

The Untold Story

By Keith Best



Julian and Keith Best in April 1962 at Julian's wedding

A small step for man but a giant step for mankind, I seem to have heard that before somewhere. I know the feeling only too well!!! Nineteen fifty, what a year that was, November the fifth to be exact, the day I took the enormous step from civilian life to become a sailor, not just an ordinary sailor, but one of His Majesty's sailors. What more could a fifteen year old boy wish for? Not for me a job in a factory making watches year in year out, I was heading for all those exciting times as advertised in the brochures from the recruiting office!!

Very early on the 5th of November, which was also my Dads' birthday, we were off to Swansea to get the train to Bristol. I don't remember much about the journey, what I do remember is the Sailors Home where I was to stay the night. I had never slept in a bed with such starched sheets, it was like sleeping between two sheets of white hardboard, what a night! Breakfast was not too bad with porridge followed by smoked haddock. There were about six or seven of us on the train to Gosport, it was the longest journey I had ever made, mile after mile of new countryside, yet some of the names seemed familiar as I'd read about them in books or papers.

GOSPORT

Time for us to get off the train to be met by a friendly looking sailor in a peaked cap and lots of gold badges. Right my lads he says with a smile we'll soon have you fed and watered, talk about lambs to the slaughter!!!

HMS St Vincent was very imposing to say the least, immaculate is a good description, not so much as a matchstick lying around, if there had been I don't think it would have been there for long. Down to the new entries block, a cuppa and a few forms to fill in then sign a little card to send home to Mum to say I'd arrived safe and sound. I was now an official NOZZER, Boy Seaman 2nd Class, to be any lower I'd have to be dead!! Next on the agenda, collect bedding, about thirty of us all much the same age but from so many different backgrounds ambling off together, the last bit of ambling we would do for a long time!! Right my lad, three blankets, three sheets, two pillows and three pillow cases, sign here and here - next!

The very first thing we are shown is how to make up a bed, strip it and fold all the items to an exact size and pattern, little boy, you are now in the Navy!! The dormitory is huge, the floor like a mirror; little did I know that I'd be helping to keep it that way!! Under the supervision of a Leading Boy we made our beds up and gathered in a group to be informed as to what was ahead of us, uniforms to be collected, boots, shoes, caps, overcoat, etc. down to a simple sewing kit known as a housewife. Dinner and tea were excellent even though food was still rationed.

I think we were all in our beds by nine on that first night, and all sound asleep soon after! If you haven't been woken up at 6.30 in the morning by a bugle then there is no way I will be able to describe it to you!!! That, and some sadist shouting at the top of his voice telling you you've been in bed far too long is far from the way my mother used to say 'come on now, we don't want to be late for school do we'? This boy was about to learn the hard way. Wash etc. then get dressed for breakfast? Oh no, not as simple as that, beds to be stripped and folded as shown (inch perfect at that) and floor to be swept and polished with the heavy bumper provided, similar to the old style carpet cleaners but solid and weighing a ton!! Seven thirty breakfast, and later various lectures to let us know what was ahead of us, then then back to the dormitory to be shown what where and how to wear our sailor clothing.



HMS St. Vincent – [Imperial War Museums A9795](#)

It amazed me how well the clothes fitted, I don't think anybody had to change anything. Us absolute beginners were given a hand by some of the boys from HMS Arethusa. I think they were boys who had lost their father during the war, brought up on Arethusa, then given the chance to continue in the navy. Anyway, they knew exactly what to do and showed us what was what. We had all been given a Type Block with our name on and every item of clothing had to be marked in black or white paint. All through the next weeks we had to use red silk like cotton to sew our names in every article of clothing we owned, socks, pants, vests etc. and all done in our own time.

As Nozzers we were not allowed out of St Vincent for the first six weeks, that was considered make or break time. We all made it and got to know each other quite well, where we had come from, why we had joined, and who we had left at home, we had lots of laughs and a few hidden tears!! Six weeks quickly dragged in!! I can make a bed with the best of them, my name is sewn into every item of clothing and my shoes and boots have been spit and polished to perfection. I can salute officers exactly as the book says, I even keep an eye open for them so's they can return the salute to me!! I have been put in Blake division and have been told that the enemy were in Benbow, Rodney and Duncan divisions - our blood now belonged to Blake! When it comes to competitions, no quarter is asked or given, it's all very serious stuff, it is very important to each of us that we all work as a team.

It takes a lot of hard work to train a seaman in the Royal Navy, general seamanship covers a multitude of skills, navigation, damage control, first aid, signals, sailing, and general ship maintenance. In years gone by gunnery played a vital role, but not quite so much now due to the modern weaponry a warship now uses. The next year in St Vincent was going to teach me a lot more than I thought possible, there would be good days and there would be bad days, even some "I want my Mum" days. Six thirty am the dreaded call, "right lads time to get up, and go over the mast"!! At that time I think the mast was two miles high, up one side and down the other. I never did find out why we had to do it, after all I had no notions of joining the Cutty Sark or HMS Bounty!!!



The Mast at HMS St. Vincent

Another day, another 6 :30am call, this time its early morning dhoby session, down to the wash room with a bag full of washing in one hand and a bar of the hardest yellow soap imaginable in the other. Strip off to the birthday suit and start washing clothes in a large tub, rinse and take up to the duty instructor to be examined, so far so good. Standing all starkers holding up a piece of clean washing when the

instructor looks at you and starts singing "Wee Willie Winkie" does nothing for your ego!! When all this is done, and not before, time for breakfast and the day ahead.

Early morning shower — if ever there were three little words to make a boy tremble, they were EARLY MORNING SHOWER! Up sharpish, collect all the necessary toilet gear and head for the shower room. Loads and loads of hot water, the perfumed smell of Nights Scented Castille or Palmolive, what a life, then after about ten minutes the duty Petty Officer passes by and calls 'Plunge'. That was the equivalent of a judge putting a black cap on his head, there was no escape, it didn't matter if your Mum knew her M.P. or the local Chief Constable, the call had been made, there was no way out. The plunge was a large concrete bath, twelve feet long, five deep, and five wide, full of water. Now, there's three kinds of water, excluding hot, there's cold, very cold, and there's "Bloody Hell! It's freezing" and it was the latter that was in the Plunge. All we had to do was go in one end and clamber out the other, it took me about point seven five seconds - and I wasn't the fastest! When we got out at the other end we were like little white prunes, all bleached and wrinkly. It's amazing what freezing water does to the anatomy! There was one consolation, the 'big boys' were in the same boat as the rest of us! We stood there with teeth chattering, if we clamped our jaws together, our heads would bounce up and down like chickens with St. Vitus Dance - not a picture for the squeamish! The powers that be must have thought all this was going to do us the world of good. I don't think it did us much harm but I certainly don't remember it doing us much good!

Seamanship was very interesting, so much to learn. Knots and splices by the dozen, flags to learn, colours and what they stood for, how to pass messages by semaphore, Morse code and how to use a signal lamp, well, the basics anyway. We had all been issued with rope and other cordage to make up the clews and lashings to secure our hammocks. This had to be done the right way or the hammock could not be slung correctly and out you would go! Gunnery was different, it was hard work lugging the shells for the four inch guns and heaven help you if you fouled up! There is nothing funny in carrying a shell around all the various departments to find out the exact weight of the shell you were carrying!! After half an hour you knew it weighed about a ton, at least that's what it felt like! Still, we learned how to keep our mouths shut and pay attention when the instructor was speaking.

Sport also played a big part in life at St Vincent. Inter-divisional games compared to what the gladiators of old did - win at all costs but don't get caught cheating! At one stage I was invited to join the boxing team, it wasn't wise to refuse. I eventually ended up in the final against the former champion of the Arethusa, he was good, I knew he was good because he had his own gum-shield!! I was going to be lucky to hang on to my own teeth!! He was quite a good boxer, but so was I, and in my favour, I could also fight. He didn't have the stubbornness to keep going that I had, and on the day, I won. It was great being one of the heroes who had helped win the huge cake that was the main prize.

Pay day was on a Thursday, for what it was worth, three shillings and sixpence a week or 17p in today's coinage. We were also allowed to go ashore at the weekend, it was usually a wander around the few shops or visit the cinema. There would be a main feature film, a newsreel and a B class Western and of course Charlie Kunz playing the piano during the interval - nothing too exciting but worth the shilling paid to get in.

