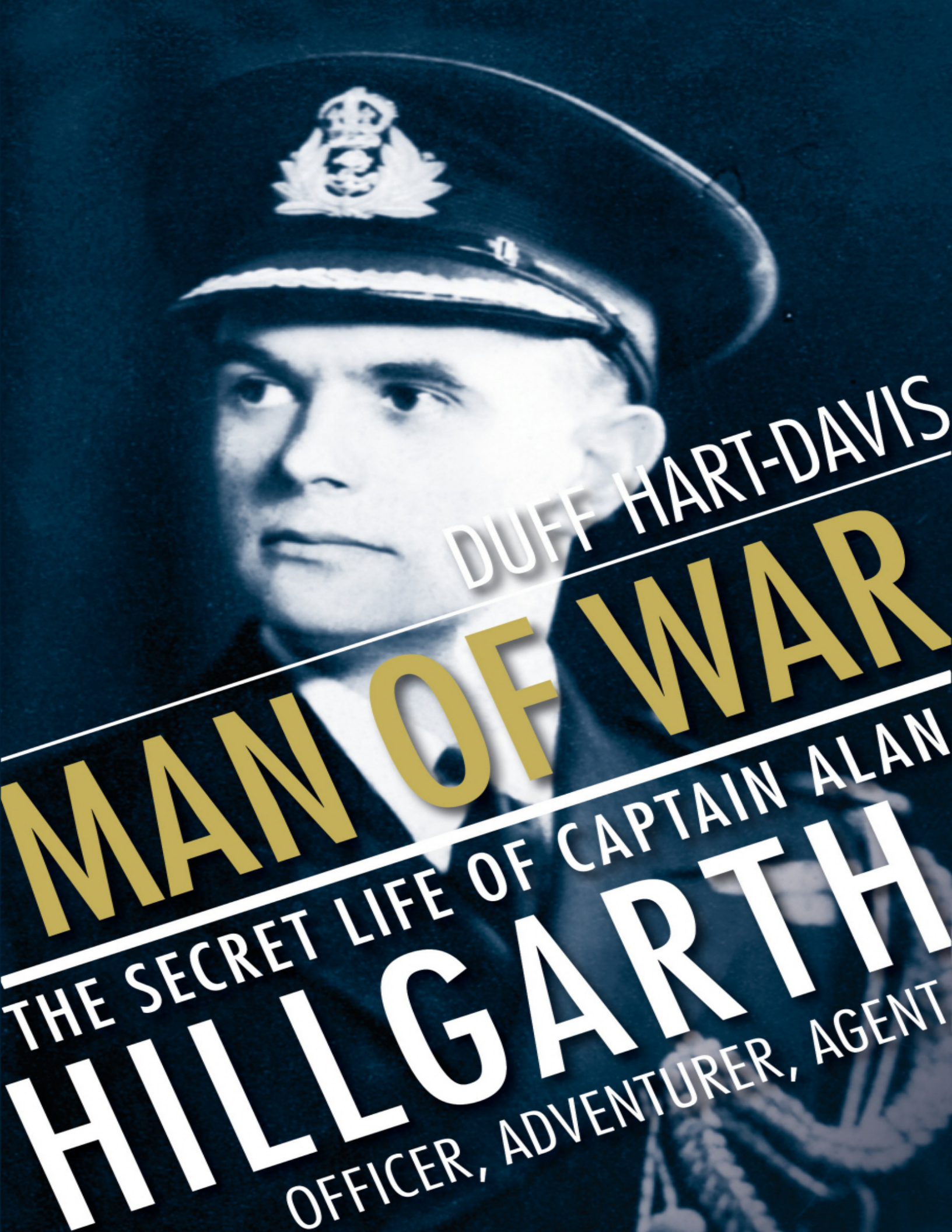

DUFF HART-DAVIS

MAN OF WAR

THE SECRET LIFE OF CAPTAIN ALAN HILLGARTH

OFFICER, ADVENTURER, AGENT

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About the Book

‘A lot of people know me,’ wrote Alan Hillgarth, late in life ‘but I’m very much an enigma to most of them. I’m a trouble-maker. I ride the storm.’

