

'Murmer in the Small Boats'

Edmund was a radio-operator in World War Two, and served as such on at least three ships. So, do memories of that time occur in his writing? In his story, *Second Chance*, there's reference to some enemy airmen killed at sea, and this is also referred to in *'Transit'*. In *'The Rings of Tantalus'*, Conrad has a brief memory of having once seen a man laughing with his stomach gashed open. But nowhere though is there any reference to the tug-boat race.

Of boats, however, there are one or two scenes in *'The Cloud Walker'* worth mentioning. The Freebooters have all their ships (which are made of wood) in a harbour on the Sussex coast, and Kieron and some of the townsfolk decide to try and blow these up at night. To do this, they get small boats and load them with combustible stuff and whale oil, and set off down the river towards the harbour, under the cover of darkness. Unfortunately, they are spotted by an enemy patrol and most of the men in the small boats are killed.

Another small boat, this one specially constructed for the task, features in *'Sea-horse in the Sky'*. In this novel, some of the characters use a small boat to go down river and beneath a barrier of coldness, on a mission to explore the region beyond it.

Towards the end of *'The Cloud Walker'*, having dealt some damage to the enemy, Kieron is rescued out of the sea by a small French boat that is from Arromanches. From D-Day+1 onwards, Edmund's tug-boat the *Empire Jonathan* was helping establish the Mulberry harbour at Arromanches.

Presumably, in *'The Uncertain Midnight'*, and in *'Who Needs Men?'* there are probably memories in some of the scenes that involve fighting, but it's hard to guess what might have happened and what is fiction. But, in *'The Cloud Walker'* and in *'Sea-horse in the Sky'*, the common elements of small boats going along a river on a mission into enemy territory seem to possibly hint at something that Edmund might have done during the war.

Edmund was a seaman from some time in 1943, serving on a tug-boat (1944), an oil-tanker (1944) and a cargo ship (1945), working as a Radio Officer. But...well, there are discrepancies, and blank spaces in that particular history. It seemed that the more new research we did about Edmund's time in the war the more new questions we had unanswered. For every two or three spaces we managed to fill, another new one always came up. On the face of it, overall, Edmund was a Merchant Seaman and okay, so the relevant information about Operation Overlord is still Classified...yet even so, there are still periods of time we know nothing about - particularly what he was doing in the fall of 1943.

One evening I had a strange experience. I was reading a poem of Edmund's, *'Autumn Voyage'*, for only about the second or third time ever.

As I was reading the last verse, a sudden image came into my mind: it was like a memory, but much much sharper - in terms of details and focus.

*'I, who have watched the sea-wind
stir a turquoise pool of stars in the night valley.'*

Suddenly, it was as if I was half there, with him. I had only to close my eyes to

see how deeply blue and clear the sky was that night, and how the mountains were a sort of creamy-white - like granite or sandstone. It was quite cold and there was a breeze. We were both crouched, hunkered down, he and I, by a small pool of water which reflected the night stars above us. He was almost darkness against the brightness of the mountains behind him. We seemed to be in a valley. It was night time and definitely another country. He had a hat on, like a cloth-cap with a leather brim at the front. I had a hat on too and we both had jackets on. We were cold; but not uncomfortably so. During the day time, it could get quite hot out there. There was a pack beside him, on the ground at his feet, and something else - hidden by his shadow - a rifle, I think. Further down the valley, behind me somewhere, there were two or three other guys, but we couldn't hear or see them. I just knew that they were there, part of our team. It was very quiet, very still. He moved his hand and I glanced down, as he dipped it into the pool, causing the stars to ripple, and lifted his hand up to drink a few drops of the sparkling water. He grinned at me and I saw a flash of white: his teeth.

This 'image' was so brief, and yet so vivid; it stayed in my mind for days and even now, months later as I write, I can still see it in my 'mind's eye'.

This incident probably has no relevance, here. Perhaps I suddenly thought of something I might have seen in a film, once. And anyway, how could I remember a memory of Edmund's, just by reading a few words of his? And Edmund was a Merchant Seaman: he wouldn't have been there, in the valley, inland, on land, creeping about with a rifle.

'Autumn Voyage' though - good title. The poem mentions 'a northern voyage' and also: oceans, waves, and waters, so I don't think I'm reading too much into too little by suggesting that it's about or was inspired by a voyage Edmund went on, in autumn. In which case, there are three autumns to consider: that of 1943, about which we know nothing except that he was on 'small ships' in the coastal trade - according to the report our researcher wrote; the period 13th September to 26th October 1944 when he did his first run with the Sovac; and the fall of 1945 which followed the end of his time on his last ship, at the start of August 1945 and returned to the Merchant Navy Reserve Pool (he left the Merchant Navy in January, 1946).

