



## Journey to Valsura (1942-1946) Cdr MFB Ward, First Commanding Officer of MIS Valsura

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August 1942 was a very turbulent and violent month in the history of the world. While the Quit India movement was in full swing here in our country, the World War II was at its peak in the West. It was during these times that history of a different kind was being written in Jamnagar, called Nawanagar in those days. The foundation stone of HMIS Valsura was laid in Rozi Island of Jamnagar on **15 August 1942** (someone must have had a premonition five years ahead of time, that this date will be immortalized in Indian history) and in just four months on **15 December 1942**, the Torpedo School of the Royal Indian Navy, HMIS Valsura was commissioned with the motto 'Valsura Semper Viret', meaning 'Valsura will always be victorious'. The name Valsura is made up of two Tamil words 'Val' meaning Sword and 'Sura' meaning Fish. This was a very appropriate name for the Torpedo School as 'Swordfish' was the name of the very successful Torpedo bomber of the Royal Fleet Air Arm. On 26 Jan 1950, INS Valsura came into existence with the motto, 'Tasya Bhasa Sarvmidam Vibhati' meaning 'The light that emanates from here Illuminates All'.

The man, who made this improbable feat, of building Valsura in just four months, possible, was Commander MFB Ward of the Royal Navy, our first Commanding Officer. This officer had narrowly missed death on 14 September 1939 when HMS Royal Oak was sunk in Scapa Flow just after the start of World War II. He was one of the 414 survivors from a crew of 1247, the biggest Royal Navy loss of all time. We Valsurians were very fortunate when on 25 October 2012, his son Colonel Robert Ward (Retd), of the Royal Marines visited us and presented us with a compilation of his father's meticulously written diaries aptly titled 'Journey



to Valsura 1942-1946'. The compilation is a veritable treasure not only for Valsura or the Navy, but probably for the entire nation.

Col Robert Ward has divided the compilation into six parts. The first part, from 12 March 1942 till 3 April 1942, covers the journey of his father from England to India. He covered a distance of 12,500 miles and the route from Poole, UK to Bombay, India was through twenty cities covering the nations of Ireland, Portugal, Western Sahara, Senegal, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Congo, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain and present day Pakistan. He has described interesting interactions with his co-passengers on the various flights, including one with an American who had seen Pearl Harbour just after the attack.

The next section from 4 April 1942 to 12 August 1942 is about finding Valsura. Here he has mentioned his interactions with Royal Indian Naval officers at Delhi and Bombay, about the opulence and graciousness of the His Highness (HH), KS Digvijaysinhji, the Jam Sahib of Nawanagar and also about the burning of the Town Hall in Delhi and the bonfire lit in



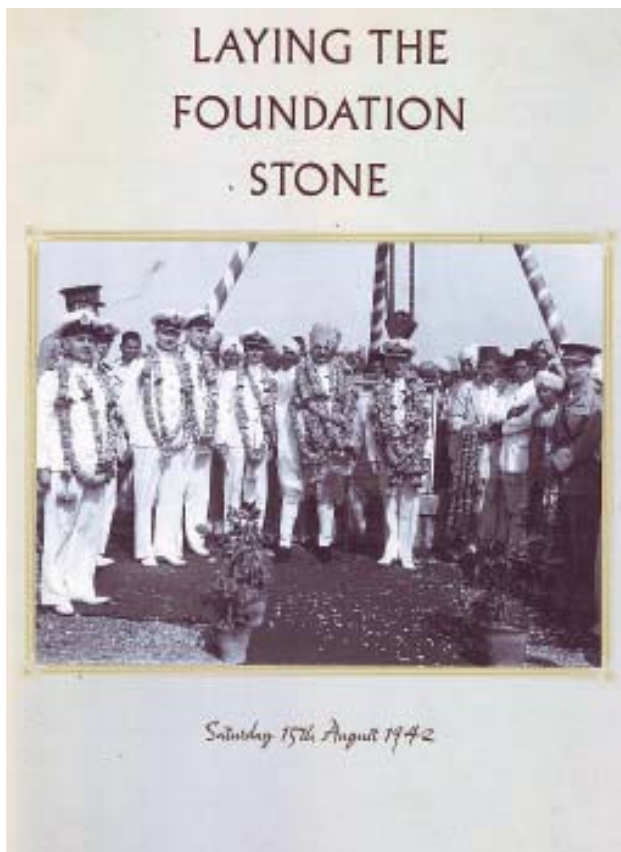
Bombay where people threw their hats and ties into the fire.

The third section covers the auspicious day of 15 August 1942 when the foundation stone of Valsura was laid. The general arrangement drawing of HMIS Valsura is also shown. He mentions that Vice Admiral Sir Herbert Fitzherbert, Flag Officer Commanding, Royal Indian Navy (FOCRIN) was present with his wife and that the ceremony was perfectly organized and done on a most lavish scale. He describes in detail about the ceremony and of the Guard of Honour being inspected by His Highness, the Jam Sahib and writes that HH, was a great authority on cricket and racing and the women of that time found him very charming as the men found him interesting.