He was barely out of short trousers when he found himself thrust into the horrors of the First World War. Within months, still only 16, he had fought at close quarters in Gallipoli, bayoneted an attacking Turkish soldier, and had been shot in the head and leg. That was just the start of his adventures.

After the war, he became an author of thrillers, a gold-hunter in South America, a diplomat and a spy-master. As British Consul in Majorca during the Spanish Civil War he saved countless lives acting as mediator between the two sides. During World War II he was Britain’s most important intelligence officer in Spain and one of the key players in the successful Allied deception Operation Mincemeat.

Later, he became Chief of Intelligence for the Eastern Fleet, in Ceylon, where his bravery, dedication and acumen accelerated the defeat of Japan and greatly advanced the Allied cause. After the war he retired to Ireland, happy to live out of the spotlight. But he remained a valued advisor and confidant to Churchill, who once said of him, ‘Hillgarth is pretty good.’

With exclusive access to the family archive, Hart-Davis has written a gripping, moving account of a hitherto-neglected

hero, uncovering the truth about an era shrouded in mystery and a man who wanted it that way.

About the Author

Duff Hart-Davis has written and edited over fifty books on a wide variety of subjects, including eight adventure novels and the *Sunday Times* bestseller *The War That Never Was*, an enthralling account of the secret war fought by British mercenaries in the Yemen during the 1960s.

He worked on the *Sunday Telegraph* as Literary Editor and feature writer and as a columnist for the *Independent*. Together with his wife Phyllida, he now lives on the Cotswold escarpment.

DUFF HART-DAVIS

MAN OF WAR

THE SECRET LIFE OF CAPTAIN ALAN HILLGARTH

OFFICER, ADVENTURER, AGENT

CENTURY · LONDON

Author’s Note

The subject of this book was christened George Hugh Jocelyn Evans, and as a boy was called Hugh. Later he changed his name to Alan Hugh Hillgarth, and for the rest of his life he was known as Alan. I have called him Hugh for as long as the family did, and then switched to Alan.

For Jocelyn, Justin, Tristan and Nigella

Introduction

When my wife and I moved to Co. Tipperary early in 1978, we soon heard that a former naval officer called Alan Hillgarth had retired to a big white house called Illannanagh on the shore of Lough Derg. Locals spoke of him not exactly with awe, but with curiosity, as if there was some mystery about him: they could not quite make him out.

They knew he had a naval background, because he styled himself 'Captain', but they had no idea what ships he had sailed in or what campaigns he had fought. He had been – they thought – some kind of a spy. Rumour had it that he was a friend and confidant of the wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill – but again, no one was sure of details. People felt he must have some connection with Spain, for he wore Spanish-style hats, and a long, black cloak lined with scarlet at the hunt ball, and he employed Spanish servants. Indeed, with his rather dark complexion and bushy black eyebrows, he might well *be* Spanish. But what he had done in Spain, nobody could tell. All people knew for certain was that he had a boat on the lake, that he walked around his modest estate a good deal, and that he loved trees: he had his staff plant hundreds, and he was often to be seen pruning them, always wearing a jacket and tie.

We never met Hillgarth, alas, for he died a few months after we had arrived in the neighbourhood. Over the years I

continued to hear snippets of information about him, but it was only when I began to research his career that I realised what an extraordinary life he had led. All the rumours, it turned out, had some foundation, but many more facets of his existence had remained hidden.

He had indeed, mainly by chance, become a man of war. He had served in the Royal Navy, and he had been wounded in the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of 1915–16 when only sixteen. He had hunted for gold in the Andes. In the 1930s he was British Consul in Majorca during the Spanish Civil War, during which he saved hundreds of lives. He was also involved with espionage in various difficult environments, most notably in Madrid from 1939 to 1943, when he ran a network of secret agents and struggled to keep Spain out of the world war. He was indeed a friend and confidant of Churchill, with whom he corresponded during and after the war, and as Chief of British Naval Intelligence in the Far East he made a significant contribution to the ultimate victory over Japan in 1945.

One of Hillgarth's most attractive characteristics was his lack of conventional ambition. He never wanted to become an admiral or to command a fleet. What he *did* want was to do his duty whenever called upon, and in many fields he was conspicuously successful.