I remember my first leave, the train journey to Swansea, me in my best suit, gleaming and ready to show off to the whole of Wales. It was a long journey and it was in the days of the steam trains. For most of the time I had my head stuck out of the carriage window, watching the world go by. On arriving home

things proved not to have change much, I was hardly in the door when my mother had scrubbed my neck to remove the grime left by the train journey, I must have looked like Al Jolson!! It was brilliant to be on leave, but what a poser! Cap flat on the back of the head and a pure white silk scarf around the neck, (both frowned upon by the navy) but I was on leave not on holiday like a civilian. I even went back to my old school! They must have thought I was Lord Nelson and wondered how the Navy had managed before I joined! It must have been the white silk scarf, because quite soon afterwards, Julian, my brother, packed in his cushy job with Mables the coal merchants and he also signed on the dotted line. When I joined, I didn't know what I'd let myself in for, but when Julian joined, the Navy didn't know what it had let itself in for!!

The instructors must have done a good job on all of us in our class because we all stayed the course and had good pass marks at the end of our stay. There had been such a lot to do, so many brand new experiences, so many different places to visit as part of our training, but here we all were at long last, Boy Seaman 1st Class, Nozzers no more! We were all ready to face the future, a lot wiser but still very nervous.

FIRST POSTING

You can take it from me that the largest thing in all the world is an aircraft carrier swinging at a mooring buoy in Portland Harbour. There is no doubt that when we approached HMS Indefatigable in a small motor cutter, that the rest of the world disappeared!! Our kit bags and hammocks had to be lugged up a million steps to the deck and then what seemed like a mile to our mess-deck, right up at the pointed end!! We were allowed to settle down in our mess, lockers stowed with our kit and hammocks put away in the proper stowage rooms. Duty rosters had been made out for us. Daily orders were pinned up on the notice board and had to be read and properly digested, excuses for not knowing what was to be were not readily accepted on board ship.

We still got up at 6.30am on the following day, but by now we were used to it and it wasn't quite as painful! We got dressed in the rig of the day, number 8s, which was light blue shirt and dark trousers. When breakfast and all the cleaning up was done, we all paraded on the flight deck in our respective mess numbers. A complete inspection by the heads of each department, then it was time for jobs allocation. Most of the tasks we were expected to perform were simple cleaning jobs, like sweeping, washing and polishing. There was and never will be anything as clean as a Royal Navy Ship! Since we were still boy seamen we went to school on board ship in the afternoon. It was mostly Maths, English and Geography etc. but all done in a light-hearted way. We still indulged in all sorts of sport, on board and ashore.

By now we had all made small allotments of money to Bernards the Naval Tailors which allowed us to get some tiddly gear. First on the list was a new cap as the naval issue was more or less oval shaped and not too special, but a P & S was really special, a round cap with red and green panels inside, port and starboard, which could be shaped exactly as required, making a nice bow wave back and front - marvellous! We had also started to scrub our blue collars in Teepol to get them to a paler shade of blue, we were pulling out all the stops to be real sailors, not brand newbies just out of training school! It helped that our pay had been increased and we had access to our bankbooks which contained money saved for us at St. Vincent, so when shore leave was allowed at the weekends, Saturday or Sunday depending what watch you were in, we would go ashore in Weymouth with a pound in our pockets, as smart as a lick of paint and never be broke again, the Navy was so lucky to have us!! (Teepol by the way was

probably the first liquid soap available which was used for everything from washing dishes to removing rust from anchors.)



HMS Indefatigable – [Imperial War Museums A21197](https://www.imperialwar Museums.org.uk/collections/21197)

The call over the Tannoy system to Clear lower decks, hands to paint ship was the start of a very hectic time as an aircraft carrier is a large ship and takes a lot of painting, officers and certain crew members are excused from taking part. Areas were designated, paint pots and brushes were handed out and large nets had been slung under the flared bows in readiness. I was given a Bosun's Chair and shown where to put it over the side, there was no way, I said to myself that I was going to launch myself into space on that little chair, but I was "encouraged" to go by a 6ft 2 inch Petty Officer with more stripes than a Zebra and a face like the inside of a gearbox!! So there I was, suspended in space with half a gallon of grey paint and a three inch brush and an endless supply of ships side that needed painting. It all turned out to be good fun, I was my own boss in that chair, I'd paint down to the waterline then a boat trip to the gangway to get back on board, repeated several times until all the ships side had been painted. Whilst this was going on, other crew members were painting the superstructure, the weather was good and moral was high.

SEA LEGS!

It was not long after we had painted ship when we heard that we were going to sea. Talk about excitement! First of all we were to call in at Rosyth in Scotland, then up to Invergordon, after this it was to be Copenhagen in Denmark. That trip was brilliant, my first voyage to a foreign land, a run ashore in Copenhagen with Danish Kroner in my pocket. We soon discovered that our money was not going to go far, everything was so expensive, if I remember rightly I managed to buy a couple of postcards of the Little Mermaid and not much else! There were several trips arranged for us to visit breweries and maritime museums etc. the breweries were the most popular of them all! There were several large

sailing ships in harbour at the same time as us which were used as training ships for sea cadets in the Danish navy. The best part of the visit was the run ashore to the famous Tivoli Gardens, we were given a warm welcome and all the fairground rides were free, this suited us fine because by now our cash was just about done. We had only been in Denmark for five days when it was time once more to cast off lines and put to sea again, I'm sure this did not bother us too much because going to sea was still a big adventure to us, watchkeeping was now part of our routine, mostly it was steering the ship from the wheelhouse deep in the bowels, or lookouts on the bridge with a fancy pair of binoculars around the neck, we were now well and truly part of the ship's company.

Out in the North Sea things had got a lot livelier, our first crossing had been nice and calm, but now the weather had changed dramatically and we were about to carry out exercises with several ships from different NATO countries. I was soon to discover if my sea legs and stomach could stand the test the elements were about to throw at us. As it happened, luck was on my side and I was spared the discomfort of being seasick and was able to play my part in the various tasks I was expected to perform. Fuelling at sea and transferring men and material from one ship to another were just some of the exercises carried out. The days of HMS Indefatigable were numbered though, she was due to be taken out of service and replaced by HMS Implacable her sister ship. The change over was done in Portland harbour and only a skeleton crew left on board the Indefatigable to take her down to Guzz as Devonport was known. Several exercises were carried out on the Implacable, it was the time of the cold war and we were expected to be at a state of readiness at all times, but this did not stop us going for a trip to Gibraltar. This was what I joined for - there was a big world out there, just waiting for me!

A DROP OF ROUGHERS!!

I think everybody knows that the Bay of Biscay can be a little bit rough and speaking from experience I can confirm that this is true. Our escort destroyers sailed up and over the huge waves whilst we, being so much bigger, pounded straight into each mountainous wave. I had heard from some of the older sailors that they had spent three days on one wave! I could have believed them after seeing this lot. Entering Gib. harbour was a nightmare, a force five gale was blowing us off the jetty where we were supposed to berth. A large steel cable was secured from the bows to the shore and a similar line at the stern but having so much freeboard, that's actual ship-side above water, we were like a large sail and the wind struck us hard. It wasn't long before the headrope started to make a loud humming sound, this was the warning sound before it parted and we were lucky that day that nobody got hurt. A steel rope that has parted under stress comes back like a whip lash, everybody stands stock still hoping the wire will pass them by, this time we had luck on our side. With the aid of several tugs we finally got secured alongside and it was only then that we could look up and see the famous Rock of Gibraltar. The gale seemed to drop quickly and the weather turned beautiful, exactly what we had hoped for, we were now well and truly abroad, we were in the sunny Med.

Sadly, all the expected joy of such a visit was to come to an end, it was just two days later that I received the shattering news that my father had died. My Divisional officer and Petty officer were very good to me at that time, remember I was only a seventeen year old boy. Due to circumstances I could not be flown home for the funeral and as hard as it was for me, it was even more so for my mother. Two of her sons were abroad, I was in Gibraltar and my older brother Julian was out in the West Indies on the cruiser HMS Devonshire. I don't know how she managed to cope, but she did. It also said a lot for Lionel, he was so young but he came through with flying colours. It was a very sad time indeed. When

we sailed for home, back to Portland, it was from there that I was sent on compassionate leave, I think for seven days. By that time there was nothing I could do, but perhaps my being there helped my Mum although she had coped so well, time was going to be the healer now.

