5. Jim Gilbert, Royal Navy Stoker

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A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

5. Jim Gilbert, Royal Navy Stoker

While Norah was knitting his socks through the winter of 1940, Jim Gilbert was in the North Sea serving aboard HMS *Elgin*, a 'Smokey Joe' minesweeper built at the end of the Great War. The *Elgin* had been moth-balled in Malta and was now back in service as part of the 4th Minesweeping Flotilla, based at Great Yarmouth, sweeping ahead of the convoys that travelled between the Firth of Forth in Scotland and the Thames at Southend.

Was Jim pleased to be back in English waters? It is clear from his letters that he was restricted in what he could say. He'd had plenty of adventures overseas, a life he had no doubt hoped for when he'd travelled along the Sussex coast to the Royal Naval Barracks at Portsmouth in June 1937, to sit the written exam at the Recruiting Office in the morning and – bated breath – pass the physical in the afternoon. His memory was surely etched with his first proud encounters with the naval town. The welcoming lights of the Sailors Rest and shops full of badges and uniforms. The feeling of walking through the dockyard gates as a new recruit, in the footsteps of men who had fought Napoleon at Trafalgar. The sight of officers, ratings and dockyard workers, all busy and purposeful. The tethered destroyers and looming grey warships in dry-dock, all up close.[1]

We don't know how old he was then – Jim never revealed his age to Norah – but as stokers were often more mature than the usual boy entrant, we can guess that he was a young man; twenty-two, perhaps. He completed his training – rifle drill, seamanship and more – and was soon aboard a submarine depot ship, to see two years of action, in Gibraltar, Malta, Yugoslavia, Greece, Alexandria and Tangier, defending routes to India and Suez, keeping an eye on Mussolini's activities in North Africa, then witnessing the unfolding horror of the Spanish Civil War.

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By all accounts, it took some getting used to: doing your own washing, keeping clean and smart, the officers belting you with a stonikey for the slightest lapse. But it couldn't have been all bad. On the best days, Jim played with machinery all day long: with engines, turbo generators, dynamos, evaporators and fans. Perhaps he didn't even mind the morning watch with its chilly 4am start, coming off at 8 to clear the mess deck and prepare the midday meal, always meat and potatoes, and fill up the big tea urn in the galley. His off-duty hours were spent in the stokers' mess, reading from the ship's library, writing letters, doing crossword puzzles and even some embroidery, maybe arguing with his fellow ratings, singing bawdy songs and occasionally sneaking a forbidden game of cards. Were they happy ships? Was it like they all said: the companionship was the very best thing?

It was obvious to anyone in the forces that war was coming. The nation was chuffed to bits with Chamberlain at Munich but Jim knew it was only a matter of time. It was Spain that sealed it. He would have seen it firsthand when they were there on patrol duty: starving people fighting for the ship's waste food, civilians desperate to escape the fascist onslaught, some sailors abandoning ship to join the republican forces. But the Germans: was he among the British sailors who had played them at football in Gilbralter and Tangiers? Were they decent-enough lads who seemed alright to him?

And when war was finally declared, was Jim with those who were shipped over to Egypt, to the place they knew fondly as Alex? I'll bet he got really plastered that night.

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Back in Blighty on the *Elgin* at the end of 1939, it had been straightforward work at first. The sweepers moved slowly in echelon – in parallel, diagonal, ladder-like rows. Each vessel was fitted with a wire to slice through the mooring cable of contact mines, freeing them to be shot at and destroyed, the sweep of the one in front protecting (in theory) the one behind. They often got the buggers straightaway, although sometimes the bullets just bounced off the steel sphere, like dried peas from a schoolboy's blowpipe.