Of these, it's probably the autumn of 1943, or 1944, that the poem's about. If it's about his - first - voyage across the Atlantic, on the Sovac, towards the end of 1944, then why the 'northern voyage'? And, surely they'd have known they were headed, even if only eventually, to America, so why the 'hidden destinations', and 'the navigated voyages to nowhere'?

We know little about what Edmund was doing in the autumn of 1943, except that he was in service on 'small ships' in the coastal trade, *probably* as an unqualified Wireless Operator and that he got a Special Grade Certificate, which probably means he had lots of different on-board duties. Of course, with the relevant information presented like this, 'Autumn Voyage' could seem to be most likely about Edmund's first trans-Atlantic crossing, on the Sovac. Yet, if it turned out that he had been involved with commandos, and that this was in 1943, then for me at least the clues in the poem would be the three lines that appear together and all begin in a different way to the rest of the poem. All begin with three single syllable words, and in each case 'the' is the second word:

'of the same.....'

'in the bare.....'

'and the same.....'

There is a novel called *I Was A Spy* by John Arnold, published by Curtis Warren. All the authors of Curtis Warren Books had to use in-house pseudonyms. As John Arnold is the name of a character in one of Edmund's early short stories, it seemed worth getting a copy of the book to see if there were any other potential clues. And there are - lots. Still, I cannot say for definite that the book was by Edmund. Why I mention it here, though, is because the story is set during World War Two and commandos and specific commando operations are mentioned, and this 'John Arnold' went with them. This reminded me that Edmund featured commandos in his novel *The Black Phoenix*, also published by Curtis Warren, in 1954 - the year after *I Was A Spy* came out.

One evening, while I was on the telephone with Jon and we were talking about Edmund and the Curtis Warren books, I said that there were other scenes in Edmund's later (SF) novels that, like the post-WW2-based story of *The Black Phoenix* (and *I Was A Spy*) involved the main character going into enemy or potentially hostile territory. Between us, we started listing the various titles. But, I knew what Valerie would say: Edmund was a Merchant Seaman, he probably didn't even carry a gun. He was a sailor.

"Perhaps he was both," Jon suggested, and then he mentioned three initials, which I hadn't heard of. A commando group in World War Two who used small boats. As we talked, I began to remember again that odd experience I'd had when reading '*Autumn Voyage*'.

Two days later, I had another odd experience. It must have been purely coincidental; yet it was strange nonetheless.

I took the day off work. I was still thinking about Edmund as a commando. It seemed just so not him. And yet, something I couldn't quite remember, about Edmund, kept nagging at my mind. I began to wonder if there were any films about commandos. About Navy ones. I tried to remember all the various war films our family had watched in the past. A bit bored, I went round to a friend's house. Looking in the newspaper, I saw that there was a World War Two navy film on in about ten minutes time. I decided to watch it: it might provide some insight to what life might have been like for the teenage Edmund back then. The film was called '*The Cockleshell Heroes*' and though set, I think, in 1942, before Edmund became a seaman, it was exactly the kind of film that I needed to see just then: British World War Two commandos operating with purpose-built canoes behind enemy lines.

Actually, the theme of operating behind enemy lines, in enemy territory, in a strange unfamiliar and possibly hostile environment, is one that features in a lot of Edmund's science fiction. And, if you read all of Edmund's fiction, noting the names and initials of the characters, and compare them with those of certain groups of commandos operating during World War Two, and look out for further similar 'clues', I reckon you might start to think that Edmund either knew some of these people, back then, or even that he had worked with them.

The evidence, such as it is, does seem to suggest a connection of some kind; I'd say a strong one. I've done the research. But it's strange to think that Dad might have been a commando - I'm not sure if I believe it. Valerie has said that

he never spoke of such things to her, not even when he'd drunk too much and was remembering the war. Indeed, none of his family thinks he was a commando. And there's no mention of such missions in his service records. But there are 'blank' periods of Edmund's time as a seaman, that we know little or nothing about: what he was doing in 1943, before he actually joined the Merchant Navy; where he went on the Empire Jonathan; and the last half of 1945, after the war was over.

When the idea that Edmund might have been a commando first came up, unlikely as it seemed, it somehow rang a bell in my mind. There was something to do with Edmund and commandos - but I couldn't quite remember what it was. It was one of my sisters who reminded me, during a telephone call between us, and as she spoke, suddenly it all came flooding back to me. Edmund had mentioned 'commandos' once, not to Valerie, but to us kids. It was at Stammers at lunchtime, and I think it was summer. I can't recall what we'd been talking about, but my sister and I both remember Edmund telling us that he'd had commando training. He was telling us that he knew how to kill a man with just his bare hands - indeed, with just one finger. Outside, in the garden, he pointed out the place on my sister to hit. His actual words were: "I could kill you with one finger. I've had commando training." It was the only time any of us remember Edmund saying that word.