HAPPIER DAYS AHEAD

Time was also passing for me, I was now an Ordinary Seaman, this also meant that I was due to be drafted. The draft list was put up on the notice board in the mess so that all could read it and we were about to be split up. Most of us were going to be sent out to the Med fleet for two and a half years!! If you say it quickly enough it doesn't sound so long!! I was the only one to be joining HMS Chivalrous of the 1st Destroyer Squadron Med Fleet. A bit of leave first of all, then a flight out to Malta in a plane that could have been used by Blerriot or his father! We stopped off in Nice to take on coal or logs, can't remember which, I did tell you the plane was old didn't I? It was whilst we were there that the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill landed at Nice, we must have been invisible to him as he completely ignored us, I don't think dear old Winnie could be bothered to see us. Anyway, we were soon airborne again, wings flapping like Billy-o on our way to Malta GC. Like a child on Christmas morning, that's how I felt when I first set eyes on HMS Chivalrous, a greyhound of the seas, low sleek and lit up from stem to stern with upper deck lighting, I was looking at everything I had joined up for.



HMS Chivalrous – [Imperial War Museums FL8096](#)

There isn't much room on board a destroyer below decks, and all space is designed for a purpose. The mess-deck tables are close together and you soon learn how to get on with everybody, sweaty feet, wet clothes and long faces if the mail from home wasn't very good. We slept in hammocks, no bunks and duvets in those days, a bit of a chat, maybe a read, then out lights. The steady sound of the generators soon had you asleep with just the odd shout of "leave that alone! You'll go blind!!"

Most naval ships carry out the same daily routines although some are stricter than others. Destroyers were far more relaxed than carriers or cruisers but that did not mean they were less efficient, we were at sea nearly every day getting ourselves and the ship into a first class working unit. We did minesweeping, gunnery, torpedo firing, re-fuelling at sea and numerous exercises with ships of all description. We won the Med Fleet Gunnery trophy beating destroyers of greater firing power than ourselves, the Daring class and the Battle class, we were very proud and rightly so. I can still see the Meteor jet towing the target sleeve for us to fire at, instead of being the closest we blew it out of the skies - the target that is, not the plane! Night exercises were a regular thing as well and it was during one of these that we received a call that a Comet airliner had come down in the Med. We were first on the scene and searched all night using the ships signal lamps and any other means of light on board but alas, there were no survivors, some wreckage, suitcases etc. and very, very sadly a child's doll.

There were several happier moments as well when we visited Naples, Sorrento and Triest and sailed round the island volcano Stromboli. This was when we were on our way to Dubrovnik to sweep an old German minefield that had been newly discovered. It wasn't a large field and after two or three days we had it swept, the paravanes sweeping out from either side of the ship cut loose the mines which then floated to the surface to be blown up by a burst from a Bofors gun, then all we had to do was lower a whaler to pick up enough fish to last a week.

I had a great job on Chivalrous, bowman on the ships motor boat. The destroyers were always berthed at mooring buoys in mid stream, Sliema Creek in Malta, so a motor boat had to be on call 24hrs a day as there was always somebody either going to or coming from shore. There was also the run round to Grand Harbour, which suited us fine as it meant we were away from the ship and prying eyes for a while - not that we were going to skive! On a run like that we mostly collected mail or stores but it also gave us a chance to chat up the Wrens who worked at these different places, after all, that's what sailors are supposed to do!!

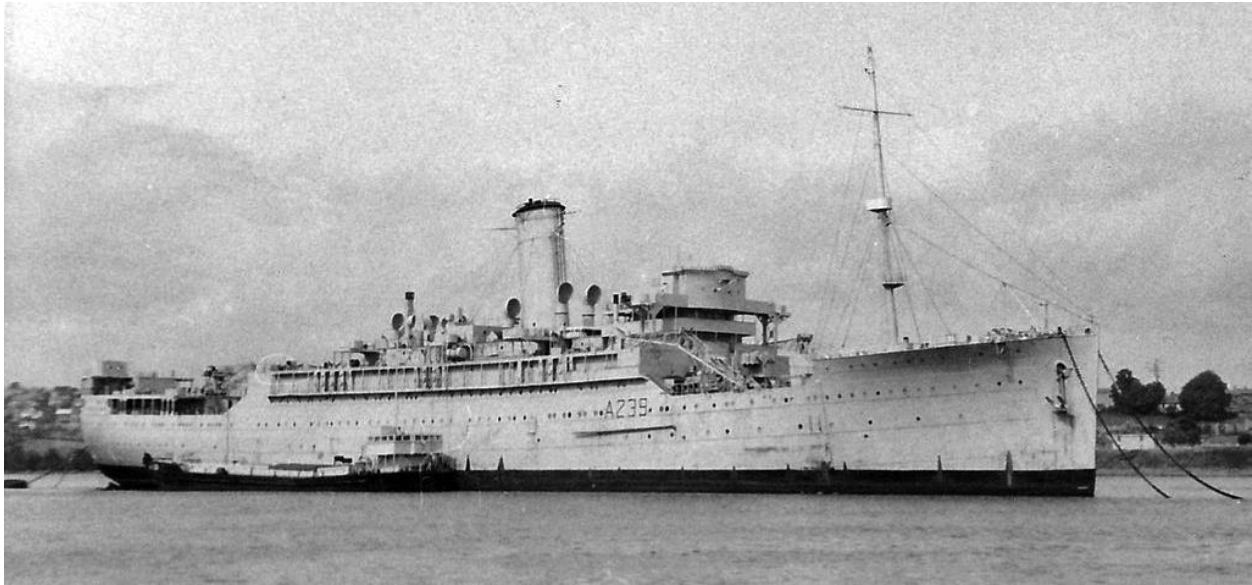
WHY ME?

Scrubbing down deck was good fun in Malta. The Chivalrous had wooden decks and these were kept spotless by scrubbing with deck scrubbers and salt water from the fire hydrants and hoses, an ideal time to have a carry on, those hoses were pointed everywhere except the deck! Skylarking was the order of the day, it mattered none that we got soaked to the skin, but things sometimes did go wrong! It was the day that I was on the hose, and my target to be had left the focs'le in a hurry, he was hiding amidships, but as soon as he showed his nose he was going to get it. Unfortunately for me, the next person to appear had two and a half gold rings on his sleeve and yes, he got it!! It was times like these that made you appreciate a skipper who had a good sense of humour, he left me nameless but that was all, I was demoted to the deck scrubber the next time!

Why is it that all good things have to come to an end? The powers that be had decided to sell the Chivalrous to the Pakistani navy and to say we were devastated would be an understatement. However there was even worse to come. We were to be drafted to HMS Ranpura, a heavy repair ship - from our lovely destroyer we were going to a converted P&O liner, more chiefs than indians! We were about to go back to the real navy, heaven help us!

At least we did not have far to travel as the Ranpura was at a berthing jetty in Sliema Creek. The difference in the two ships was like chalk and cheese, the forehead mess-deck on the Ranpura was like a

dance hall compared to the one on the Chivalrous, and it took you ten minutes to walk from stem to stern. By now I was well and truly settled down in Malta, runs ashore to all the notorious haunts had become a regular thing. The infamous Gutt was still the most popular place for a run ashore, once you had got past TINY the giant Maltese policeman at the top end of the street you were on your way. There are more bars and café's down the Gutt than one could cope with, each of them had their own girls and small band. Ask any old sailor if he remembers Sparrow and eyes will light up! What her party piece was cannot be mentioned here!!



HMS Ranpura

This was the time I got my first tattoo - a couple bottles of Hopleafbeer, a glass or two of cheapo vino and the challenge was taken up, what, me, scared of a tattoo? No way, wouldn't bother me! In to the tattoo shop we go, surrounded by a thousand pictures of all that was available, a bluebird, an angel, a tigers head or what about a fantastic snake winding its way around your arm? No, none of these, I settled for Donald Duck!! He's still there after all these years, scratched and faded but still the same old Donald. The other one I had later was supposed to be a heart and flowers but it looks more like a box of chocolates!

The bathing pool at Grand Harbour was a popular place to go when we were off-duty and had an assortment of diving boards to mess about on. I remember one time climbing up onto the first board to perform my swallow dive when this young boy about ten or eleven years old passed by on his way to the top board. With watching us I had to follow him, he did a fantastic dive and got a round of applause. Me next! It must have looked as if somebody had thrown an octopus from the top board and I was halfway down when I realised I was turning over. My entry into the water was also spectacular but for a different reason. I didn't get a round of applause but I did get lots of sympathetic looks as I was helped from the water! If I had found that boy later I would have thumped him but knowing my luck on that day I'd probably have found out he was an expert at Karate!!

