SLINGER

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SLINGER

The Wartime Memoirs of Royal Navy Commando Cyril Wood

Compiled & Edited by

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Hellgate Press Ashland, Oregon

Dedicated to Royal Navy veterans

A portion of the proceeds will go to The Royal British Legion—
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PREFACE

This book is a memoir. It reflects Cyril Wood's recollections of experiences from his time in the British Royal Navy during World War II. He passed away before the memoir was written down and it thus represents a collection of notes, photos and video transcripts put together by his granddaughter. Nothing has been removed from the original content or changed, although some adaptations have been made to keep the timeline as accurate as possible. It was important to his granddaughter that this book convey a true picture of who the man Cyril Wood truly was, not just in speech, but also in action. The writing is therefore in the same style as his spoken word and some of his language might occasionally be hard to understand as he uses contemporary slang. This book was written so that a unique story about a normal young man in a unique time was not lost to the ever-moving pendulum of time.

CHAPTER 1

THE VOLUNTEER

January 1939 - January 1942

Just let us NOT forget. When War broke out between England and Germany, at NO time did any of us consider defeat.

Dad (John) was a Canadian. He had been brought up there because of his mother's father's death, and of course he didn't get into the stupidity of things them days.[1] You had to wait to find lands, so it left them broke. He was lucky to get a council house in Dartford in Kent, England. So that is where I grew up. I was born as the second son of five children on 8th of November 1924 and I learned fast how to navigate the cobbled streets of Dartford. I can remember we used to stop and play marbles on our way home from school. There were hardly any cars, but there was one at the police station.

Alfreda and John Wood.

[1] The family went to be with Cyril's great grandfather when they heard news he was dying, but he lingered and they had to stay and find work. It was a long time before they could afford to return to England. John was born meanwhile.

I had this marble lined up and I was getting ready to throw. I went out into the street; this bike was coming down the hill and my right knee was busted. We went into the hospital, but they kept me in there only for two days. 'Cause my mother (Alfreda) couldn't afford to keep me in there you see. My mum got hold of a broom and she cut the handle right down so it would fit under my arm and that was my crutch. The doctor called on me at the very end to say the plaster could come of and well, back to school again.

Life was very hard when I was a youngster, it was very, very hard in the 30s. You might get a penny at the end of the week and you might not, it depended. My brother and I used to go down on the speci[2] Davey Greg's, they would have eggs from Holland, great six-foot-long boxes. We would take the boxes, we would get the managers permission to take them, he would fill the back with them you see.[3] Then we would chop them up into bundles of firewood. Chop them all day and we would end up with a couple of barrel loads of all big bundles of firewood. "Penny a bundle, penny a bundle!" Oh god almighty. We had enough for fireworks, and you know, sweets. If you had any sweets, you kept them out of sight. It hurt when you got to school if you were chewing it with your teeth you see. Put them in a basket. You got to get rid of this precious sweet. You got very, very few of them you see. You were stupid to go to school chewing; you were going there to learn. It's not that they could do too much them days.

When I left school at the age of 14. I wanted to sign on as a cabin boy and to be a real sailor. I dreamed of climbing riggings of tall ships. Ships with big sails. Ships that went to the deep

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[1] "Speci" is slang for "speculative" and/or "on the chance that."
[2] They were punished in school for eating in class.

seas, but that dream had soon been knocked out of my silly head. As I was told, "You will work and bring home money like your brothers and father." You had no choice being in a family of seven. Three boys, Ron, me and Eddie and two girls, Ruth and Joyce. I went to work, errand boy as I was, for all of five shillings for a 48-hour week. This you gave to your mother and each day you received one penny: Your bus fare to work. You could never be late to the bus! Or else you walked home.

In the times before the Second World War we just heard a lot of talk, and if it did develop, it would be over within a few months, that was the general opinion. No arguing about that. We were just a famous country that had won wars before and no one should even dare to go against us. I don't know, it sounds big-headed now, but that is what we genuinely believed. We didn't know the might, the true might. All that sort of thing was hushed down, and most papers was Tory controlled. We didn't realize the intensity of it all, I am sure of that. That is a plain straightforward speech as far as I am concerned. I can't think of any other way to explain it.