In 'The Tenth Planet', Idris Hamilton tells the Minervans that not only is he a trained spaceman but "*I have also been trained to kill - if necessary - with my bare hands.*" Why? Valerie remembers Edmund telling her the story of the tug-boat race, many times, and of the German airmen shot down in the North Atlantic, and he told some of his children too, but she says he never once mentioned commandos or anything like that, not even at his most maudlin. Sworn to secrecy, maybe?

When I say I've done the research, I meant: with Edmund's fiction, and his poetry - indeed, anything. And, of course, I read books about WW2 seaborne commandos, including one that has lists of the names of the men involved. Not sure if I thought it possible that Dad was a commando, I wasn't looking to prove a case for, as I read lists of initials and certain books again. Just that if there were any potential clues, any relevant words, I wanted them here, all in one place. And I have to say that, oddly the vast majority of these potential 'clues' point towards two particular groups: 'Number Two' and, though to a lesser extent, 'A' Group. (Certain individuals seem to have operated with both groups.)

"I can drink any man under the table!" Edmund used to declare. That's odd: that's exactly what one of the leaders of Number Two used to say - in books I've read about these commandos. The phrase also gets used in Edmund's novel 'Five To Twelve'. Another of the leader-types had the nickname 'Sally', and in 'The Black Phoenix' there's a male who has the code-name 'Aunt Sally' in the commandos' command structure. In 'Ferry Rocket', the hero, himself a special agent, has the same unusual surname as a captain of two of the submarines that took these commandos on some of their missions: Mars.

As the idea that Edmund was a commando is a bit dubious, I am not going to list all the various 'clues' and what to compare them with. However, interested people ~~would~~ would need to read: 'Ferry Rocket'; 'The Black Phoenix'; 'Seed of Light'; 'Sea-horse in the Sky'; 'The Last Continent'; 'Who Needs Men?'; 'The Tenth

Planet'; 'Prisoner of Fire'; 'The Slaves of Heaven'; all of the Expendables books; 'Merry Christmas, Ms. Minerva!'; and a lot of his short-stories, especially, The Lizard of Woz; Nineteen Ninety-Four; A Question of Time; and Repeat Performance. I could go on - suffice to say that of the novels, all of the above titles have more than one name of interest each. Most of the matches occur in his early work. There were 57 men in 'Number Two'. 29 of their initials appear in Edmund's fiction; some others would do if the initials of the character were reversed. 14 pairs of initials from Number Two do not occur anywhere in Edmund's fiction, even reversed.

'A' Group had 21 men. 13 of those initial pairs appear in Edmund's fiction. A number of others would count if reversed, or if an extra third letter was removed. Only two pairs of initials from 'A' Group do not appear in any form in Edmund's work.

As I say, the book titles above have at least two potential names each. The novel that has the most is 'Prisoner of Fire' - oddly, because this book also contains a group of names associated with an institution that has nothing to do with the military in any way.

And not all the initials Edmund used in his fiction, that seem to have some connection with Number Two Group, are the possible initials of individuals. In his story M8I-Ursa Major, there is talk of 'the F.T.E.', which stands for Field Testing Executive. That's an odd use of the word 'Executive'. It reminds me of S.O.E., the Special Operations Executive who were in charge of British commandos in World War Two. And also, in the same story, there are the S.F.P. men:

'the entire S.F.P. team should foregather on the navigation deck.'

S.F.P. here stands for Space-Frame Physicists. If you place the 'P' before the 'F' and then say it aloud, the initials sound very like those of the commandos to which Number Two group belonged.

So, despite all this, we must probably assume that Edmund was never anything other than a Merchant Seaman. Number Two Group were operating 1943-1944, but it's probably just a coincidence that Edmund was working in the same area as them, on 'small ships' in the coastal trade - the inverted commas are used thus in the report our researcher produced; and Edmund didn't actually join the Merchant Navy until the spring of 1944. He probably just knew someone who was a commando, and then later on, as a writer, just did lots of research about them and their covert missions - although there couldn't have been that many books about them in the 1950s, and it was all *Classified*, anyway.

"I've had commando training." Those were his exact words - my sister and I both agree about this. Yet, they don't necessarily mean that Edmund was a commando. And all those initials and names and other odd clues I've collected, and the themes of small boats, they are all probably just coincidences - even collectively.

And the young man who looks like the young 'dashing' Edmund, standing in a photograph of just over fifty men of Number Two, late 1943, cannot possibly be him - though, whoever it was he must have been Edmund's exact double for a while.

And it's probably just chance that when I was due to be born, in the first week of November 1960, my parents were thinking of calling me 'Noel'. Very unusual name for a boy. I would have been: Noel Cooper. Indeed, I'd have had the

same name as a British naval commando who went missing during an operation in early November, 1942 - a few months before Edmund first went to sea, on those 'small ships'.

We'll probably never know for sure, yet I think there was a connection of some kind, and do not discount the notion that my father might have been a commando. He was a very good swimmer, he was very intelligent, and there's slight evidence that suggests he had second sight, all of which would have made him a useful person to have on special operations.

Shaun