It was also on Ranpura that I started to draw my tot of rum, if ever there was a milestone in a sailors' life, this was it. When the bugle call for Up Spirits is played, the rum bosun from each mess takes a mess kettle to collect the rum allocation for his particular mess, then using the Tot measure he dishes out one

measure to each rating entitled. The Tot measure always had one finger in the cup, this was the accepted thing and it was then up to the rum bosun to decide what to do with extra rum. Normally it went to somebody whose birthday it might be, even if that person was not eligible and it was also used as payment for various services rendered to the mess in general. Rum was also the main stake in any gambling we did, mostly debts in Cribbage and Uckers, the naval version of Ludo. Instead of pounds, shillings and pence, we had sippers, gulpers and half tots, on rare occasions even the full tot, but there was an unwritten law that said you would never take a mans' full tot off him, gulpers was the very most ever taken.



Rum Ration – [Ray Thomas](#)

Beard growing was the in thing at that time, well, it was for those who could grow one. There was a certain procedure to go through before you could grow a beard in the navy, moustaches were not allowed. A request was put through the proper channels to discontinue shaving, a certain amount of time is then allowed to see how the beard was taking shape. If it resembled a dogs' breakfast you would have to shave it off, if on the other hand it looked promising, then you would be allowed to continue discontinuing. At the time I was in Malta there was a certain L/Seaman Clark who had a magnificent

beard, identical to the sailor on the John Player cigarette packets, sadly, I could not grow a beard, not with the bum fluff on my chin!!



Player's Navy Cut – [Wikimedia Commons](#)

SUEZ 1953

With so many ships spread out all over the world at that time, it was decided to send the Ranpura down to the Suez Canal when some trouble flared up there. Goodness knows what we were expected to do there, we had no armament except some old 303 rifles, half the crew were married men who had their wives out in Malta so they were not too keen to go anywhere. Very quickly some heavy machine guns were mounted around the upper deck, more stores were brought on board and a contingent of Royal Marines embarked. We were not what you would call a fearsome fighting unit. The big day came for us to go to sea, three tugboats pushed and pulled us to the entrance of Sliema Creek then we were on our own, sailing flat out at twelve knots, not the most impressive of departures from Malta by a naval warship!! It probably took us three days to reach the canal, it seemed like two weeks, but we eventually got there. As we sailed into Port Said we could see that the statue of De Lessops the man who had designed the canal had been toppled over and there were several people there throwing stones at us, they were better armed than us! There were no tugs to assist us alongside in the harbour but we managed OK, full security was put in force and nobody was allowed ashore. If I remember correctly it all had to do with Egypt nationalising the canal, and of course the rest of the world didn't like it.

It was certainly an exciting time for us as on Coronation Day we had a flash back from one of the boilers, which started a large fire below decks. The fire parties and damage control men did well, they had everything under control and the fire extinguished in a couple of hours which was good work considering the size of the fire. For security reasons the hull of the ship was inspected by the ships divers about three or four times a day in case frogmen had placed Limpet mines under us, it was now getting to be serious stuff, the real thing. During our stay in Port Said there was a twenty four hour "Frogman Watch", two men on the focs'le, two on the Poop deck and a few more amidships, each armed with a 303 rifle, a clip of bullets with five rounds of ammunition and two hand grenades. During one of my watchkeeping turns on the focs'le I heard some splashing close to the ships side, I shouted to my mate to see what he thought, and we decided it must be a frogman, there was nothing to see so I threw a hand grenade over the side. If anybody wants to wake up the whole world at two o'clock in the morning then the best way to do it is to throw a hand grenade over the side! What a bang!! The ship came alive in seconds, there were ratings galloping all over the place and goodness knows where all the officers came from. My mate and I between us explained what had happened to the duty officer, it didn't sound very convincing, not even to us!! Spotlights soon had the whole area lit up and it was then that we saw our frogman, a dead porpoise, but after a very long discussion it was decided it could have been a frogman, we had been alert but should have informed the duty officer before taking any action.

At another time on watch on the Poop deck (the after part of the ship) between two and three in the morning I was watching all the city lights, especially a nice red one that was flashing on and off on and off on top of a minaret. Soon I was fighting to keep my eyes open, that was one fight that I lost. It's amazing the load of rubbish you can spout when you are woken up by a hand on your shoulder! Sleeping! Who me? No way, how could I be asleep standing up? At the same time you can see the duty petty officer holding your rifle in his hands!! Luck was on my side that night, a severe dressing down, well deserved at that, from a decent bloke who was a mere mortal like me.

We were less than two weeks down Suez, not much else happened and it was boring as we were not allowed to go ashore. Occasionally when cleaning the ships side we would "fall" into the water, have a little swim and then get back on board. This was accepted by the powers that be and the duty officers turned a blind eye to it, they were as bored as we were. We had to be very careful to pick the right time to "fall" because there were some very nasty looking jelly fish around most of the time.

MALTA HERE WE COME!!

Problems down the canal must have been solved, because we were now on our way back to Malta, perhaps we had done our share just by being there, goodness knows. When we arrived back in Malta you'd think we had returned from a trip around the world!! All the wives were there to cheer us in, soon we were back in our old berth and the families were allowed on board to greet husbands and daddies, all's well that ends well. Now that we were back in Malta it was time to make a shilling or two. If one of the married men was on duty that night he would be desperate to go ashore to his family so he would look for a stand-in, someone to do his duty for him. Two or three pounds was the going rate, pretty good in those days, especially if it was done on a regular basis, maybe two or three times a week. Sport also played a big part of our lives in Malta, you name it and we played it. One memorable game was against the Wrens hockey team and contrary to popular belief, Wrens are not always genteel young ladies! Give them a hockey stick and they become lethal!! Mary became "MAULER", Brenda changed to "BONEBREAKER", and sweet demure Kathy was "KILLER". We never stood a chance, if they had had scythes and felling axes they couldn't have done a better job on us!! When they were giving us three

rousing cheers (for survival) we were thinking about what we could claim for personal injuries inflicted on us!!

Bingo nights on St Manuel Island were always popular, the House money was always about twenty or thirty pounds, a lot of money in those days and sometimes the snowball would be a couple of hundred pounds so to win a line meant a couple of good runs ashore. It was about this time that the aircraft carrier HMS Ocean was on her way to Korea. When she called into Malta I put in a request to join her as did a few of my mates but we were all turned down as she had a full compliment. We were quite disappointed not to go, it would have been something special, I think we wanted to do something useful instead of just hanging about.

Life on board Ranpura was much the same day in day out, it was no wonder we went ashore as often as we could afford. It was during one of these "nothing happening days" that a couple of us decided to swim across Slime Creek. The Creek was about quarter of a mile across and officially we were not allowed to do this but if someone dares you what do you do? That's right you swim! Off I set, but it was not an uneventful crossing, I was halfway over when what I thought was an octopus tentacle wrapped itself around one of my legs! I swam the other half of the distance in a quarter of the time, I was even sweating in the water! When I got out of the water, I saw the 'octopus' was a long piece of seaweed still caught on my foot — but I got a lift back on a boat — I wasn't taking any chances!!

Then came the time to start crossing the days off the calendar before it would be time to go home. When that day did arrive, it was not a nice comfy flight home but as skeleton crew on an old minesweeper that had been in Malta since before the end of the war. If I remember rightly she was an old Flower-class boat called HMS Primrose, which was being brought back to be scrapped, all we did was eat sleep and do the watches required. We sailed her into Portsmouth with her Paying Off pennant flying from the mast and she received a good welcome with cheers and hooters greeting her on the way in, it was sad to think that very soon she would be in the breakers yard.

For me it was another train journey back to HMS Drake, even before I went on leave. All the routine of joining a ship had to be gone through, it would be three days before I was ready for the off. I was due one weeks leave for every year abroad plus another for the other six months, so I was on my way, warrant in hand and three weeks leave ahead of me!!

The leave was fantastic, my brother Julian was home at the same time but he was going back before I was. Julian was either on, or going to join the Gambia, his cushy time on HMS Devonshire had come to an end!! Anyway, his days of being a stoker were over, he was now a Mechanical Engineer, but to us, once a stoker always a stoker!! Also on leave at that time was a great friend of ours, Wynn Griffin. Wynn was more than a mate, he was like a brother, if there was any nonsense on the go you could bet that the bold Wynn was around!



HMS Drake in 2015 – [MOD 45158439](#)

It wasn't long before I was on my way back to HMS Drake, not a place I have fond memories of everything had to be done by the book, far too many officers wandering about with not a lot to do. We spent most of our time dodging them in case they found us a job - we couldn't have that could we!!? After a couple runs ashore with Julian he suggested I request a draft to HMS Gambia as she was going on a great cruise to the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. I was due a home draft after the spell I had done in Malta which might have meant a long time in Drake, no thank you says I, and in went the request. It was granted the day before Gambia was due to sail, so it was a mad rush to get all the paper work done so that I could leave Drake as soon as possible, then early next morning it was another mad dash to the dockside where Gambia was just about to cast off her lines - I made it just in time!