The reason for his obscurity is simple. Not only was he extremely modest, never boasting about his achievements, but he was also outstandingly patriotic and discreet, believing that naval and military secrets should never be disclosed, even in peacetime. Although frequently urged to write his memoirs, he declined to do so for fear that any release of classified information might be of advantage to potential enemies.

In a letter he once wrote, 'A lot of people know me, but I'm very much an enigma to most of them' – and so he remained, to the end of his days. It was my good fortune to make contact with his children, and, when they generously

put their papers at my disposal, I saw that their father had lived a fascinating and much more important life than the world had yet suspected.

Duff Hart-Davis
Uley
Gloucestershire
March 2012

List Of Acronyms

ADM	Admiralty
C	Head of the Secret Intelligence Service
CBNIET	Chief of British Naval Intelligence, Eastern Theatre
CMG	Companion of St Michael and St George
COIS	Chief of Intelligence Staff
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
ENIGMA	German code cracked by the listening station at Bletchley Park
FO	Foreign Office
H/F D/F or HUFF-DUFF	High-frequency direction-finding
HE	High explosive
HMG	His Majesty's Government
MI5	Government security service
MI6	Government intelligence service, operating overseas - same as SIS
NA	Naval Attaché
NID	Naval Intelligence Department
OBE	Order of the British Empire
PRO	Public Record Office (same as National Archives)
RIAS	Royal Institute of International Affairs
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RM	Royal Marines
RN	Royal Navy
SEAC	South East Asia Command
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service - same as MI6
Snotty	A midshipman
SO, SO1, SO2	Early versions of
SOE	Special Operations Executive
WRNAS	Women's Royal Naval Australian Service
WRNS	Women's Royal Naval Service ('Wrens')

1

Mobilise!

'DEAR DADDY,' WROTE Hugh Evans to his father from the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth on 14 July 1914. 'I don't expect that you thought we might be mobilised. Well, we *are going to mobilise*, directly a telegram is received from the Admiralty.'

> We had a long lecture from the skipper last night and have five hours to get on board the specials at Kingswear [railway station], if the telegram comes. We must have our chests and all our gear with us … Mind, all this is only precaution. If the telegram comes I go to Chatham and join my ship, the *Bacchante*. She's a very old cruiser flying an admiral's flag. I am the senior in our party of nine … We should have 1/- a day and would soon be midshipmen and perhaps go on landing parties or be present in some big naval battle.
>
> Remember, daddy dear, this is all supposition and precaution.
>
> Goodbye, daddy dear,
>
> Remember, Your loving son, G.H.J. Evans.
>
> P.S. I may go now.
>
> I may go tonight.

I may go tomorrow.
I may not go at all.
P.P.S. Don't worry and don't let mother worry.[1]

He went. Two weeks later he sent a telegram: MOBILISING CHATHAM NOW HUGH ADDRESS BACCHANTE. He was fifteen years and two months old, and had barely started what should have been a two-year training course at Dartmouth. But before his first term was over, along with 433 other boys much the same age he was suddenly catapulted into service by the imminent outbreak of the First World War.

His next letter home reported a frantic dash to Chatham, the naval dockyard on the River Medway in Kent:

2 August 1914 HMS *Bacchante*, Chatham
Sunday Afternoon

Dear Daddy
At five minutes to four yesterday everybody was carrying on as usual when suddenly the word was given to mobilise and we all rushed off. We travelled all night and I slept on the rack. We arrived at Chatham barracks at 2.30 am and slept on the floor of the gym. This morning we joined our ships. I am in the *Bacchante* and the 3rd cruiser squadron. I expect we shall go out and convoy merchantmen in the Atlantic, or we might go into the Baltic … Anyhow we get 2/6 a day war pay and a medal at the end. I'll write as often as I can. We are acting midshipmen and if the war lasts some time will be made snotties [midshipmen].

He had to cut the letter short because he was wanted in his gun turret 'to fuse lyddite[2] shells'. Already he was 'second-in-command of the fore barbette. The lieutenant

commander is in charge, but I do all [the] work except during battle. I expect I shall get some prize money.'

Bacchante was a veteran – a Cressy-class armoured cruiser laid down in 1899, 472 feet long, steam-powered, with four tall, vertical funnels amidships and a curved, underslung bow that protruded at the waterline, for ramming. Her main armament consisted of two 9.2-inch guns, one mounted fore and one aft, and twelve 6-inch. Her top speed was a paltry twenty-one knots.