This image, and many of those that follow, come from Paul Lund and Harry Ludlam's *Out Sweeps! The Exploits of the Minesweepers in WWII.* I'm no military historian. Immersion in the details of battles, tactics and leadership, or innovations in guns, aircraft or minesweepers, does not come naturally to me. But like Hitler in 1939, this book was full of surprises. Compiled from the diaries, reports and verbal accounts of dozens of men, the vividness of the images grabbed me. The Thames estuary as 'a gigantic graveyard of wrecked ships', victims of the magnetic mine which took out fifteen merchant ships and two destroyers in five days in November 1939. From Harwich, you looked out at the *Simon Bolivar*, masts and two big funnels standing above the water, spookily half-sunk and abandoned. Then there was the puzzle as to how the mines got there, sitting in the middle of swept channels, like they came up through the seabed and bred overnight. It was only after a mine was recovered from the marshes at low tide that the Admiralty knew what they were dealing with, that the unmarked aircraft that came under cover of darkness were in fact enemy planes.

The ships were fitted with the newly-developed 'LL' ('Long Leg') sweep, two heavy electrified cables, one long and one short, towed astern by small boats, the current creating a field in which mines were set off at a safe distance behind them. The minesweeper itself was protected by the 'degaussing cable' fitted around the hull to reduce the ship's magnetic field. For a man who loved machinery as much as Jim, this must have been thrilling stuff. Maybe his favourite was the raft sent ahead of a flotilla, so magnetised that a spanner would jump out of a man's pocket and his watch hairsprings reduce to a tangled knot. A Jules Verne-like creation, he'd love the idea of that.

The flotillas themselves, with their columns of rising black smoke, gave the appearance of a small settlement on fire. They had to take it easy at night; too speedy and they'd be visible from all over, the funnel gushing sparks like a Roman candle. Up close, it was all about muck and heat. The huge, filthy decks were inches thick in coal dust. It got everywhere. The crew had Welsh anthracite for breakfast, dinner and tea. Sailors reported that life aboard could feel like being sealed off from the outside world for weeks on end, like the Derbyshire village hit by the plague.

Occasionally, Jim would have seen other bits of the war. Sweeping eastward in early 1940 as Hitler invaded the Low Countries, the *Elgin* had met hundreds of boats of all descriptions bringing Dutch and Belgians to England as refugees. Some seamen, those who'd joined after the call-up, saw their first dead bodies then, floating by like debris.

A few weeks later, they were off to Dunkirk. The work was almost sedate at first, transporting men to cruisers. But then the Germans stepped up their air attack and the Navy was soon steaming back to Margate loaded up with thousands of men, British and French, depositing them and turning on their heels for another treacherous cross-channel trip. Eight days they were, without washing, shaving or changing boilersuits and hardly any sleep. The RAF was nowhere to be seen. They were all sore about that.

Did Jim have a grandstand view of some of that summer's more fantastic sights? Like when Hitler granted Mussolini permission to lead an attack on London and the men were wide-eyed at the wooden Italian bombers which, when shot down, looked like grand pianos dropping from the sky? Or was he always below the waterline, working as part of the engine room 'black gang', stoking up the coal-fired boilers and keeping the carbon off the sprayers, while men on the deck were pointing their guns at the swooping enemy above? He would be able to hear the twelve-pounder going off, the roar of an aircraft diving and swooping overhead, and the blunt thud of bombs exploding in the sea. He will have been at the ready to block holes with hammocks and tarpaulin, to join a bucket brigade in the event of a hit.

If a ship couldn't stay up, if it set ablaze and then started the sudden lurch downwards, there was nowhere to escape, just the freezing grey deep. If the sister ships couldn't get to you, you were done for. Jim and his fellow ratings thanked God for the *Gossamer*, who took the *Elgin* in tow when she was damaged by an acoustic mine, while the *Niger* and *Speedwell* covered behind. In turn, the *Elgin* had rescued survivors from HMS *Dunoon* when she hit a mine off Yarmouth at Smith's Knoll. Twenty-three ratings and three officers were lost that day.

