific toll in vessels and men alike. He nodded, as if David was here with him, as they had intended it would be.

Together they had made the little *Rob Roy* the best sweeper in the group.

It had been an early dawn when the sweep had put up a mine. Ransome had peered aft from the open bridge as Rule's sweeping party had slowed the winch, and a boatswain's mate had passed the word that the drifting mine had snared a wreck, or part of one. God knew there were enough wrecks littering the seabed on the approaches to every harbour.

Just a minute or so with every eye on the mine's bobbing, obscene shape, a signal lamp stabbing from the ship which now lay resting alongside, so that the shattering roar of a diving aircraft had made several believe that the mine had exploded. Out of the clouds, perhaps returning from a sortie over the mainland; they would never know. The rattle of machine-guns and cannon fire, then another roar of power as the plane had climbed away to the clouds, heading for home.

They had not even time to track it with the Oerlikons, let alone the main armament. It was over in seconds and David lay dying, his blood thinning in the spray boiling over the stern as they increased speed away from the mine, which was dispatched by marksmen on the trawler that always followed astern when they were sweeping.

Mercifully he had died before the ship had berthed alongside. The cannon shell which had cut him down had blasted off his shoulder and half of his face. Nobody else had received so much as a scratch.

The telephone jangled sharply on the desk, and Ransome had to pull his thoughts together, to accept that the ship was connected to the shore switchboard.

It was a woman's voice, a Wren from the S.D.O.

'Lieutenant Hargrave will be joining *Rob Roy* as expected, sir.'

Ransome stared at the ship's crest. He must get over it. A new first lieutenant? So what?

The voice said, 'Are you there, sir?'

Ransome pushed back his unruly hair again.

'Yes. Sorry.' What was she like, he wondered? 'Too good a lunch, I expect.'

She laughed. 'All right for some, sir.' The line went dead.

Ransome tried again. He stared at himself in the small mirror beside his bunk. Shadows beneath his eyes, lines of strain which seemed to tighten his mouth. He leaned closer and touched his sideburns. White hairs. He straightened his back and tried to grin at himself. He noticed that the grey eyes did not smile back at him.

He sighed. Aloud, he spoke to the small cabin. 'Not surprised. I feel bloody ancient!'

Ian Ransome was twenty-eight years old.

Lieutenant Trevor Hargrave returned the salutes of two passing seamen and swore silently under his breath. He carried a heavy suitcase in one hand and had his respirator haversack and steel helmet slung from the opposite shoulder. Even sailors who normally went to great lengths to avoid saluting anybody seemed to take a delight in doing it when an officer had his hands full.

Hargrave was tall and had even features and blue eyes which had made several of the Wrens at the base watch him as he passed. He shivered slightly as he looked at the moored vessels, and an idling Air Sea Rescue launch about to get under way from one of the jetties. His deeply tanned face told its own story. He had been back in England for six months, but even now in April it seemed bitterly cold after the glistening expanse of the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic.

He thought of the powerful cruiser which had been his home for over a year. She had been employed as a main escort for

long-haul convoys, most of which carried troops and all the equipment and vehicles they might need when they were finally delivered to their theatre of war. Simonstown, across the ocean to Ceylon or down to Australia and New Zealand. They were there just in case a commerce raider, or some death-or-glory German cruiser, broke out to savage the convoy routes before she was run to earth. Just one major enemy unit could tie down convoys for weeks; even the rumour of one was bad enough.

But all in all they had seen little of the real war. Lines of deep-laden merchantmen, sometimes with an escort to provide air cover for the dicey parts where ocean-going submarines, German and Japanese, might be at large.

It was as if the war had been held at arm's length. The cruiser reacted accordingly, and there was little difference in her ordered world from the days of peace. Mess dinners, banyan parties on the islands, even some regattas when they had been down-under with the Aussies.

He thought of his dismay when he had gone to London to protest about his new appointment. *A minesweeping course.* He could still see the contained amusement on the commander's face in the dusty Admiralty office.

He had tried to discover his father's whereabouts but had met with a stone wall. The Western Desert, Scotland – nobody knew or would tell him. At the back of his mind he nursed the suspicion that his father was behind it somehow.

Hargrave stopped and looked along the old stone wall. The course was over. It was not next month. It was now.

