

The Service Career of Commander Edward H R Walker, RN¹

David Carter

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Ransome has left us only a few direct clues concerning the naval life of the ‘father of the Swallows’, but for those with an eye to these things, he has given us many indirect references to a fascinating career during an eventful period in the history of the Royal Navy.

In 1929, the year of *Swallows and Amazons*, Roger was 7 (SA.1)² and John 12 (AR’s own notes) but John was only just 12, for he had had a birthday ‘just before the holiday’ (SA.5). Since he says that he – and Roger, for that matter – would be going to sea ‘some day’ (SA.31), he cannot have been expecting to enter the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth as a Cadet at the then conventional age of 13. The implication is that John was looking forward to obtaining a Special Entry Cadetship when he was 17 ½.

It seems likely then that Commander Walker’s career began with entry into the Royal Naval College, Osborne in January 1905, at the start of his 11 terms of training as a Cadet. At that time, the captain of the College was Captain Rosslyn Wemyss, MVO and the Executive Officer Commander W.G.E. Ruck-Keene. After two years at Osborne, Cadet Walker proceeded to Dartmouth, then under the command of Captain William E. Goodenough, and, as Executive Officer, Commander the Hon. Hubert Brand, MVO. All four came from families with long naval traditions, which continued in later years.

In the days before the First World War, midshipmen spent three years under training in ships of the Fleet, before taking an examination in seamanship and proceeding as acting sub-lieutenants to Royal Naval College, Greenwich for a 3-month course in mathematics, navigation and pilotage and a further 6 months at Portsmouth for courses in gunnery, torpedoes and engineering. Thereafter they spent further time at sea, confirmed in the rank of sub-lieutenant, with the date of their promotion to lieutenant being determined by the results of the examinations at the end of the several courses.

However, not all a young officer’s sea time was spent in large ships with gunrooms. More senior midshipmen were given experience in small ships, and sub-lieutenants were routinely appointed to destroyers. We know from later references in the books that Walker became very enthusiastic about small-ship life.

It is clear that Walker did well throughout his training, for although he was appointed to one of HM Ships on the Australian Station in 1912, he was selected, shortly after joining her, as one of the small band of officers lent to the recently-formed Royal Australian Navy. He transferred to HMAS Melbourne, a light cruiser under the command of Captain Mortimer L’E Silver, RN, and sister-ship to

¹ Commander Walker’s middle initials are shown (by conventional implication) in the dedication of PD.

² The references in this article are to chapters, not pages, of the books cited.

HMAS Sydney which in November 1914 earned undying fame in the Pacific battle against the German Emden.

'Operational requirements' brought several of HM Australian Ships into Port Melbourne in November 1913 during Melbourne Cup week, and it was during that major sporting and social event of the Australian calendar that Walker first met his future wife, Mary. Like thousands of others from all over Australia, she and her family had travelled to the city, drawn by a common interest in racing. We know that Mary had been brought up close to Sydney harbour (SA2) where she had first sailed when she was a little girl. She capsized her cousin's dinghy in Sydney harbour (SD 8), and she was familiar with other Australian harbours (SD36). She visited New Zealand (SD15). We know too that she spent part of her time in childhood and teenage years on a sheep station, for she speaks of drought and bush fires (SA18), of camping in the bush (SA 31), and of having ridden sleepily home from dances, waking only when the horse stopped at the stable door (WD2). The picture emerges of a comparatively wealthy family, able to afford – despite droughts and consequent stock losses – a certain amount of travel in Australasia, who either sent Mary to a boarding school in Sydney, or had a second home there. She may of course have spent long holidays with relatives in the city, but in any event she was clearly familiar with one of Sydney's most popular recreations as well as with life as a teenager on a sheep station. Walker was promoted Lieutenant in February 1914, and was due to return to the United Kingdom later in the year. Mary persuaded her family to travel to England for 'The Season' (expecting, of course, that Walker would be back in England before the end of the summer) and her father indulged her wishes, having formed a favourable view of the young Lieutenant Walker, his prospects in the Service, and the probable outcome of his growing friendship with his daughter. True, Walker had little means beyond his pay, and there was no such thing then as marriage allowance (this would remain true until 1938), but a generous dowry and allowance could be managed for Mary – much needed when children came along.

In the years before the first World War, a P&O liner left Sydney for England every fortnight, and the family chose to travel in the Medina, a modern ship built as recently as 1911 and the last of the 10 ships of her class. Her entry into the Australian service was delayed because she was chosen to carry HM King George V and Queen Mary to India for the Delhi Durbar in November of that year, so Mary and her family were able to bask in a little reflected glory by sailing in the same ship as Their Majesties had done. Medina left Sydney on 18 March 1914 and arrived at Tilbury on 1 May. The voyage through the Mediterranean gave Mary her first acquaintance with waters and ports which she was to see again later in her married life.