You heard terrible things from other ships. The damage a 'tin fish' could do. The rating who almost had his neck severed by a massive shard of wood, men with limbs blown clean off. Swilling out bits of bodies in buckets of water after an engine-room hit. The cries of men

left flailing in the sea. Sometimes survivors got ill with nerves and were unable to return to duty as one unit. Cracking up under enemy stress, the medics called it. It was all kept hush hush, of course. Civilians knew nothing about it.

But even for those who didn't lose the plot, it could be hard to keep your spirits up. Sometimes even the women in port couldn't do the job. Had a night on the town been Jim's half-plan, back on the Thames in February 1941, the day Norah's socks arrived? During the freezing tedium of weeks at sea, had he craved the lustre and bustle of London, with its snug pubs and welcoming women?

When the parcels from the Comforts Fund were doled out that afternoon, when Jim slipped his fingers inside a sock, stretching the stiff navy wool and maybe imagining the hands of the woman who had cared enough to knit for him, his knuckles had brushed against sharp-edged brittleness. He plucked out a snip of paper, turning it over to reveal a girl's name and address written in a gently rounded hand:

Norah Hodgkinson,

Upper III,

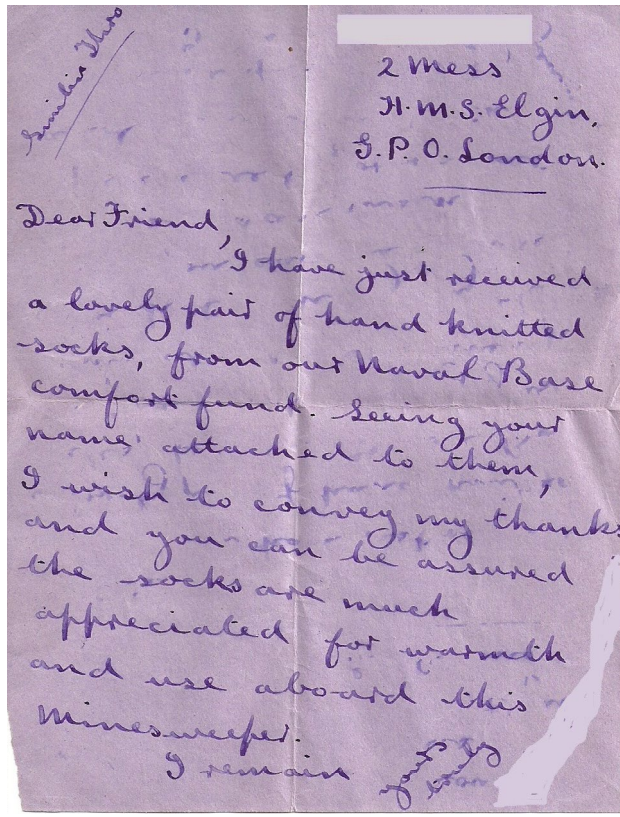
The High School,

Loughborough,

Leics.

Did that bring a smile to his face? His socks had not been knitted by a middle-aged matron, but by a young woman, a schoolgirl! 'Whooah! Look here! I've got a girl's address!' No doubt the usual lewdness followed.

But that evening, in the Crown and Anchor maybe, a short distance from where his ship was docked, did Jim find himself suddenly wearied by the empty banter between his fellow ratings and the town girls? Did he want to write to her, to Norah, straight away? When he was finally settled into his hammock, struggling to prop himself up on one elbow to keep his right hand steady, maybe he took more care with his writing and paid greater attention to his spelling than he had done in a while. Norah was a grammar-school girl, after all.



2 Mess
H.M.S. Elgin,
F.P.O. London.

Dear Friend,

I have just received a lovely pair of hand knitted socks, from our Naval Base comfort fund. Seeing your name attached to them, I wish to convey my thanks and you can be assured the socks are much appreciated for warmth and use aboard this Minesweeper.

I remain yours

Fig. 20 Jim's first letter, February 1941. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.