Her skipper was Captain Algy Boyle, a younger son of the Earl of Shannon. Hugh never liked this bachelor and strict disciplinarian: he felt that Boyle had a down on him, and the other midshipmen were scared of the captain, although admitting that he was efficient and sometimes very kind. The crew included nineteen former policemen, one of whom was Leading Signalman Ryan, a tall, hefty fellow with a drooping moustache. Conversations with him always ended the same way. 'See this scar,' he would say, holding up a thumb. 'Bitten by Miss Sylvia Pankhurst,[3] I was, while trying to arrest her.'

On 4 August 1914 – the day war was declared – *Bacchante* set out as part of Cruiser Force C, accompanied by her sister ships *Euryalus*, *Aboukir*, *Hogue* and *Cressy*, to patrol the area of the North Sea known as the Broad Fourteens. Four days later, back in Deal, the crew learnt that the scout cruiser *Amphion*, with which they had been working, had been sunk by a mine with the loss of 150 men, and that they themselves had steamed through the middle of a minefield. 'Our escape was miraculous,' wrote Able Seaman W. Chesterton in his diary, 'owing to the vastness of the field and [the fact] that our movements were restricted to that area.'[4]

That same day, 8 August, Hugh thanked his mother for some things she had sent:

> The wristwatch is top hole. We are going somewhere (I can't say and don't quite know yet) and it is very likely that I shan't be able to write for some time … I am awfully pleased with Uncle C's [field] glasses. They are topping, and it's awfully decent of him to lend them to me.

His next letter home bore no date – an unusual lapse for him – and struck an ominous note:

> They read all letters going out, so I can't tell you where I am. Don't be surprised if I don't write for a month or so. If you hear that my ship has gone down, you'll know I've gone with it. The war may last for a month, or three, or six, or a year or even more. I don't know and can't guess.

The old cruisers were sailing north-east, and on 25 August Hugh had another chance to write when *Bacchante* put into port to refuel. The scent of battle had evidently sharpened his appetite for a fight – but by then the censors were at work, and some of his words had been heavily crossed out with a blue pencil:

> We are now coaling at XXXXX and tomorrow will start XXXXX. We are going to be painted a light grey so that we shall be less discernible … We have been all over the shop, sometimes XXXXX sometimes XXXXX, sometimes off XXXXX, once off XXXXX.
>
> Sometimes I can't realise that we are at war. It's all so peaceful … Yet, by God, if I don't have some chance of smashing a German I'll go mad. Are they *civilised?* Are they *men?* They are *barbarians, animals, worse than beasts, brutes, cowards, fiends!!* So it is here with every man jack aboard. We're all

> burning to cut the throats of the devils, and when we get at them, they won't like it.
>
> We have to keep watches at night – and two or three during the day … My station in night watches is the conning tower. I have to control and direct by megaphone the starboard twelve-pounders and two six-inch guns on the starboard side. I have to report where the shot falls and correct the range and deflection so that the shots hit the target.

Three days later British and German warships clashed in the first battle of Heligoland Bight, the large bay on the north-east German coast. Cruiser Force C did not become involved in the strung-out engagement, merely acting as a screen, but Hugh got his first real taste of war when *Bacchante* took on casualties, and he was required to help the ship's doctor, Staff Surgeon Murray Levick, by throwing amputated limbs over the side. The experience does not seem to have disturbed him. 'We were in the manoeuvre but didn't fight,' he told his mother. 'We brought many wounded home to Chatham and some dead.'

There, on 22 September, dire news reached the crew over the wireless. Three of their sister ships – *Aboukir*, *Cressy* and *Hogue* – had been torpedoed and sunk in a murderous attack by a single U-boat, all within the space of a few minutes. More than 800 men had been rescued, but 1,459 had died, among them thirteen of Hugh's contemporaries, less than a month into their naval careers. Later it transpired that, because of exceptionally bad weather, the cruisers had been steaming at only ten knots, instead of the thirteen recommended, and that their captains had ignored the order to zigzag, because they thought there were no German submarines in the area. Hugh was shocked by the sight of the midshipmen who survived, coming back in a Dutch vessel. 'They were absolutely done … Several had spent *three hours* in the

water. Most had fainted. Some had become delirious when pulled out.'