The outbreak of War in August 1914 thus found Mary in England but the uncertain situation had delayed Walker's own return. Mary was clearly determined not to return to Australia at that stage, and given the optimism that the War 'would be over by Christmas', little seemed lost by delay. In any case, sailing to Australia would be fraught with a certain amount of risk – not that she minded that.

Walker was eventually brought home at the end of the year to start the Long Navigation Course at HMS Dryad in January 1915. Pilotage and navigation were always to fascinate him, and in later years he made sure that John shared that interest, carrying it further into the science of surveying. A brief leave after the end of the six month course gave Walker and Mary the chance to marry and spend a honeymoon camping (SA2) in the peaceful surroundings of the Lake District.

'They are good enough tents in a high wind' (SA p.23). Mr & Mrs Walker enjoy a breezy honeymoon in the upper Langdale Valley.

Walker's next appointment was a 'plum': to HMS Iron Duke, wearing the Flag of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, GCB, KCVO, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet. Jellicoe inspired admiration and loyalty

in all who served with him, and there need be no surprise that Walker named his first-born son after him. Another benefit for the newly-qualified navigation specialist was the opportunity to serve with, and learn from, that accomplished expert navigator Captain Oliver E. Leggett, the Master of the Fleet.

There was little action for the Grand Fleet at that time, and the bleak windswept surroundings of Scapa Flow became all too familiar to officers and men alike. Walker was present at the battle of Jutland in May 1916, but even after that engagement there was little opportunity for the married officers to bring their wives north, and Walker had to wait until the autumn when he was able to take advantage of Iron Duke's making a brief visit to Rosyth on 20 October to start a fortnight's leave in Edinburgh with Mary, before rejoining the ship in Invergordon on 3 November. It was this break, of course, which resulted in the appearance of John in July 1917, and the dates of Walker's leave raise the intriguing possibility of John's having been a Trafalgar Day baby.

Walker continued serving in Iron Duke until early in 1918 when, after a short leave, the Admiralty, with a typical naval sense of humour, appointed him to the new destroyer-minelayer HMS Walker (Commander E.J.G. Mackinnon). His new ship was one of those which came under the command of Rear Admiral Walter Cowan, CB, MVO, DSO, for operations in the Baltic in 1919. These operations, in which the ship saw further action, were at least in part responsible for the successful establishment of the independent States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – and it may not be too far-fetched to assume that during this period Walker could have met Ransome, who was working as a journalist in the region. Walker clearly enjoyed his service in the Baltic, for he retained a copy of volume III of *The Baltic Pilot* (which covers, inter alia, the Gulf of Finland), and later gave it to John, who took it everywhere, even to Wild Cat Island (SA2).

In March 1920 (partly because of his previous experience in Australia) Walker was temporarily appointed to the battle cruiser HMS Renown, which took HRH the Prince of Wales to visit New Zealand and Australia. The ship left Portsmouth on 16 March and sailed by way of the Panama Canal, arriving in Auckland on 24 April. After visiting Wellington, Picton and Lyttelton, Renown left New Zealand on 22 May and proceeded to Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart, and Western Australia before returning to Sydney on 24 July.

Walker had been due to remain in Renown (which was due back in Portsmouth on 10 October, after again crossing the Pacific and transiting the Panama Canal) before taking up an appointment as a Term Lieutenant at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth in January 1921. However, his appointment was brought forward to September 1920, and so he had to leave Renown in Sydney and return to England by P&O. Thus he had the experience of sailing round the world (SD27).

His time at Dartmouth was his first experience of the training service and, with his wife's persuasion as well, it later decided him to delay John's entry into the Navy until he had completed his education at public school and could join under the Special Entry Scheme at the age of seventeen and a half. Whatever his opinion of the cadets' academic education may have been, he was obviously not enamoured of the methods used at Dartmouth to teach signalling, for years later he was to comment that Nancy ought to be employed for that purpose (SW1).

Promotion to Lieutenant Commander followed in February 1922 and Walker went to the Mediterranean Fleet as Navigating Officer in HMS Caradoc, a ship of the 3rd Light Cruiser Squadron which was commanded by a famous former destroyer officer, Rear Admiral Sir Reginald Tyrwhitt, KCB, DSO. Two and a half years in the Med in a peacetime atmosphere allowed Walker to visit many countries and even to make extended excursions inland – in one case, to Aleppo – and to enjoy much hospitality ashore in established British communities.

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In the summer of 1924, Walker came home once more. Earmarked for early promotion, he was given another good appointment which renewed his association with destroyers – that of Navigating Officer of HMS Douglas, which completed to full complement on 4 September 1924 and wore the broad pennant of Commodore C.K. Maclean, CB, CVO, DSO, commanding the Atlantic Fleet Destroyer Flotillas.