HMS GAMBIA

The very first thing you do on joining a ship is to report to the Master at Arms who gives you all the information you need, which mess you'll be in and which watch and part of watch, like first or second part of Port or Starboard as the case may be. He would also let you know what duties you were expected to carry out. With so much going on at the time I was only told what mess I was in, I didn't even assist in leaving harbour or sailing out of Plymouth Sound, but I had to get myself organised soon or I'd miss out on my rum ration and that would have been a disaster!! Ahead of us was a trip of a lifetime, we were about to visit places we had only heard about, distant lands and different peoples.

Whilst at sea we did nonstop exercises to bring the ship up to the required standard of efficiency, a quick visit to Gibraltar and then on to Malta, it was Grand Harbour this time not my old haunt of Slime Creek. As I had been spending a lot of time down in the stokers mess, it was runs ashore with Julian and

the stokers, I felt they needed looking after, so I kept an eye on them! It was back to all the old haunts for me, but for most of them it was brand new territory and seeing as they were only stokers it was clear that they needed an experienced intelligent seaman to keep them under control!! We were only in Malta long enough to visit all the places a mother hopes her son would stay away from, just long enough for about twenty per cent of the ships company to be on some charge or another mostly over indulgence of the local brew.



HMS Gambia – [Ray Thomas](#)

EAST TO SUEZ

Malta was a short stop for us, soon we were heading for the Suez Canal, for me for the second time. This time it was to be different, the hostilities were over and we got no aggro, anyway, if there had been any we would have been more than capable of handling it as there's a great deal of difference between a well-armed cruiser than a repair ship! The first thing to be done before going down the canal was to have a very large lantern fitted to the bows for the benefit of the canal pilot who takes you through, as the journey is quite long and can involve night sailing. There was a two convoy system working at the time, one coming North and the other going South and lay-bys were strategically built to allow ships to pass one another. The whole stretch of the canal was well organised and we had no problems going through.

So here I was, twenty years old and ready for an experience of a lifetime, it was also nice to know that I would be on hand to keep an eye on my brother!! On July 22nd, 1955 we crossed the equator at 0 Longitude 66 East Latitude in the Realm of King Neptune. I don't think any of the crew had experienced this before and there was great excitement as to what was in store for us. At the initiation to the court of King Neptune a large canvas bath was rigged up with a barbers' type chair at the edge, each crew member took his turn in the chair to be lathered and shaved with pantomime style equipment, then he was tipped into the bath and rinsed off. For his bravery he was then awarded a certificate signed by King

Canute. A similar certificate is awarded after crossing the Arctic Circle, this is known as the Bluenose Certificate.



Crossing the Line – [Imperial War Museums A5176](#)

Mauritius was our first port of call on the east coast of Africa, not a lot to see there but we had quite a lot to do. For quite a while we had been practicing Guard and Band parades with the Royal Marine band and now was the moment to show off and prove how good we were. Fair play, we did ourselves credit, as a Royal Marine band is second to none so when you march to one, the head is held high and the chest is thrust out, I suppose it boils down to honest to goodness pride! It was a quick visit to show the flag and let the folks know we were still around. Picnics and runs ashore were the daily routine, too exciting but a nice place to pay a visit.

The little island of Zanzibar was next on the list, another quiet place with lovely swimming in beautiful clean water and good fishing. However, it wasn't all play at that time. On board we had a Ships' Concert Party and we did just about everything, ballet, magic, Brian Rix type farces and of course the Welsh Choir. Naturally, I was a member and even though I say so myself, we were pretty good. The choirmaster was a National Serviceman called Thomas, from Cardiff and under his guiding hand we could have given the Morryston Male Voice a run for their money! No matter where we went, as long as there was a suitable hall or theatre, we put on at least one show. More often than not, it was more than

one and the Guard and Band were also on show so all in all we made our presence felt and I believe our audiences appreciated our efforts to entertain them.

Soon we were heading north again. Zanzibar to Mombassa was just a short sail and the weather was fabulous. Mombassa was more to our taste, large harbour, more shops and more than enough places to eat and have a refreshing glass of ale. There was an international airport and a fair sized railway station, which was to be of interest to the concert party and marine band in the near future. It was from Mombassa that we started our long but fantastic journey to Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. With enough clothing for ten days and all the props etc. for the concert, we headed for the railway station. When we arrived, we were all struck dumb by the sight of the train. It was fantastic to say the least, Victorian style from one end to the other. The locomotive was huge, the kind you only see in ancient books and the coaches were out of this world — this train was not a replica, it was the real thing! The interior was designed to match the age of the train, dark greens, reds and gold, subdued lighting and large windows to view the passing countryside. I don't think the train did more than thirty or forty miles per hour at any time, so we could relax and enjoy the journey as we had first class meals and a good bed in the sleeping car. It was nice waving to the local people who came to see the train go by, I don't suppose they had seen so many young white men before (ready for the pot!).

In the early hours of the morning we arrived on the outskirts of Nairobi. We stayed there until we were all washed, dressed and fed, then we continued into Nairobi station. There were dozens of people there to meet us, mostly white folk who were to be our hosts for the time we were there. Mr. and Mrs. Trigg, who were to be my hosts, were a young couple with one child. Mr. Trigg worked for the Caltex Oil Company and they lived in a beautiful bungalow in the white residential part of town. On the way to their home we passed several what I would call slum areas, no whites there, only black people and most of them standing around doing nothing, giving us a good look as we passed by. At the time we were in Kenya, the Mau Mau was on the go. They were a very strong black nationalist group who did some terrible things to white and black people. We were warned never to leave the area we were in unaccompanied, and when my hosts went out they were always armed. However this did not spoil our visit as we were welcomed by the majority of people when we went into town, shouts of 'Jambo' and hand-shakes, they seemed pleased to see us, especially the shop keepers, though there wasn't a great deal to tempt us in the shops.

We did three shows in the National Theatre of Kenya and filled it for all three shows! It was a lot of hard work but we all got stuck in and did our best, and made it work. Of course it was not all work, we had loads of leisure time and made the most of it by sightseeing. The Rift Valley was probably the most popular place to visit. We went with an armed escort even though the road signs warned terrorists of armed sightseers!! The only terrorists we saw were in a police compound in Nairobi. The Rift Valley is out of this world, it stretches for hundreds of miles and has plenty water and vegetation, making it ideal for all the wild life living there. Our hosts were very good to us, they organized dances and lunch buffets for us and at all these parties the refreshments were free, we did not have to put our hands in our pockets at all — no complaints from us!! All good things come to an end and we had to start thinking about going back to the ship. Packing up and saying goodbye to all the new friends we had made wasn't easy, but soon we were on our way back to Mombassa.

On the day the ship left Mombassa, she had a fantastic send off. It was just after tea time on a lovely day and hundreds of people came to wave us out of the harbour, car horns tooting and people shouting

'jambo', 'jambo' and with the marine band playing we sailed away. Marvellous! We crossed the equator once more on our way to the Persian Gulf, a long and uneventful journey. We sometimes stopped the ship so that we could see sharks or manta rays, the water was so clear you could see them going way, way down into the depths. There were several ports of call in the Gulf, most of them thriving towns and cities who owed their high standard of living to the oil fields in that area, and we were given a warm welcome by all. Kuwait, Bahrain and Abadan are places not easily forgotten though it's probably the differences in peoples way of life that's most noticeable. Some men sitting astride donkeys, jogging along, and others in the longest American Cadillacs that can be bought, while other men and their sons sat in the front of a pick-up with their wives and daughters sat in the back — we have a lot to learn!!? Karachi and Bombay were the next main ports of call as we proceeded down the coast of Pakistan and India. There isn't a great deal of difference in these cities as like most other places they have on show what they would like the outside world to see, but they also have a darker side, where the poverty is so bad that even when you can see it with your own eyes, you can hardly believe it. Some of these people have nothing, and nothing not just for a day or a week but a lifetime. Starvation abounds and begging is rife, they do not live a life, they survive.

We called into Colombo, the capital of Ceylon as it was then known. The welcome was once again warm and friendly, you felt as though these people had known you before and were welcoming you home. A couple of days there, once more showing the Guard and the Band, not forgetting the ships' Concert which by now we had to near perfection (well we thought so), then it was off again. We did a lot of night exercises with ships of other nations, firing star shells was quite exciting. These were fired from the four inch guns and used to light up a large area around the ship. The shell would explode at the chosen time and a flare would slowly descend by parachute, these would be used to pick out any craft trying to sneak past our radar. Sometimes during the day, the order Make Smoke would be given, the engine room would send black smoke belching out of the funnels and the ship would then run in a half circle to be hidden by this smoke, which worked fine if the enemy had no radar to pick you out.