The disaster provoked an outcry in the newspapers. As one of Hugh's shipmates, Eric Bush,[5] put it, 'A section of the British public[6] could not understand how we boys could be of any use on board a ship in the grim business of war, and demanded our recall to the College.' Other people held different views. It was pointed out that one newly commissioned officer, Midshipman Cazalet of the *Cressy*, using a whaler, had picked up eighty-eight survivors, including the ship's captain, and the *Morning Post* published a letter from 'The Mother of a Dartmouth Cadet':

> If my son[7] can best serve England by giving his life for her, I would not lift one finger to bring him home. If any act or word of mine should interfere with or take him from his grandest privilege, I could never look him in the face again.

In the middle of the summer term Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, had visited the College at Dartmouth, where he inspected the cadets and seemed pleased with their standard. Now he pitched into argument. Writing to the Marquess of Crewe, Lord President of the Council, he declared:

> It wd. be a vy harsh measure[8] to deprive these young boys of an experience wh they will always look back to, & from wh their professional value is sensibly increased. We have had piteous appeals from the parents of the Osborne cadets to allow their boys to go. I am assured they render useful services. It has always been the custom of the Navy; & for myself I cannot see much difference in the tragedy of a young life cut short at 16 or at 17.

> I have satisfied myself that naval opinion supports the present Admiralty practice. I asked that it shd be carefully re-considered; but we were found united in keeping the lads at sea to take their chance.

Eric Bush was strongly on Churchill's side, and recorded that 'we all prayed that we would not be sent back to the College'.[9] Hugh was equally undaunted, for life at sea had taken a powerful grip of him.

> Mother dear, do you realise that this war means that I will never go back to Dartmouth? Do you realise that in all probability I shall have several *years*' leave? That half the navy will be disbanded and the other half do very little work? That thousands of officers and men will chuck up the service and strike out for themselves?
>
> I'll stick to it, for it's the breath of life to me. I couldn't live without the sea, and I love it. I used to think that there could be other professions better, brighter, happier, and even sometimes I have hated it. Several times I cursed myself for ever going down to the sea. Now I understand.
>
> I have not set foot on dry ground for six and a half weeks … and how time has flown! Seven weeks gone like a day, and I scarcely feel it. Well, it's the sea that does it. When I feel the long, merry roll and heaving, jerky pitch of the old tub, I seem to roll and pitch with it, as though I were part of it and shared it. I love it.

By then he had got the measure of his fourteen- and fifteen-year-old colleagues, and his view of them was by no means indulgent:

> The other chaps here aren't bad. *Dixon* you know through his mater. He's not bad. I don't like him very, very much, as he's rather a swine at times. Then *Bashall* is quite decent … although he's quite a swine sometimes. *Bush* is awfully decent and pure as anything. He's very small and I have always liked him. *Vereker's* not bad,[10] is the nephew of Jellicoe and Madden. He's no swine. Then there's *Barclay*. He's rather a bumptious ass, Canadian and thinks a lot of himself. Otherwise quite decent, and not a swine.
>
> Mind, Daddy, I don't expect you to show this part about the other chaps to anyone but mother & Anne [Hamilton, a lifelong friend of the family]. Then *Tennant, J.*,[11] is rather a prig and very rich … He's not bad and not a swine. He's Asquith's nephew. His father is Under-Secretary for war, and rather a fool, I believe. *Phipps* is rather a fool …

Like the other acting midshipmen, Hugh had one primary source of supply – a Mecca among emporia – in the form of the naval outfitters Gieves.[12] Even before boys gained admittance to Osborne, the firm sent every potential cadet a telegram of congratulations, by implication soliciting his custom; and Hugh, succumbing to this overture, had opened an account at the company's establishment in Chatham. He then had frequent recourse to Gieves whenever he wanted clothes or other equipment. 'Please ask mother what she's done about my winter underclothing,' he wrote, 'and write and tell me quick. Tell me everything she's ordered at Gieves's for me. Don't order anything more. I shall order what I want.' Later he called for

4 pairs of spare Gieves midshipman's patches
1 pair of sock suspenders
2 writing pads (thick paper with envelopes)

10 small buttons as on uniform waistcoats
25 large buttons as on uniform coats
One old badge if you can find one

You can get the buttons off my old uniform monkey jackets, coat collars and waistcoats. I want them for white uniforms, and it’s hard to get buttons in XXXX.