Serving in the Atlantic Fleet provided plenty of opportunities for regular leaves at home, and we have evidence that these were put to good use at Falmouth, messing about in boats, teaching John to sail and to scull a small boat over the stern (SA4), and sailing with John and Susan, on one occasion meeting fog in the Channel outside Falmouth (SD32).

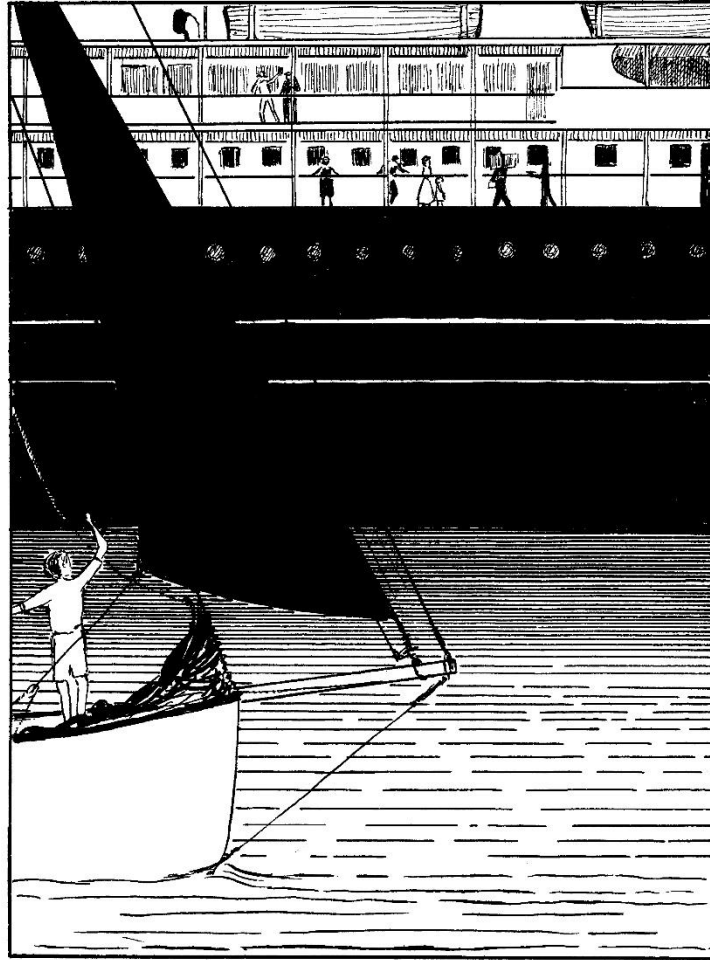
At the end of this commission Walker's name duly appeared in the list of promotions to Commander with seniority of 31 December 1926, in company with (among others) those of Reginald H Portal, DSC, and John H Edelsten (both of whom later became Admirals) and Cecil R McCrum (a first cousin of Ernest Altounyan). A spell in the Operations Division of the Admiralty (enlivened by the birth of Bridget towards its end) was followed by appointment to the cruiser HMS Castor, which had recommissioned at Devonport on 22 June 1928 for service in the Third Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean.

Castor was however later detached for service on the China Station (SA1 refers to Walker's ship being 'at Malta, but under orders for China' at the time of sending the famous 'Duffers' telegram). Once arrived in China, Walker was to leave Castor and take command of HMS Thracian, a destroyer-minelayer of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla which had recommissioned on Station on 1 October 1929. This was, of course, an appointment after his own heart and the fact that it would mean prolonging his absence from his family was of small account (Ed: Shame on him).

The old R&T Class destroyers of the 8th Flotilla were relieved at the end of 1931 by V&W Class ships, and in the normal course of events Walker would have brought Thracian home to Chatham in January 1932. (She recommissioned in reserve at Chatham in February of that year). However, he was allowed to bring her only as far as Malta, where he arrived on 15 January 1932. There he had to hand over command of Thracian and return to China for special anti-piracy duties on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir W A H Kelly KCB, CMC, MVO, for a further six months.

There were two consequences of this move, both referred to by AR. First, Mary Walker took Bridget to Malta that January (Walker had scarcely seen his new daughter (WH3)), leaving the other Swallows to enjoy their winter holiday in the Lake District. Although Mary returned to England before the Swallows were able to return to school at the end of their period in quarantine, she could not join them for fear of Bridget's being exposed to possible infection. Walker himself, anxious to return to England as quickly as possible after his extra time on the China Station, travelled not by sea but by the quicker, although more tedious, trans-Siberian route.