My battle station was as a GRU operator, Giro Rate Unit. I would sit in a partially enclosed area on a swivel seat and a pair of very strong binoculars fixed to the unit. My job was to search for any incoming aircraft and lock on to them once I had their direction, speed and range. All this information was automatically passed on to the Gunnery Control Centre within the ship and they used this information to control the guns.

It was while I was on the Gambia that I had my 21st birthday and true to form, the rum flowed. I lost track of how much I sipped and gulped, both on the seamen's deck and down below in the stokers' mess. After I had passed out, I was put in the oilskin locker on a makeshift bed, face down so that if I was sick I would be OK! Two days I was in there — what a state to get into, but it was the done thing so why should I be any different?

A close watch was kept on me to make sure I came to no harm but I survived!! Most of my spare time was spent down in the stokers mess, mainly because Julian my brother was there, plus there was always a good game of cards on the go. One of the games we played was Newmarket. I've forgotten exactly how it was played but do remember winning and losing a shilling or two. Of course any gambling was illegal and frowned upon, so we always had to keep an eye open for the regulating staff who could be wandering around. Sometimes we would get the Ouija Board out. Now to say I've had some entertaining times in my life would be correct, but none has ever come anywhere near a Ouija Board session in the

stokers' mess! The lights are turned down and everybody gathers around the board where the tumbler is put in the centre. At each session, four people take part, under oath not to push or pull that glass. Well! I've met some liars and cheats in my time, but these blokes took the biscuit!! How so many men could be coming into great fortunes and of course, the most fantastic sex lives, is beyond me, each one better than the next. The atmosphere was spooky, but the outcome was hilarious. One thing for sure though, when you left the stokers' mess, you would leave either with money and the anticipation of the rum that was coming your way, or you would be skint and dreading the following day when your rum ration would do a disappearing act! This type of entertainment just didn't happen on the seamen's deck, perhaps it had something to do with the fact that nearly all the stokers were 'regulars' and a lot of the seamen were National Servicemen. Most of them hated the fact that they were there at all, plus, they got less pay than we regulars did, so who could blame them for not being too enthusiastic about it all. Anyway, everyone knows stokers are nut cases, so perhaps that was the reason the atmosphere in their mess was a lot easier! Ah well, at times acting (maybe not acting) daft helped us to pass the time and it certainly built up good friendships.

Passing my exams to be a Leading Seaman was quite a milestone as it covered so much, from how to organise a picnic, to repairing a large hole in the ships' side, or taking charge of a sailing boat when the masts have been broken to organising a guard of honour for some visiting dignitary. The exams took three days altogether but at least we were given the results almost immediately and even now I remember I had an 87% pass. Chuffed to say the least, but there would be a delay before I could call myself Leading Seaman, otherwise known as a killick or hookey, due to the anchor on my sleeve.

Our next port of call was Trincomalee where we were to have a break at a rest camp for a week. The beauty of Trincomalee harbour is beyond belief, this huge harbour fringed by palm trees, some so thick it looked like jungle with calm, crystal clear water, so clear that when you dropped a coin in it went down for miles before it disappeared. The peace and tranquility wouldn't last long however, as soon the rattle of other anchor cables could be heard as several other ships arrived, as well as a fleet auxiliary tanker to supply us with oil. None of these ships would be going with us when we eventually continued our cruise though, some would be going back home or maybe visiting other ports. Besides exercising well together at sea, I think we managed to keep the peace ashore as well, most of the time anyway!!

So here we were in Trincomalee getting ready to go to the rest camp at a place called Dijatalawa for a week. It was a fair old run in the buses but the scenery made it all worth while. When we arrived we discovered it was like an old army camp, wooden huts etc. and settling in didn't take long. This was going to be a relaxing break, no work and all play, who could argue against that? Sport was one of the more prominent activities we engaged in that week, football, rugby and golf, but most memorable for me was the cricket! One of the teams was short of a man, so I volunteered my services like a true hero! We were second team to go to the crease, therefore we fielded first — no problem, I could catch and throw a ball with the best of them. The opposition ended up with a good score and then it was our turn. The whole side did quite well, and as novice I was last man to bat. I was immaculate in my whites, cricket pads and white shoes, the umpire centred my bat at the wicket, two runs meant we would win. The bowler was about a quarter of a mile away, his feet like a sprinter were in starting blocks and I knew right away that things were not looking good for me! He left those blocks like a bat out of hell and delivered the ball like an Exocet missile - I never even saw it, but my stumps did, he scattered them! Never in such a short time have I hated anyone so much and I trailed back, head down muttering under my breath about his lack of legitimate parents! So much for cricket!!



The Rest Camp at Diyatalawa – [Ray Thomas](#)

There were lots of villages in the Diyatalawa area and we did the rounds of most of them. We could get a drink of Tiger ale, the local brew, in quite a few wooden bars and there were also a few dodgy looking tattoo shops if you could call them that. After several glasses of Tiger, it was once more time for a tattoo though the range of designs wasn't up to much. I chose a heart and some flowers, and if the designs weren't up to much you should have seen his tools!! Of course no electricity so no electric needle, his pride and joy looked like an old school pen. Still, we were here now so he was told to carry on and the results matched his skill and equipment, though I have to say it's still there to this day!

The week flew in and we were soon on our way back to the ship. As I've already said, Trincomalee was a fantastic harbour where we could watch the giant manta-rays flipping right out of the water and landing on their backs to clean off any lice clinging on. There was also a huge basking shark about fourteen or fifteen feet long which used to come alongside and was supposed to be harmless, never the less I never got round to tickling its' tummy!! It was here we spent our second Christmas away from home, a typical naval 'do' with turkey and all the trimmings followed by Christmas pudding. All the mess-decks had been decorated with various home-made decorations, the 'balloons' supplied by the sick bay!! We had religious services for those who wanted it and plenty of carol singing, all in all, everyone had a good time. We would soon be making our way back home, but not before visiting Caleutta, Madras and Massawa, all typical Indian cities. We had covered many miles and carried out several exercises, the main one being "Jet 55" during which the engine room personnel had taken Gambia through the Measured Mile. This involved running the ship at maximum speed over a period of times and distances. It is a sight indeed to see a cruiser splitting the waves at thirty six to thirty eight knots.

The days, weeks and months had rolled by, we were into 1956 and the bows were pointing towards Guzz (Devonport). My Mother and Lionel would be waiting on the quayside for Julian and me, then we'd be off home for some leave. When I look back and remember all the mail I got from home, both me and Julian, it's unbelievable. My Mum never forgot us once, no matter where we were, we knew that as soon as the mail was ready for distribution, there would be a letter there for us, maybe two or even three, depending how long we had been at sea. We used to write quite often as well, and send postcards from the various places we visited and to this day she has a fine collection of postcards

carefully preserved in albums. At this time, I was dropping the odd letter to a young trainee nurse in Edinburgh called Sheila and she was to play a major part in my life.

TARGET TOWING BOATS

It was when I was back in Drake that my promotion came through, it certainly made a big difference from being an Able Seaman. The other ratings treated you with a bit of respect, and there was a small increase in wages, not a lot, but a move in the right direction. Very soon after that, I was drafted to the target towing boats, which were fast launches used for towing splash targets for the Gunnery School at Wembry on the South coast, outside Plymouth harbour. These boats were magnificent, black hulls, grey upper works and three powerful engines that moved the boat along at forty knots towing a target. At the rear was a small winch-house and a winch that held about a mile of slender towing wire. The target was similar to a wooden garden gate with metal scoops bolted here and there which formed a large spray when towed at speed, normally about quarter of a mile astern, the idea being for the guns on shore to shoot at the spray thrown up.

There were three identical boats, Langemark, Sharron and Schelds, each one had a crew of a Leading Seaman, three Able Seamen and two Mechanical Engineers, with one Lieutenant in charge of all three boats. We were self catering so we had to collect our provisions from the stores in HMS Drake, plus our daily rum ration — couldn't forget that!! We took turns towing the targets, each crew desperate to go each day. The weather was good and we made the most of it when we were well away from prying eyes! The engines were started by a small cartridge that made a loud bang, after that came the deep roar that made you feel the power that was available, we'd cast off and make our way down stream towards Plymouth Sound, and what show-offs we were, gym shoes, white polo necked jerseys, (trousers of course) that was our dress of the day. All heads turned as we passed by doing about eight or ten knots, but once we were past the berthed ships it would be time to push the throttle forward and make her fly!!