He felt the breeze flapping at his blue raincoat. Everything looked tired and run-down. Like the town with its bombed houses and boarded-up shops. And London with its wailing sirens and shabby people, ration queues and uniforms everywhere. He had never seen so many foreign servicemen. Free-French, Norwegians, Polish, Dutch – the list was endless, as if to record the enemy's total oppression of Scandinavia and Europe.

His eyes narrowed as he saw the two fleet minesweepers. At this angle they were almost bows-on to him. As if they were resting, leaning against each other for support.

His gaze rested on the outboard one and he felt his heart sink

still further. He had read all he could about HMS *Rob Roy* but seeing her in the frail sunshine was still a shock.

He saw the scars on her paintwork. Coming alongside in the dark, or manoeuvring against another vessel to take off survivors probably. Hargrave knew quite a lot about *Rob Roy*'s history. She had even been at Dunkirk where she had made several trips, returning home each time loaded with exhausted soldiers.

He saw her pendant number, J.21, painted on her side, the thin line around her single funnel which marked her as the senior ship in the flotilla. It gave him no comfort at all.

He went through the details once again in his mind. It had not taken him long to gen up on the ship; after all, she was not exactly a cruiser. Two hundred and thirty feet from stem to low stern, 815 tons with an armament of two four-inch guns, two Oerlikon twenty-millimetre cannon and a few heavy machine-guns. He began to walk along the edge of the wall towards her; the nearer he drew the smaller she seemed to get. And yet crammed into her neat hull she carried a total complement of eighty officers and men. It did not seem possible.

He reached the steep brow which led down to the inboard ship. He saw her name was *Ranger*, built in 1937, the same as *Rob Roy*. The year made him start. How would he have felt about the navy had he known this would happen?

He had applied for the submarine service when the time had come to leave the big cruiser. Apart from his other qualifications he was a good navigator, and on the long hauls and across those far-off oceans he had had plenty of oppc unity to extend his knowledge and make full use of the ship's chartroom.

After a brief interview his request had been turned down. His own captain had merely informed him that he had been considered unsuitable for submarines. What the hell did that mean? As soon as he had this appointment sorted out he would apply again and make certain he saw the right people. He was being childish and he knew it. Destroyers then? He stared down at the minesweeper's deck and saw the sentry watching him with mild curiosity. He did not move to help him with the suitcase, however.

As Hargrave clambered down the steep brow and saluted, the

sentry tossed up a careless acknowledgement. For some reason it irritated him.

Hargrave snapped, 'I'm going across to *Rob Roy*.' He looked meaningfully at the slack webbing belt and heavy pistol holster. 'Aren't you going to ask for my identity card?'

The sarcasm was lost on the gangway sentry. 'You're *Rob Roy*'s new first lieutenant.' He hesitated and added as slowly as he dared, '*Sir*.'

By the time Hargrave had crossed the deck to the other side his arrival had been noted. Both the quartermaster and gangway sentry were ready and waiting for him.

Again the salutes, then the quartermaster said, 'I'll 'ave yer case put into yer cabin, sir.'

Hargrave looked around. She seemed crammed with equipment and loose gear. But the two boats, one a whaler, looked smart enough, and the ship's bell was freshly polished.

The quartermaster's words made him turn. 'I'd better hold on until the first lieutenant has cleared out his own stuff,' he replied.

The man eyed him curiously. 'All done, sir.'

'Well, thank you.'

The seaman gestured towards a steel door. 'Wardroom's through there, sir. Time fer tea.'

I could use something stronger, Hargrave thought bitterly.

As soon as he had stepped over the lobby coaming the quartermaster said to his companion, 'Bit stuck-up, eh?'

The seaman grinned. 'The skipper'll 'ave 'im fer breakfast.'

The quartermaster rubbed his chin worriedly. 'I 'ope so.' He added, 'Never thought I'd ever miss an officer, but the old Jimmy was a good bloke.'

They lapsed into silence and waited for the watch to change.

Hargrave climbed down a steep ladder and found a white-coated petty officer checking a list against some tins of biscuits.

He gave a lop-sided grin. 'Arternoon, sir. I'm Kellett, P.O. steward. I looks after the captain an' the wardroom.' Again the grin. 'In that order, so to speak. Care for some char, sir?'

Hargrave nodded and pushed the heavy green curtain aside before stepping into the wardroom.

Like most small ships it was divided in half, if necessary by