

LIFEBOAT COXSWAIN WHO WAS WITH DUNKIRK ARMADA OF LITTLE SHIPS

LIVING QUIETLY in retirement at Wells and having gardening for his hobby is Mr. Theodor Nielsen, who for over 36 years served in the Wells lifeboat and was its coxswain from 1933 to 1947.

"The first time I saw Wells was one Sunday, after 5 a.m., between the smoke stacks of the twin-paddle tug which towed us in," Mr. Nielsen told a reporter this week. That was in 1910, when to the three-masted schooner Charles and Ellen, on which Mr. Nielsen was serving, went the Wells pilot, Mr. Charlie Wordingham, who was accompanied by his daughter Louise. The Danish sailor and Louise became friends, and they were married in 1914.

Mr. Nielsen, the son of a sailor, was born in the Danish sea port of Aalborg. By his 12th birthday he was an orphan. He went to sea at the age of 14, and changed to the British coastal trade—still in sail—in 1906. He joined the Wells fishermen to replace his brother-in-law, who was called up for service with the Navy. At the end of the 1914-18 war Mr. Nielsen went to sea as engineer of the Emmanuel, plying between Wells, King's Lynn and Hull. His brother-in-law emigrated to Australia, and so Mr. Nielsen had a permanent place in the family's fishing business, a career which did not end until he retired from service with the lifeboat in 1947.

Mr. Nielsen joined the lifeboat crew in 1910, and the 13 months he spent with the Emmanuel was the only break in his lifeboat service before his retirement. He became bowman, second coxswain, and then coxswain of the lifeboat.

Part of Mr. Nielsen's story can be gathered from certificates hanging on a wall of his home. In June, 1944, he was awarded the M.B.E. for Dunkirk service. Then the Brancaster, Wells, Blakeney, Sheringham and Cromer fishing boats made their way to Lowestoft for the journey south. From Lowestoft, Mr. Nielsen says with a chuckle, the whelker Tony led a strangely assorted but mammoth flotilla to ports in Kent.

In Mr. Billy Cox's boat Bessie, Mr. Nielsen, Mr. Cox and a Blakeney fisherman went on an expedition to the French coast. Their mission was to pick up a small party of men. Alas, although they stood off the coast, they were too late. Without a doubt, Mr. Nielsen is proud of his flotilla navigation. But, he emphasised, the M.B.E. was an award collectively earned.

An award on vellum from the Royal National Life-boat Institution states: "Coxswain of the Wells lifeboat, in recognition of his courageous conduct when, at considerable personal risk, he entered the fuselage of a badly damaged and partially submerged Lancaster bomber to search for survivors. . . ."

Dr. Hicks, Mr. Nielsen explained, was tending a badly-burned airman, the others were busy, and it seemed so much easier to make sure there was nobody aboard himself.

The former coxswain can tell of a trip when ice on his life-jacket was over an inch thick. And there are other experiences worth retelling. But there is one of which Mr. Nielsen is particularly proud; he was chosen to represent the Norfolk fishermen in the Victory Parade in London at the end of the 1939-45 war, and he marched in the procession.

In 1947 Mr. Nielsen handed over the lifeboat to Mr. Billy Cox and sold the boat Tony. Now he grows magnificent flowers.

