

The story of — CYRIL EDWIN CURTIS - a Dover Seaman

— by Merril Lilley —

How to go round the world for nothing without getting your feet wet. Cyril Edwin Curtis wrote the above quotation in his diary when he volunteered for service in the Royal Navy on 22nd June, 1920, entering as a boy seaman aged fifteen. Cyril was born at 6 St. Andrews Terrace, River, on 18th February, 1905. He attended Barton Road School and teachers' reports described him as ambitious, painstaking and honest, willing and industrious.

After joining up he was sent to HMS *Ganges*, the training establishment at Shotley, Harwich. There, rated Boy 1st Class, he passed all his examinations. These included physical training, seamanship (knots, ropes, and wires), boats under oars and sail, swimming tests, educational tests and field gun training. His certificate for the educational test states that this included 9a) writing an ordinary passage in English to dictation and (b) a simple paper in the first four rules of arithmetic, simple and compound, vulgar and decimal fractions, calculation of averages and making out mess bills.

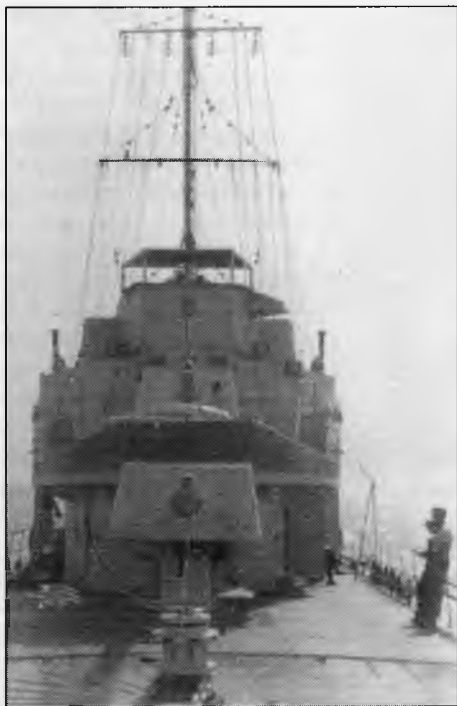
A year later in May 1921 he was drafted to HMS *Erin* at Sheerness, as a boy seaman, 1st class. HMS *Erin* was a battleship originally built for the Turkish navy and retained at the outbreak of war as a training ship for boys. By July he was transferred to HMS *Dunedin*, a 6 inch gun light cruiser, presented by the people of New Zealand. Training included fire drills, boat drills, signalling, rifle shooting, fleet exercises, gunnery, power boats and search lights. He went on training cruises

to Scotland, Ireland, Finland, Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Gibraltar and Morocco.

By February 1923 he was an Ordinary Seaman and drafted to Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham. He was just 18 years old. He continued training on various ships until he joined HMS *Cyclops* which was a submarine depot ship in the Home and Mediterranean fleet. On the *Cyclops* he cruised to Norway, Sweden, the Baltic ports, Gibraltar and the Mediterranean and passed examinations to become an Able Seaman in January 1925.



Cyril Edwin Curtis, China 1927



HMS Wild Swan at sea

In 1926 he joined *HMS Pembroke* where he served until he volunteered for foreign service in China and was sent as a replacement on *HMS Wild Swan*, China Station. He had to wait for a passage to Hong Kong, where, unfortunately, he missed the *Wild Swan*, eventually catching up with her in May 1927. Thereafter he was engaged in river and coastal patrols. 1928 saw him volunteering for river gunboats and joining *HMS Gnat* on the Yangtze, patrolling the river with anti-bandit guards and often returning bandit fire.

By September 1928 he had passed out as a Leading Seaman and he returned to England on *HMS Vindictive* in May 1930 back to RNB Chatham and *HMS Pembroke*. Always on the lookout for new experiences, Cyril next volunteered for

torpedo courses and qualified as a seaman torpedo man. He also completed a course as a heavy lorry driver, before being drafted to *HMS Wolfhound*, working with torpedoes.