The fourth section from 16 August 1942 to 1 December 1942 describes the building-up of

Valsura. While discussing the plans for the construction, Cdr Ward also mentions his visits to Bombay where an interim Torpedo School was functioning. He also mentions about a visit to the Taj and that Her Highness showed him, her exquisite collections of jewels specially emeralds, necklaces with pearls and diamonds designed in the style of art deco by Jacques Cartier. This part is also interesting as they discuss the Jam Sahib's birthday celebrations during which a State Olympiad was held in the race course with various tournaments like hockey, volleyball, lacrosse and also athletic events. He also reveals that he regularly played golf with his friends and the Jam Sahib (and we at Valsura were proudly claiming that we had recently introduced Golf in Jamnagar).

The fifth section from 5 December 1942 to 22 December 1942 is dedicated to the commissioning ceremony. The Chief figure of interest for the ceremony was General (later Field Marshal) Claude Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army (Readers may recollect that in 1942, after the initial successes of the war in North Africa turned against the British, he was relieved of the post of C-in-C, Middle East during the crucial El Alamein campaign and was sent back as C-in-C, India). HH was not available at that period as he was representing India in the Pacific War Council. He had earlier





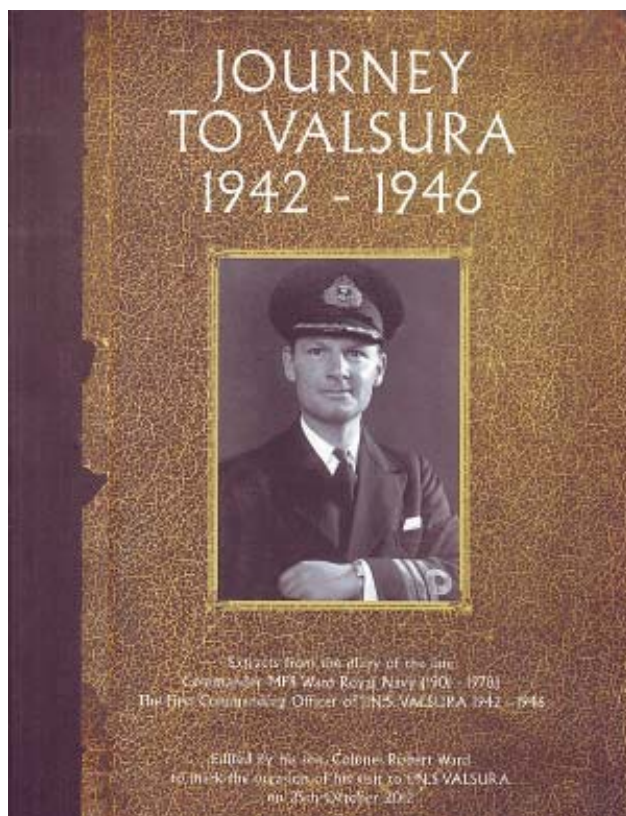
represented India in the first assembly of the League of Nations in 1920. In his absence, the commissioning of HMIS Valsura was done by his wife, Her Highness Gulab Kunverba Sahiba. Cdr Ward has written that after inspecting the Guard of Honour, Her Highness opened the door of the main building with a silver key.

The final section from 25 December 1942 Christmas Day till 16 September 1943 mentions the growth of Valsura. This section is very interesting as it brings out issues of running an establishment about Divisions, Colours, Defaulters, Cross Country Runs, Liberty Men being assaulted brutally apparently by the Police, etc. many of which are similar to those being faced by Commanding Officers even today. He has mentioned anecdotes of the Jam Sahib, the making of the Ranjit Sagar Dam, the Solarium, the tennis and golf matches and many more. He also mentions Ranjitsinhji, the famous cricketer and the Jam Sahib's Uncle

and predecessor and his cousin Dilipsinhji (incidentally the famous Ranji Trophy and Duleep Trophy cricket tournaments in India are named after these Jamnagar royals).

Cdr Ward was a voracious reader and his observations on the books he was reading at that time are of considerable interest. He also avidly followed the World War II and shows his interest in strategy and tactics. Cdr Ward was keen on sports and there are episodes of tennis, golf, riding, shooting with HH and also of hockey, tug of war and other sports tournaments. He has also mentioned that on 15 May he saw the best men's tennis four he had ever seen: HH, Geoffrey Clarke the Military Secretary, Franjo Kukuljevic (Croatian tennis player) who was ranked as No 10 in the world in 1939 and Max Ellmer, the Swiss champion.

I do not want to let the complete cat out of the bag, as each word of the document compiled by Col Robert Ward about his father's journey to Valsura is very interesting and worth reading. The pdf link to this document is being hosted on the INS Valsura website <http://insvalsura.gov.in/> for all to read. *A great tribute from a son to his father.* On the last page, in the editor's note, Col Robert Ward writes, "..... When Vice Admiral John Henry Godfrey (the then FOCRIN) visited Valsura in March 1944, he said it was the best and cleanest establishment in the Royal Indian Navy....." I believe the successive commissions of Valsura have strived hard and kept the sayings of Admiral Godfrey, true to this day.



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