He could not say where he was going; but white uniforms obviously signified a hot climate: *Bacchante* was on her way south, to Malta, Port Said and the nightmare of Gallipoli.

2

Early Days

HUGH WAS BORN in London on 7 June 1899, the second son of a leading London surgeon, Willmott Evans, who specialised in diseases of the skin and, at the age of forty, was widely known both as a practising doctor and as a man of exceptional erudition. An ardent bibliophile, author of a far-ranging survey of current practice, *Medical Science of Today*, and fluent enough in German to have translated Nobiling and Jankau's *Handbuch der Prophylaxe*, he was sufficiently versatile to have coached students in thirty different subjects. He was never one to suffer fools, and used to tell his children that when he explained something to them, it should be 'clear even to the meanest intellect'.

He is said to have spoken twelve languages, and his mild eccentricities included a passion for collecting; among the objects which cluttered his London house were a stuffed gorilla, prehistoric axe-heads and Roman water pipes dug up elsewhere in London. He seldom if ever asked patients to pay their bills, but devoted enormous energy to his work: his monumental study *Diseases of the Breast*, published in 1923, ran to 500 pages and was profusely – not to say revoltingly – illustrated with more than 100 hand-drawn and painted examples of cancers and other deformities.

Hugh’s mother Frances was born in Canton on 17 May 1867, a daughter of the Revd George Piercy, a pioneer Methodist minister based in China. She once kept a diary describing a journey from England back to Canton, and she, too, had a distinguished career in medicine: from 1884 to 1893 she was at the London School of Medicine for Women, where she won, among other honours, a Gold Medal in *Materia Medica*, a Gold Medal in Anatomy, and Honours in Physiology. She then worked as a doctor in London, and held various posts, including those of Assistant Anaesthetist at the Royal Free Hospital and Demonstrator of Anatomy at her old school, before marrying Willmott in the summer of 1895.

As a child Hugh lived with his parents at their London home, 121 Harley Street, a large, tall house, where he had the company of his elder brother Evan, born in 1896, and his second brother, Arthur (known as Jim), born in 1902. A sister, Maureen (Molly), arrived in 1905, and another sister, Joyce (Jo), in 1907. Hugh was always the most mischievous and adventurous of the family: aged seven or eight he would take the lead weights off gas lamps and throw them in front of the horse-drawn carriages bringing patients for consultations in Harley Street. When he went to a pre-prep school called Greenhouse he soon acquired a reputation for toughness. A colleague remembered how he once climbed high into a giant laurel and amazed the company by sticking his arm out of the top.

One ineradicable memory from that time was his hatred of rice pudding: if ever he refused to eat his helping, he was sent up to his bedroom and ordered to stay there until he had finished it. Salvation seemed to have come one day when he spotted a loose floorboard: prising it up, he tipped the congealed mess into the space beneath – and all went well for a week or two, until a nauseating smell of rancid milk gave his secret repository away. When his father found out what had happened, he was furious – not with the boy

but with the nanny – and directed that Hugh should never be given rice pudding again. In general, he was closer to his father than to his mother, with whom he had little rapport.

At about eleven Hugh and Jim both went to Mrs Egerton's Preparatory School, and one day when there was some bad behaviour during the boys' return from the sports field, the master threatened general punishment. Hugh owned up, but later told a friend that he had not been the culprit: he had taken the blame to save everyone else from retribution.

The tradition of service at sea was deeply embedded in the family, for seven earlier generations of Evanses had produced naval surgeons. So at the age of twelve Hugh moved on to Osborne College, the preparatory school for the Royal Navy on the Isle of Wight. A small, neat-looking boy, he was known from his dark hair and olive skin as 'the little dago', and in choosing a career he may well have been influenced by the log of his great-great-grandfather Evan Evans, who was appointed Second Surgeon's Mate aboard the *Niger*, a thirty-three-gun fifth-rate,[1] or classic frigate, in June 1790.