I didn't realize the War was starting before the bombing started. You would be down in the shelters, you would hear these bombs whistling down and oh dear, oh dear, absolute murder. It really was. We decided to go down into the tube station at London and places like that. It was safer down there and we would set up home down there. It really, really was bad. It hit us then, it really did. We were still cheeky though. We were going to win. There was no question about that whatsoever and when the War was declared it didn't really matter that much to us. There was an air raid alert, but there was just a stray airplane in the sky. Us boys, being cheeky, we were up top looking around to see if we could see anything. It didn't really mean a

lot to us really. Chamberlain was the Prime Minister then. He would be in the paper, "peace forever more." Bullshit. The unification of eastern London, you would never meet it anywhere else. We were all united in the belief, it would go in our favor. Get in and get it done with. Finished.

In 1939 I was only a young lad of 15 years; my oldest brother Ron was about 19 and Eddie the next oldest brother was 17. Ron had been a Territorial[4] and so had his call up a few days before War was declared and so went in at once in 1939. Dad had walked, like so many fathers to the Territorial Hall in Dartford with his sons and given Ron the last handshake. His words were: "Go, lad, and finish what we were not allowed to do in the Great War."

My dad was talking to a few of the older men himself. "Hope to God it doesn't last as long as the last one did."

"Nah, nah, Germany isn't that strong."

Everyone was quite convinced it would be over before Christmas, more or less you know, it was proved different wasn't it. So, we said goodbye and bought some fish and chips for three pennies wrapped up in a piece of paper and jum on the way home. Well I know Ron's troops went in to a coast somewhere and eventually they joined into the army going over to France. And then "Who do you think you are kidding?"[5] Poor bugger got back from the hell at the Dunkirk beaches. He was broken and finished as a fighting man when we really wanted to return, taking the Lowland's (Holland and Belgium) and France. Then swarm (re-invade) to the side and then he was going back again, I just felt sorry for them you know. And wanted to give comfort to all them that got home, but a lot of people got telegrams and

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[4] A reserve troop in the Territorial Army.
[5] This is Cyril's joke referencing to his favorite TV show, "Dad's Army." The quote is from the show's theme song.

letters, unfortunately your son was reportedly killed, etc. etc. and that was it. He didn't get back the second time, so after the letter, money is all that we got. To this day none of us know where he was buried. There were thousands like him. The Germans had shovelled them up and dumped them. In the big pits. Like all the poor old Jews. It was really callous, wasn't it, the way they treated them Jews. Well, that's how they treated the army, not much difference, it was the enemy. Then Eddie received his calling-up papers about 1940-41 and he was conscripted into the army. What he told me about life in the army convinced me. It was the Navy for me.

I myself could not wait for my letter to be recruited. Like so, so many more, I volunteered at the age of 17, to enlist in the Royal Navy. Ron was already dead at that point and Eddie was called to France with the army. I just went down to Chatham and I volunteered in there.

"Hello lad, have you come to volunteer?" he says. "What's your name, where you live? Show us your birth certificate."

I answered: "I aint got it."

He continued: "What do you mean you aint got it, you a bastard?"

"No, I ain't." I responded, but you know they had to know all the details you see.

I said: "My mother couldn't find it for me" I got in.

"Right." he says, "You will be hearing from us."

They accepted I would be 18 in the year of 1941. I was only about 16 and a half, 17. Anyway, that was a couple of months before November which is my birthday, you see. If you left it until when you were 18, you had no choice but to be in the army. However, if you volunteered earlier you could choose where you would serve. I joined the Navy I just wanted to go to

sea. It just sort of fascinated me. It's in my blood. One of my forefathers must have been in one of these wooden ships sailing away, I don't know, but I was just in no doubt, army, never, never. I was content with the idea, but I had a hell of a lot to learn about life at sea. I was missing my brothers you know, I was missing everything. In our youths we wanted to get into it. I can't say anything else. I don't know what else to say, it was pure ignorance really. I felt a deep desire to be a sailor in the Royal Navy. Thus, I volunteered.

I shall never forget the birthday present I received from our King! Of all people, the best present I ever wished for, because now, no longer would I dream only of going to sea, I was on my way. My acceptance into the Royal Navy in the form of a letter. My call up for service came on my birthday, 4 November 1941, right before Christmas. It stated to report on 5 January 1942. My mum didn't know whether to cry or, as was quite usual these days, box my ears!

"He is only 17, I will stop it." she said to dad.

"Not much point in stopping that." said solid old dad.

"The lad has got what he has always wanted. If we keep him, he will only end up as gun fodder like our other boys."