First we'd call up Wembry on the radio to find out if they were ready to proceed, if the answer was yes then we would go to the target area and start towing the splash target astern, the guns on shore would start firing and we would then measure the fall of shot, informing them how accurate, or not, the firing had been. Some days there would be a long delay before they were ready to shoot, so we would have to fill in time. Hunting for basking sharks was one of the more popular diversions, the sharks were huge, harmless animals and quite common on the South Coast, sometimes we would do a bit of fishing and perhaps catch our lunch. Quite often the shoot would be cancelled altogether which suited us fine. Instead of returning to base, we would nip down the coast to Looe or Fowley which didn't take long at the speed we could do, then it was swim, sunbathe or a quick run ashore, we really had it made.

P.T. SCHOOL

All this lasted only a few months because I then had a call to go to the P.T. School in Portsmouth. I had always been sport minded and fancied giving it a shot. I'd put my request in ages ago on Gambia, but you had to be a Leading rate before you could go, so there I was packing up to travel again, this time to HMS Victory in Portsmouth for a six month course. My most vivid memory of the P. T. School was of a game of water polo versus the Royal Navy team, I know exactly how Custer felt at the Little Big Horn! I was to mark the little chap in the centre, six feet of Charles Atlas and the rest of the team were even bigger. They grew their finger nails and toe nails long, similar to a marlin spike used in splicing rope, and

even had muscles on their toes! It wasn't quite so bad when we were in the shallow end, but the memory of the deep end gives me nightmares. I think for most of the time, I was submerged, with these destroyer like figures thundering above me. I felt like a submarine in one of the old war films, trying to be quiet while the enemy passed overhead! Even when I managed to surface, there was no escape, there's nothing like a wet leather ball hitting you in the face at sixty miles an hour, to make you want to go home to Mum!! We dragged ourselves out of the water when the final whistle went, bruised, cut and full of pool water we had swallowed. Custer? He didn't know half of it, what's a few thousand pesky Indians?!

There were twenty four in the class when we started, but eighteen of us wouldn't be there at the end. We were all quite good at everything involved, swimming, fencing, boxing, judo etc. but to be quite good was not good enough. I was let down by my power of command, or lack of it, I just didn't have the ruthlessness that a good P. T. Instructor needs so I was only there for four months, some had left even earlier.

I was only four days back in Drake when I got drafted to HMS Gannet in Northern Ireland. This was a fleet air arm base used to train pilots in submarine hunting, the planes they used were also called Gannets. I was Quarter Master there and had to ensure that security was top priority, everybody and everything had to be checked in and out. There were only about a dozen of us seamen there amongst all the fleet air arm staff but we got along fine, except that is with the pilots, who, when they were on night training used to dive bomb our quarters which meant no sleep until they had finished. We could have killed them!! At one time I was put in charge of thirty or so sea cadets who had come for a two week hands-on holiday. I was to teach them all sorts of simple tasks like marching, saluting and how to spit and polish their boots, knots and splices were also on the list. I think they enjoyed themselves, no tears on show anywhere though they probably sobbed into their pillows at night!!

Four months later and it was time to move on again, Gannet was going to close down and I was being drafted to a sea going ship, a minesweeper; which was something different for me. I was to join HMS Bildeston at Hythe near Southampton, what a journey, train, boat, then train again. Anyway I eventually arrived at Hythe to discover that Bildeston was in reserve, the same as another dozen minesweepers — there had been a major blunder somewhere. After two or three days it was discovered that it wasn't supposed to have been the Bildeston I should have gone to, but the Dalswinton, her sister ship up at Port Edgar near South Queensferry in Scotland! It's just as well we were not at war in those days, perhaps I might have ended up on the Bismark or Tirpitz!! What does one do? Yes, pack up the kit again, grab a train and head North, good news for me and my wee nursie! !

The Dalswinton was a tidy little ship, spotlessly clean and shipshape, there were three other ships of the same class tied up at the jetty, also some Ham class inshore minesweepers. The Ham boats were named after small towns whose names ended in Ham, like Meltham, Altrincham etc. these boats were designed to sweep in river estuaries and shallow waters. I was to be Quarter master on the Dalswinton, but I was to work together with another Leading seaman looking after the seamanship side of the ship and assist as part of the team when we were minesweeping. Although we had the usual paravanes and cutters for sweeping, we also had a large electronic cable that was streamed out over the stern of the boat, which sent out electrical signals that would detonate any mines in a specific area. We were also trying out a net system similar to a fishing net, the mines were supposed to be caught in the net and brought to the surface, it never worked once!! The only thing it ever seemed to do was get tangled up in seaweed on

the sea bed, when it was freed and brought back on board it had to be cleaned off or it would stink to high heavens.

AMSTERDAM

Runs ashore into Edinburgh were becoming a serious thing now, I went ashore every night I was not on duty, my love life was improving by leaps and bounds, happy little me! Amsterdam was to be our first foreign call, all the squadron sailed out of Port Edgar in line astern and headed out of the Forth into the North Sea, I think we must have looked quite smart as we had all painted ship prior to going. Sailing up the canals was new for all of us and rather interesting, that is until we came to the fish processing factory, what a pong!! You could see and taste the smell, all the hatches and air vents were closed and sealed as if we were in a gas attack, in a way I think we were! Soon though we were tied up practically in Amsterdam and ready to go ashore, the city was just as we had heard, canals, bikes, and more canals and bikes, loads of nice shops selling the usual things like clogs and small boats and gooey sweets. It goes without saying that we visited the red light district, just to see I must hasten to add, looky, looky, but no touchy touchy — HONEST! anyway, after three or four nights we got fed up! !

BRUSSELS

An organised trip to Belgium had been arranged and I had put my name down to go, it was at the time of the Belgium Trade Fair being held in Brussels and a courier took us to all the places of interest and then let us loose. In a group we made our way to the giant fair ground and tried the various things, then it was into the boxing and wrestling booth. After a lot of argy- bargy it was decided that I would box the two rounds and a lad from Newcastle would wrestle two rounds or the best of three falls. The boxing was fairly easy, I was young and fit, and my opponent had hair that was going grey! That suited me fine, I was able to hit him more often than he hit me, it must have pleased the crowd as well because I collected a few shillings from the nobbins thrown into the ring. The wrestling was a different kettle of fish, the lad from Newcastle was an expert at Cumberland wrestling, his opponent was good, but not in the same class as the Geordie who won the bout in style and got a standing ovation from the crowd. The whole trip was very enjoyable and we all agreed that it had been worth while putting our names down to go.

Time once again to head back to Scotland, we did exercises with the Norwegian navy in the North Sea on the way home. It was just as well that most of them spoke English or we would have been lost seeing as none of us spoke Norwegian, but still, the exercise went well and we were soon tying up at Port Edgar, a quick wash, shave, and a dab of Brylcreme and I was on my way into Edinburgh.

THE WEDDING

It was a nice quiet wedding on 2nd Jan. 1958, Sheila and I tied the knot in the Registrars Office up the High Street in Edinburgh, the weather was lousy, bitterly cold with snow and sleet. The reception was in The Wee Windows restaurant just up the road, and afterwards we went to the pantomime at the Kings Theatre in Edinburgh. Sheila's Mum and Dad did us proud that day, money was very scarce but we were made to feel that there had been no problem in that direction.

When the day's festivities were over, we went to stay at the Bellfield Private Hotel in Portobello and we stayed there until a naval hiring became available in West Saville Terrace in Edinburgh, which was a fully furnished flat in a nice area. I was travelling daily to Port Edgar near South Queensferry, but we would

soon be on our way to sea again, this time over to Londonderry in Northern Ireland. The journey was to take us around the north of Scotland, through the Pentland Firth, and, wild as the Bay of Biscay might be, it doesn't compare to the Pentland Firth on a wild day. The currents around the north of Scotland can be frightening, large and small whirlpools are on the go all the time, it would depend on the tide whether it was wise for small boats to risk going out into that area. As helmsman on the Dalswinton it took all my concentration to keep to the given course, the bows constantly veered away from where you wanted them to point, but as usual we arrived safely at our destination, ready to enjoy our visit. We were made to feel welcome in the pubs and other places of interest, but it was while we were ashore that we were recalled to the ship as a helicopter had crashed into the sea not far from Warren Point, about halfway between Belfast and Dublin. When we arrived in the area, we hunted up and down for quite a while and then found the helicopter on the sea-bed, divers went down to see what they could find out about the wreckage and they brought up three bodies. We transferred the bodies to a frigate that had also come into the area, I think she was going to take them to Liverpool.