Not content with all his achievements so far, in his spare time!! Cyril began a private pilot's course at Lympne and gained early experience as a pilot. He was always looking ahead and volunteering for something new. Next it was off to Australia on the *HMS Sussex*, a heavy cruiser, sailing in 1934 to Melbourne to join in the centenary celebrations with HRH Duke of Gloucester. While in Australia, based in Sydney, Cyril continued private flying lessons in his spare time and fitted in a holiday. In 1935 he was rated an Acting Leading Seaman and cruised all around Australia before the *Sussex* sailed for Malta and joined the Mediterranean fleet. The follow year he was confirmed as a Leading Seaman, the *Sussex* returned to England and the crew were paid off.

Back to *HMS Pembroke* and Cyril volunteered again, this time for a course as a naval diver and joined the *HMS Cardiff* as a reserve. About the same time he gained his pilot's licence. In December 1936 he completed his diver's course and was sent in that capacity to *HMS Cairo*, a light cruiser, at the time used as an exercise vessel and gunnery training ship, visiting home ports and Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

Never content in one job for long, Cyril next found himself in Malta as a diver on the *HMS Woolwich*. He worked on the *Woolwich* and the *Sutton* until 1939 when, with war imminent, the *Woolwich* returned, under escort, to Liverpool. Cyril, still on board the *Woolwich*, did some diving work at Scapa Flow on ruined and bombed vessels.

Back at Chatham at the beginning of the war Cyril joined *HMS Mauritius*



HMS Sussex, Sydney, Australia 1934

making cruises to Gibraltar, Colombo, Singapore and Malaya. When the Japanese advanced the *Mauritius* was recalled to Colombo. Cyril was rated as an Acting Petty Officer in 1941, which was confirmed in 1942. He was back in Malta from 1942-43 and performed salvage diver's duties until he returned to the UK in 1944. Due for his pension, in 1945, he returned for the duration of the war and in November went to Dover on HMS *Lynx* where he worked on mine recovery in Dover harbour, lifting controlled mines from the eastern entrance.

Cyril was finally discharged from the Royal Navy in April 1946 after serving for 25 years and 9 months, but this was not the end of his connections with the sea. He continued to work at many other jobs in and around Dover for the rest of his life and he kept a detailed record of all his various activities in a blue-covered school exercise book.

His first was with the Admiralty Salvage Department on the salvage vessel *Swin*, diving around the south coast. He helped remove the block ships from Dover harbour and the Mulberry units on

the Cornish coast. He also worked for Metcalf Civil Diving repairing the Eastern Arm bed. He records his work helping to lift the *Rio de Corne* with a cargo of paper, sunk at her moorings; the recovery of a pontoon sunk in the Camber entrance; the demolition of the wreck of the destroyer *Codrington* and removing her ammunition and of work on SS *Cygnat* broken in half on the Goodwin Sands.

At one stage he worked as a seaman on the tugs

Lady Brassey and *Lady Duncannon*, then from 1952 he was a crew member on British Rail vessels, *Walmer*, *Deal*, *Canterbury*, *Invicta* and *Maid of Orleans*. Later he worked on a Dover Harbour Board survey launch, *Admiral Douglas*. In 1953 he left British Rail and was back with the Admiralty Salvage Department as a diver and diving attendant, on and off until 1959, when he rejoined Dover Harbour Board as a survey launch seaman again, remaining with them until he retired on pension in 1970.

Cyril was still active for several years in various odd jobs after that, including night watchman, gardener, cook steward and guide and custodian at River Water Mill. He died on July 17, 1991, at the age of 86.

The material for this article was obtained from Marion Short, a member from Deal, who has kept all the photograph albums and notebooks of her uncle, Cyril Edwin Curtis, who was a freeman of Dover.

A shortened version of this article has been published in the magazine 'Sea Breezes'.