In the summer of 1932, trains for Moscow left Vladivostok three times weekly, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 7.26 local time and arrived in Moscow (Severnii) at 16.55 on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays respectively, eight days later. There were also two other departures, at 19.22 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, arriving in Moscow at 09.23 on Thursdays and Saturdays, nine days later. Departure for Berlin, from Moscow (Smolenski) was scheduled for 22.45 the same evening, the train arriving there at 9.23, some 36 hours later. He could have spent the day in Berlin before taking a train leaving at 22.56 for Flushing, giving an arrival there at 12.37 next day, but clearly he did not, for he speaks of having spent the morning walking in Flushing after 12 days, travelling (WD23).



A rare glimpse of Commander Walker

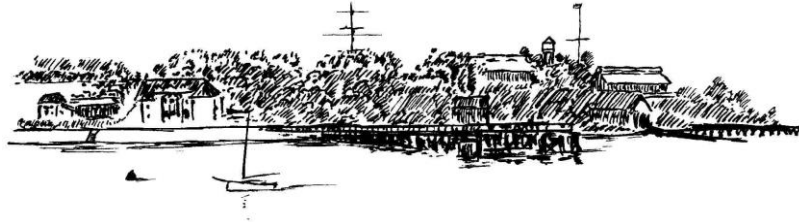
It seems he must have transferred from the Schlesicher Station to that in Friedrichstrasse for departure for Rotterdam at 13.18 , arriving at 23.00. He could have travelled via Amsterdam, whence the boat train for Flushing left at 10.19 next day, also to connect with the 14.10 sailing to Harwich, but this fails for the same reason. He must therefore have used the Rotterdam route, and taken a local connection to Flushing early next morning.

The Goblin's pilot's reference to the Harwich-bound ship on which Walker almost sailed as a 'Nederland steamer' was (as might be expected) perfectly correct, for that service was operated by the Zeeland Steamship Company, with the TSSs Prinses Juliana, Oranje Nassau and Mecklenburg. The LNER ships from Harwich sailed to the Hook of Holland. This also explains why Walker had kept Dutch money with him to spend on the boat (WD23). Ransome makes an unusual error in his reference to a Dutch battleship being in Flushing harbour (WD22). The Dutch had no battleships – the ship the Swallows saw may have been HNMS Jacob Van Heemskerck, a large coastal defence vessel which was built as long before as 1908, but modernised in 1929. Walker, as a professional naval officer, would doubtless have taken considerable interest in her.

Speed or no speed in travelling, Walker was not to be allowed to enjoy very much of the long foreign service leave to which his year abroad had entitled him. He had scarcely arrived at Pin Mill before being summoned to the Admiralty and told that he would have to take up immediately his new appointment as Commander of HMS Ganges, the Boys' Training Establishment at Shotley (SW1). Ransome presents us with a small mystery here, for while he refers (SW1) to a sub-lieutenant having been sent with a car to

fetch Walker from Pin Mill, there were no officers of that rank serving at Shotley in 1932. But research has shown that three destroyers of the 2nd Flotilla, Valourous, Comet and Crescent, visited Harwich between 15 and 21 July 1932, and as the Captain of Shotley was also Captain-in-Charge, Harwich, he might well, on receipt of a signal from the Admiralty, have detailed the Duty Destroyer to provide an officer – each of the three ships carried a sub-lieutenant.

There are, however, some problems with this theory. Jim Brading had left Rugby ‘last term’ (WD2), and the summer term that year (1932) finished on July 26. Moreover, he mentions going up to Oxford ‘in another month’ (WD1), and John complains that they would be getting ready to go back to School by the time the Admiralty let Walker go (SW1). This places Walker’s return from China no earlier than August. The only possibility that this researcher can advance is that the sub-lieutenant, and his car, had been sent from Chatham by the Commander-in-Chief, The Nore, which points in turn to the seriousness of the events which so disrupted Walker’s plans for the survey of Secret Water, and made it necessary for his wife to accompany him to London. Incidentally, Titty’s reference in SW1 to the unwelcome messenger as ‘a lieutenant’ is clearly an error – Walker’s comment that ‘Even Sub-Lieutenants are God’s creatures, though it’s hard to believe it sometimes’ is so typically that of an exasperated senior naval officer that there can be no possibility of his having made a mistake!



Shotley Point

To be Executive Officer of Ganges was nonetheless a ‘promotion job’ and Walker, some of whose contemporaries had already been promoted to Captain, served in that capacity for less than a year. He received his fourth stripe in the half-yearly promotions for 30 June 1933, in company with John Edelsten. That promotion was very slow in those years is shown by the fact that although he had six and a half years’ seniority as a Commander, he was still one of the three most junior promotions in that batch.

Having a Captain for a father was an added stimulus to John to work hard for his Special Entry Cadetship examination in the autumn of 1934, and his success at the first opportunity allowed him to join the Service in January 1935. This second celebration for the Walker family, with its assurance of the continuation of their seagoing tradition, gives us a convenient point at which we may take leave of them.

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