Like his great-great-grandson, Evan had a lively pen and evidently enjoyed writing. As his ship prepared to leave Woolwich on 3 July 1790 he recorded: 'The guns and balls was taken in, with picks and poleaxes and various other dangerous weapons well invented to kill men', and on the 7th he went again to Woolwich 'to get Elix Nitr and Pulv Janob sent there from Apothecary Hall. Gave receipt for same.'

In September the *Niger* crossed the Channel as part of a small fleet sent to spy on the French ships in the harbour at Brest. On the night of the 29th she steered towards the port and at daylight laid-to.

> The Comadore went in his own ship so near the Mouth of the Harbour as he could; so as to keep free from the Batteries. The French sent out a line of Battle ship and a Frigate towards the Comadore. At ten a.m. Comadore Englefield made signals for the *Niger* and the Cutter to make ready for Action. The *Niger* was ready to Engage in ten minutes after the drummer beat to Quarters; which was very well, considering it was the first time since the ship was Commissiond.

No action took place, as 'the French did not think proper to Insult us', but the English ships obtained valuable information, and sped back to Falmouth, where one of the officers went ashore to 'despatch Intelligence for Government'. Surgeon's Mate Evans was naturally interested in 'Accidents that happened on board the *Niger*', and reported details with admirable economy:

> Wed 18 Aug. W. Allen, a fore Castle man … met with the following fatal Accident. He was standing close to the leading block of the top rope on the fore Castle, the Block gave way and gave him a violent blow on the Cheek bone; which caused a large contused wound to which we applied dry sutions, Bandege etc and I took him into Hazlar's Hospital directly, where he died delirious in two days after.
>
> Mon Sepr. 27. Wm. Child, one of the Carpenters Crew, was at work in the Mison Top. He cut his thumb with the saw; in coming down to have it dressed, fainted and fell into the sea. He floated for some time, but before a Boat could go to his Assistance he came to, & not been able to swim, sunk.
>
> Thur 25 Decr. 90. Wm. Westerfield, One of the Watchers, being in a state of Intoxication about Nine

> at Night and playing with Crowder the Lieutenant's Cook in the Galley, his foot slipd & he fell upon his Head & never spoke after. He died at One Next Morning, he remained in a state of Lithargy untill his death. This being Christ. Day & also his birthday, he was one & thirty years old.

The Royal Naval College at Osborne was housed in the former stables of Queen Victoria's palace, which, with its twin Italianate towers, stands in a commanding position on the hill above Osborne Bay. To boys of twelve it was a daunting place, and in 1912, when Hugh attended, life there was rigidly regimented. Accelerated by bugle calls or clashes on big brass gongs, the inmates sped from point to point at the double, risking immediate chastisement if any Cadet Captain saw them slow to a walk.

Thirty cadets lived in each dormitory, down one side of a long corridor, and at the foot of every bed stood a heavy sea chest, three feet square and two feet six inches high, containing its owner's possessions, with his name incised on a brass plate on the top. Across the corridor was the boys' living space, known as the gunroom. Each intake of cadets formed a term, named after some famous admiral: Hugh's term was Blake's. Jack Broome (who later rose to the rank of captain) was an exact contemporary of Hugh's, and remembered every detail of his time in that hectic forcing house:

> Far too early for comfort,[2] we awoke to the blast of a reveille bugle call. That meant out of bed and turn bedclothes back … One gong which followed meant off pyjama tops, wash at our bedside basins, then, clad in towel only, stand by our sea-chest. When everyone was there, the next gong meant full-speed to the bathroom, into one end of the plunge baths (I suppose they were about ten feet square and five feet

> deep, full of tepid water), out the other end, find towel, back to sea-chest, dress and fall in for inspection alongside sea-chest, having made our beds. When all had fallen in … another gong signalled another stampede for Collingwood, the mess room …
>
> After breakfast, Divisions – all candidates fallen in by Terms on the quarterdeck (the name given to the big hall) … The Chaplain read prayers, hymns were sung, and all cadets were marched away to their studies … This seemed to be the only time we marched. We doubled when we changed studies, we doubled up and down that long corridor when passing the gunroom of a senior team. Loitering past a senior gunroom was asking for trouble. Almost certainly you would be spotted, hauled into that gunroom, bent over a table and given at least three cuts on the bottom.