Our dad had volunteered to fight, enlisted in Oshawa, Canada in 1915, and as some of his battles were in the Somme and Ypres. Well, he knew all about trench warfare, and surely went with the B.E.F.[6] to France. Our proud Army, they chucked the 'Jerries' out of Europe! It was hard to believe, even harder to understand why he didn't follow the defeated army but thank god he didn't. Otherwise I wouldn't be writing now. You don't really talk about it. That is to say, I used to say to him. "Dad, dad, dad what did you do? Where did you go?" and all these sort of things. You would get a belt, one to the ear, you know,

[6] British Expeditionary Force.

Cyril's dad, John Wood (*second on left*), in WWI.

"Shut up!"

Yeah, you know I asked him why he didn't go back to Canada. I suppose the memories were too strong, he didn't want to talk about it. However, he was the type of man who would usually tip his hat to everybody, especially if he wore a bowler hat. I would ask him,

"Dad, dad what you are doing that for?"

He would respond: "Oh you have to show respect to your betters."

"Dad, dad, what's your betters?"

Too many questions was enough for him: "Well, shut up!"

He was not like me. I have been a true Labour[7] man my whole life you see. I can't abide all this snobbery, I am a very down-to-earth man, you do it or you don't. I have asked nothing from nobody and what I have got is through sheer hard work.

[7] The British Labour Party.

On reflection, I am lucky even to be alive and writing considering I went to hell and back on quite a few occasions. But, of course how was I to know what I know now? And so, I waited from November to January.

The evening before I was to report to Chatham head barracks my father said to me,

"Well son, you will be a man tomorrow so you will come out with me tonight and take a drink?"

Little did he know I well knew how to drink and smoke. As the bombs dropped, we were all pressed to do fire watching. Each night was a half a crown. Two shillings and six pence. Who wanted sleep for such riches? We got a pint for four pence and ten Woodbines[8] cost the same. It gave us a kick to act the man and of course to be such! However, in his down right way he solemnly gave me half a pint of beer.

"Learn to drink slowly." he advised me. "And don't drink often."

Then he gave me my sex education.

"Now lad, there are two kinds of women you will meet, good and bad. Keep away from the bad ones."

I wondered how I was going to be able to tell apart the good from the bad. Sad to say. As a sailor you only meet the bad ones, but you get more fun with the naughty girls. I was soon to find out that good girls never wanted to, "touch your dicky for good luck sailor!" The dicky is the blue collar that hangs down the back of a sailor's jumper. My mother could do nothing to stop it. She wouldn't come to the station with me, though. Dad did. He said goodbye to me.

"Look after yourself, lad," he said.

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[8] A brand of cigarettes.

Cyril in uniform, 1941.

We just shook hands and I got in the train at Chatham and he went back home. To comfort mum, I suppose. 'Cause I was being such a fool, you see. I was eager, you know, like most of us. Just wanted to get in. There were a few other lads going with me, we gathered at Dartford station. Ah, I remember one bloke, his name was "Mills" – Fedgiemills.[9] He was a cheeky bastard and a few others.

[9] Mills was his nickname.

CHAPTER 2

TRAINING

5 January 1942 – April 1942

From Chatham a crowd of us were sent on to H.M.S Collingwood. No, it wasn't a wooden training ship. Much to my disgust it was a hard-shore training barracks. Situated in Fareham, Hants.[10] I was to go down to H.M.S. Collingwood as an off-flow from the Pompey Portsmouth barracks. Down near Portsmouth, but still in the country a bit. I was assigned the foretop division in three sections and I started the most gruelling weeks of my life. I mean really, knock, knock, I woke up. Oh god almighty. Life changed, harsh and hard. At the gates a leathery bullnecked old Petty Officer yelled out.

"Right," he said, "Out herem you are free."

He said, "Now, all the babies, turn around and go back home, cause once you cross these gates you is in the Navy, understand? And in 'ere you do exactly as you is told. You may have broken your mother's heart, but you won't break mine. Now go fall in, your horrible god Jerusalem lot. Oh god help the Royal Navy. Jump lively, at least ACT as if you are human beings!"

Not one of us moved, and he is going, "March!" so we shuffled in.

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[10] Short for Hampshire.

We had travelled all day, so we were marched left, right. "Don't you know your left from your right? Keep in step!" Suitcases banging our legs and this pure demon! He certainly never revealed that he was in the least bit human in the whole ten weeks we stayed there training. Marched our - now quite miserable and defeated lot - to the mess hall. Our meal, that I shall never forget, was bully beef cold and beetroot, with two thick slices of bread and a mug of tea. Laced with plenty of bromide. When we complained about the taste of the tea, we were told, it's to stop you from having wet dreams. Most of the food was rejected.