A sheet of menus headed ‘Daily Routine of Dietary for Cadets’ shows that the boys got plenty to eat, even if the food was monotonous. Every day there was porridge for breakfast, together with sausages and mashed potatoes on Sundays, cold ham on Mondays, and kippers, kedgeree or curried mutton on other days. Honey, marmalade and golden syrup came and went in rotation. For lunch there was some kind of meat – roast beef, roast chicken, Irish stew – usually with cabbage and potatoes, and various puddings, including ‘Roley Poley’. For tea – boiled eggs, sardines, fresh fish or German sausage, besides bread and butter with various kinds of jam. Between these main repasts cadets were kept going by Ship’s Biscuit and Cocoa at 6.45 a.m., Buns and Milk at 10.30–11.30 a.m., Biscuits and Milk at 4.30 p.m. and Biscuits at 8.30 p.m.

As for the education on offer: another former inmate, Stephen King-Hall, described it as ‘monstrously mechanical …[3] The humanities were hardly recognised. One of the

results … was to produce a brand of naval officer incapable of expressing himself either in speech or on paper, and without any conception of the strategical and tactical problems of defence.' But this damning verdict referred to a period ten years earlier, and by the time Hugh reached Osborne, the curriculum had probably been modernised. In any case, he managed to escape the mental straitjacket that such a regime threatened. Far from being incapable of expressing himself, he clearly enjoyed writing, and sent home buoyant accounts of his doings:

> On the 13th we went out to Alum Bay, Freshwater. It's a ripping place. Very lonely though. Had a sporting time. Went out to the cliff just above the Needles. 300 feet drop. Got some sporting photos. Love to all, 'H'

His most faithful correspondent was Dyddgu Hamilton, a lifelong friend of the family who had met his mother while they were both reading medicine at the Royal Holloway College – two of the first women to do so. A spinster, christened with an awkward Welsh name but always known as Anne, she lived with the Evanses in Harley Street. She was thirty years older than Hugh, and, although no blood relation, became a kind of benevolent aunt: she took him for long walks, wrote to him frequently, brought him out from school and saw him off when he joined the navy.

The description given in her passport was unflattering, but – to judge from a photograph – accurate: '*Height* 5′ 7″, *Forehead* Low, *Eyes* Brown, *Nose* Straight, *Mouth* Large, *Chin* Ordinary, *Complexion* Sallow, *Face* Long.' She may have looked like a governess, but she was highly intelligent, with wide interests, and clearly had some magic about her. A close friend of Elodie, the American wife of Hilaire Belloc,[4] she did translating work for the author and corresponded with him extensively. She was fascinated by

the literary world, and amassed a library of more than 5,000 volumes, many in French and many devoted to her special interest, natural history. She it was who got Hugh reading, she who encouraged him to write. Throughout her life they remained very close: when he was in his twenties he wrote to her saying, ‘I remember when I was a kid[5] the thing I admired in you most was your unfailing cheerfulness.’ Hugh’s sister Maureen once remarked, ‘Don’t you like the way she can make her account of some very ordinary event sound like a terrific adventure? She does it when she reads aloud, too.’

Hugh’s earliest surviving letters were scrawled in babyish capitals, but by the time he was twelve, at Osborne, both his handwriting and his descriptive powers had advanced tremendously:

> Saturday & Sunday
>
> 23 March 1912
>
> Dear Anne,
> I never in my life saw worse weather at night, or rather heard it. The wind whistles through the trees and howls round the windows, which shake and bang as if a thousand devils were loose in the neighbourhood. Then crash, a door slams, and bang go the windows, bang, bang. Then someone snores. A chap near me talks and sings in his sleep. Another fellow groans, and then I laugh and can’t get to sleep for some time. I don’t mind though. It’s awful fun.
>
> Last Tuesday I felt awful. My throat hurt like ‘Old Nick’ … So of course I went to the sick-bay. The doctor looked, looked again and then whistled. I felt inclined to laugh, only it would have hurt me. So I said nothing and did nothing. Along came the Fleet Surgeon. He stared and stared, then announced that my right tonsil was colossal. I felt as if a thunderbolt had hit me on the nape of the neck, or, in plain words