"No matter," said leathery petty officer,

"You'll be picking it out of the dust bins in two days."

Then, WE WAS! However, from there, we were taken to, Slop Alley. You take what's given you. First a hat, twice too large was given me. It didn't rest on my ears, it came over them. As I went down to him, I got a violent push, "Go back, you silly-looking sod and get another hat, a size too small! 'Cause once you get a proper hair cut tomorrow it will fit you fine." leathery man shouted at me. It was bedlam. Socks, singlets and pants, jersey, a complete sailor's suit. Wellingtons, Sou' wester,[11] and a shapeless oilskin black mug that almost matched the deck, and a hammock, and one blanket.

We were taken to the doctor's. "Strip for short arm." What the devil is short arm? I soon learned, a pencil jabbed and twiddled my penis by a very energetic young doctor.

"No crabs, no scabies," he sang out to the person taking notes.

"Move along, all in the same breath, put your hand on your hips," a new voice penetrated my brain.

A blunt needle jabbed my arm, "Ouch! That hurt" I yelled.

"Move along" a toneless voice ordered me.

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[11] An oilskin hat.

The whole line of us were subjected to the most horrifying indignations. Your arm pits and even anus was thoroughly investigated. Were we human? I had strange ideas now that we must certainly be not.

Especially when at last we were told: "You lot, a bunch of shivering humanity, you can get dressed now."

Oh god, the arm that had gotten the needle was stiff, and getting more painful by the minute. A sailor's suit is something you struggle into. When you are drunk it is hilariously funny to watch a man getting in or out of it. With the jab it was pure murder, his Leatheryness was now indeed happy. It was the only moment I ever saw him grinning as he gave his eager help pulling the tunic over our heads. "You'll be men by the time that I am finished with you!" He didn't mind one bit being called a bastard: "So are you, my lucky lads," was all he said.

Loaded, we tumbled out and were marched to our quarters. "Foretops" From mission huts with bare frame bunk beds. What a godforsaken dump?! I was beginning to wish Mum had stopped me. The language was shocking, you know. We were used to a certain amount but not that bad, you know. Yeah, gods forsaken. Insubordination. Anything you did that was not in accordance with the rules and regulations, you were on a charge, insubordination. If you could pronounce it like them Petty Officers used to and you a very good imitator, we dreaded the word. Yeah, that first night we lived in huts. I picked the upper bunk and some other sniffy little twit got the one beneath me. Him and I would argue and the petty officer would say, "Shut up!" and a boot was flying through the air, whack. It was a rude awakening to reality. All I can say. We rolled our blanket about ourselves and as "lights out", a gunshot sounded. I heard not a few lads crying.

What is that unearthly noise? I shot out of my bed. My five-

shilling watch said it was only five thirty in the morning. Leathery's voice, full of glee in a booming sadistic style shouted.

"Wakey wakey, hands off cocks, on socks! Outside in singlets and shorts in five minutes for a nice trot." It was deep in snow that morning and in pure misery we obeyed. "A warm-up run, it's good for you, keep moving!" Gradually the ice-caked bodies melted as round the façade ground, we ran. Leathery loved every moment, he was nicely wrapped up, so he just stood and shouted, lots of words I yet was to learn! Back to our hut, "Dress, switch to trousers and all outside in fifteen minutes!" and, still very dark and cold, we were marched to the mess hall. After all that you went to breakfast and by then you would eat anything, and I mean anything. 'Cause it wasn't the best of breakfasts I can assure you. Not lovely oaty toastie or this, that or the other, not lots of nice milk, no nah. You got some crusted bread or bully beef. I guess we did get a bit of powdered eggs from America. Your bread you couldn't see the margarine on it. They had spread a knife over it, you know, very little margarine on it. But you start to learn to enjoy anything. Rashers of bacon and hot tinned tomatoes, bread, we called it red lead, and the mug of tea with bromide. I turned to my new mate beside me saying, "Not bad! Bacon smells nice.", I then, picking up knife and fork, looked at my plate for said bacon. After that meal I never ever took my eyes from my plate. The bacon had disappeared in a flash. Not an eye looked at me as wolfish jaws gobbled, and I thought I was nimble? Such a lot did I have to learn.

Then you do your morning action whatever you do, learn this, learn that. Climbing up ropes and going down ladders. Marching and you know. We had to learn a lot just like ordinary pongos.[12] You had to learn it because you never knew where

[12] Navy slang for land Army soldiers.

you might end up. We had to learn how to use a rifle. We were taught to tie knots and splice besides all sorts of other training. Then, we were taken to a very deep and very large indoor pool. "All jump in!" Most of us did, those that didn't were pushed in. Our enjoyment was short-lived, ropes were thrown to us, "Tread water and tie a bowline round yourselves," shouted Leathery. Our best friend by now. We all hated him as much as he seemingly hated us. When we were pulled to the side, IF the knot was perfect you got pulled out, otherwise a big boot pushed you far out again, like drowned rats. Eventually, we all made our escape, lesson well learned. Tie it right and tie it FAST. We had to learn it all.

We were taken into Portsmouth harbour to learn how to row boats and that was funny too, that really was. Rowing was taken seriously, you know, because if you had to take the boats, if you were torpedoed, you had to know how to handle it, you know what I mean. We always had a petty officer in charge of us. And you know, at daytime he got off, glad to get away from us all, you know. We learned how to row and how to do this and that the general, very, very brief. We only got to see them once. We were only there for ten weeks. Like all Jack-the-Lads we had our fights. In our seven-and-a-half weeks seamanship training and two-and-a-half weeks gunnery training, but after ten weeks I knew I felt better. Fitter and definitely more alive. Also, we received an extra one shilling a day after a while because the skipper did not take long to get two or three of us made up to AB, able seaman. We then got a two-week leave. A railway warrant to home, sweet home. Our pay was of one shilling a day, out of the seven shillings a week I had saved those and sixpence. I had 35, -, one whole pound and fifteen shillings. 1,75 pounds in present day money. I felt a king above all kings.

Cyril (*center*) meeting with his mates on first leave.

Dad was so pleased with me, I enjoyed a handshake. We went out twice together and I drank all I wanted. Eddie was unable to get home on leave, but I did enjoy that leave. I have forgotten my sister Joyce had been in W.R.A.C, air force, for nearly a year, but had been released out, suffering TB,[13] and was in hospital. She had had me writing letters to what she called a wonderful nurse. Naturally I was eager to meet her on this leave. I went

[13] TB stands for tuberculosis.

with my mother to visit her and had chocolate for both her and the nurse. Oh yes, it was all arranged. We would go out.

Joyce said to me after a while, "Oh here is your date for tonight."

I took one look at the massively built young nurse and promptly dived under the bed. Her two very strong hands grabbed my ankles and pulled me out.

"What are you looking for under the bed?" she asked me with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh, your chocolates," I lamely replied. She then had them eaten inside a couple of minutes. "Nice," she said, smacking my shoulders. That made me stagger.

"Now let's go and get a real meal." Helplessly I appealed to Mum and Joyce, but they slyly giggled.

"You'll be well looked after, off you go," said my mother. I did eventually escape her clutches, but I never forgave my sister.

The leave gone all too soon, my railway warrant was made out for Calshot Southampton. This place I discovered was a fairly small naval gunnery training school within a large RAF base. You had to learn a few bits and pieces about different guns. One had a big four-inch gun in it; run with the shell and put it in the breech. The training we received was on anti-aircraft guns. The importance of defence against the sky was very well known by then. Many good ships had been sunk, both by torpedoes from other boats, also by aircraft who had bombs as well. A German Stuka Dive Bomber screaming down out of the sky put the fear of god into you and so – when you didn't hit him – despite the constant barrage we put up – and Skipper, skilful, hard port or hard starboard, had the bombs falling into the noggin sea, mostly.

I liked the Oerlikon straight away. Sixty one-pound shells

automatic could be shot off within thirty-seven seconds. A French gun air cooled, to save having to change barrel, which soon got red hot. Kept you mindful to fire short bursts. The air force would send up a plane pulling a long drag on an even larger rope. "You fire at the drag not the F… plane you stupid B… !!!" I was enjoying myself strapped in and able to swing the barrel. And you don't waste ammo, the poor pilot always wrote their will and last letter before they took off. Friendship in that divided camp was totally non-existent. At the end I was awarded AA2 rating. This meant I could wear a badge with a barrel and receive threepence a day extra pay. One shilling and nine pence a week. Now I was beginning to earn big money! You are in the Navy, so you are now MEN. Yes, it was sheer hell and truly hard, especially after so short a time, and after ten days' leave, I was on a train to Scotland. To the Clyde to join a Flower class corvette to begin.