We stayed to put a marker buoy above the wreck so that it could be lifted by a suitable ship then we anchored off shore, only to be caught up in a very severe gale. We started to drag our anchors and were being driven towards the shore, so it was up anchor at about two o'clock in the morning, and sail into the gale, but because the Dalswinton was a light wooden boat, we felt every wave and gust of wind. The following day the storm had passed and we put down the marker buoys as required and headed back up and around the North of Scotland homeward bound for Port Edgar.

The ship was to have a minor refit at Port Edgar, so we were put ashore at the naval base, HMS Lochinvar for two weeks. During my time on board the Dalswinton I organised a football team and bought nice new strips and a couple of footballs with money from the ships funds. I had also arranged for funds to start a small shop on board, I believe it was thirty pounds I was given to purchase various items like soap powder, toothpaste, writing pads and envelopes, biro pens, sweets and chocolate and other odds and ends that we were most likely to run out of. The shop was non profit making and proved to be a success. Runs ashore had now changed to runs home, I quite often got a lift on the back of a motor bike, a nice Norton Dominator owned by a Petty Officer electrician who also lived in Edinburgh. The Dalswinton had been all spruced up when we got back on board, below decks had been given a lick of varnish, a new television had been installed in the mess, still black and white but slightly larger. Not a lot had been done on the upper deck, mainly new ropes and sweep wires, the dreaded net called the Dustpan had also been removed and we were glad to see the back of that. I was on board HMS Dalswinton for nearly a year after I got married, we must have carried out hundreds of exercises during that time but we did not go abroad again while I was on board. Then came the news that I was to be drafted again, this time to HMS Harrier way down in Pembrokeshire in South Wales. I was to be the Quarter Master in a shore based radar training school, at the time I thought that this would be the ideal way to wind down before I left the navy, that's what I thought anyway, funny how things don't always work out as you expect them to!!

HMS HARRIER

As soon as I arrived at Harrier I put my name down for married quarters, I also had a look at various other places that could be rented, but they were either too expensive or too far away from the camp. In the meantime Sheila went to stay with Emrys, my step-father and my Mum in Ystradgynlais, this was also the time that Lionel was about to leave school and was giving serious thought to joining the

Merchant Navy which he eventually did. We knew my mother would miss him as they had been very close and had weathered some rough times together but a man's got to do what a man must do, so off he went, and didn't he do well? My Mum was as proud as Punch, imagine, her son was going to be an officer! A lot of credit must go to Sheila as well, she chummed him around the shipping offices and gave him loads of moral support. It didn't take long to settle down in Harrier and I soon got used to the routine of a shore base again, discipline wasn't too bad because most of it was aimed at the trainees, but even for them it wasn't too bad.

Soon we found Married Quarters in the village of Dale, Sheila moved in and things were going fine, we even got ourselves a collie dog and called him Glen. Glen was to be good company for Sheila when I was on night duty at the camp, especially as Dale was a quiet village with one pub, two little shops and about three street lights. One of Glens' party tricks was to lie on his back at the foot of the front lawn, waiting for somebody to come and rub his tummy, one day a crowd of Wrens obliged him, but they didn't stay long when I joined him waiting for my turn!!



Dale, Pembrokeshire - [Wikipedia](#)

The house was very nice it had everything we would need, all mod cons but no television set, it also had spiders, big ones, they used to come down from the trees at the back of the house. Whenever one of those monsters crossed the floor it was a race between me and the dog as to who would be first on the settee, he always came a good second!! The area around Dale was very pretty and we would go for long walks with the dog. Due to the mild climate there were lots of rare plants and birds, students came from all over to study them and the only pub did a roaring trade especially at the weekends. That year there was a long, hot summer and Dale was a magic place to be in. There were two little shops, one was the Post Office and the other a general store run by a little old lady called Mrs. Roach, she made the most beautiful bramble liqueur, it was the nectar of the gods.

A PAIN CALLED "FIRST LIEUTENANT"

Two main incidents come to mind about Dale and HMS Harrier, the first being my run in with the First Lieutenant, his name was Johnson, that's one name I'll never forget. It was the time that Glen the dog had sore paws and had trouble moving about, it was quite late at night and he was outside getting some fresh air before coming in for the night. We heard the roar of the car and then the howl of pain from the dog, I went dashing out to see that Glen had been hit by a car. I could see it speeding along the road towards the officers' houses and I watched as the lights were switched off. I carried Glen into the house and then made a bee line for the car. The only way I could find out which car it was, was by feeling the bonnets to find a warm one. I found one and went to the nearest house and knocked on the door, the man who answered the door was the Surgeon Commander, it wasn't his car but he pointed out the house where the owner lived, yes, it was him, the First Lieutenant. He denied all knowledge of the incident, I even threatened him with the police but he said it was an officers' word against mine. From then on I knew I would have to watch my back especially up in the camp where he was one of the big guns, he certainly tried to make my life unbearable after that, anything that he could find wrong at the main gate was my responsibility, why wasn't this done? Why wasn't that done? He did his utmost to be a pain in the backside. The day I stopped him at the main gate and asked for his Identity Card was a stroke of genius!! He was definitely a candidate for a coronary or varicose veins in his head!

THE VULCAN BOMBER

Great excitement came our way when a Vulcan bomber crashed into the sea off the Pembrokeshire coast and it was rumoured that there was an atom bomb on board. It had to be found at all costs, scores of fishing boats joined the naval ships to find the aircraft. They used to go out early in the morning and come back into harbour late at night, I was given the task of taking mail and written orders out to these ships once they were secured. I was given the keys to a lovely launch for the job, quite a nippy craft and a crew of three to man her. It was all good fun and the ships crews were pleased to see us bringing the mail, but fate was soon to bring us down to earth with a bump, well we were definitely about to get a bump!!

It was a particularly dark and nasty night and we were making our way back to the jetty, having delivered the mail as required, when it happened. This massive mooring buoy appeared from nowhere and I hit it head on, what a crash, we heard and felt the boat shatter. Luckily nobody got hurt but the boat was in such a state we could not tie it to the jetty and beached it not far from the pub in Dale, unfortunately the pub was closed, I'm sure we all could have done with some medicine!! We got a lift back to the camp where I tried to explain to the duty officer what had happened. There was nothing he could do about it at the time but in the morning I was put on charge for negligence and allowing the boat to suffer severe damage.

The normal procedure was carried out, investigation by a junior officer who then passed on his findings to a more senior officer. I ended up in front of the captain, the top man himself, my own Divisional Officer was to be my council. When I look back at the hearing I still allow myself a little smile, the charge was read out in fine detail especially the bit about the amount of damage done to the boat. All this time the captain's face was blank but he was taking it all in, occasionally he would leaf his way through some papers on his desk in of him. There was no point in me denying anything as the charge was straight-forward. When all the formalities had been gone through, the captain looked at me and quietly asked what did I have to say for myself. I explained that we had done this run several times without incident,

my Divisional Officer intervened and elaborated on this, stressing the unsociable hours we had been working delivering the mail. He also mentioned that the mooring buoy was a new one put down to accommodate some of the extra shipping searching for the Vulcan bomber, this seemed to go down quite well. The captain asked if there was any more I'd like to add and it was then that I made the biggest mistake of my life when I said I'd pay for the damage to the boat!! First of all the steam came out of his ears in little puffs, his face turned a purplish colour, (he reminded me of a large well shaken bottle of Ribena) then he blew all valves!! However being a true naval officer, he quickly recovered, waved a piece of paper at me and asked "where the hell was I going to get eight thousand pounds from" — at that time I was getting about seven pounds a week! I don't know if he was rubbing his mouth or swallowing a Valium, but when he recovered he listened while my divisional officer explained that my wife was pregnant and having a bit of a bad time.

There's no two ways about it, there are officers, and there are gentlemen officers, and our captain was one of the latter. I had had visions of being hung, drawn and quartered then kicked out in disgrace, but no, none of these, he looked straight at me and sentenced me to one weeks confinement to camp! Even my divisional officer was taken aback and even more so was the First Lieutenant, he was not a happy chappie!!

Being confined to camp wasn't too bad either because Sheila used to come up to the camp to see me so I didn't even have to start digging a tunnel for escape! I also had all my meals in the camp, though officially I wasn't entitled to because I lived in married quarters. It wasn't long after all this carry on that Jacqueline was born in Haverfordwest, Sheila didn't have a very good time then, but we got through it. Julian brought my Mum and Emrys down to see their first grandchild, a long journey from Ystradgynlais, and three weeks later we visited my Mum and Emrys for Christmas, we were like the Clompets — we even took the dog! Unfortunately it would be three months before Sheila's Mum and Dad would see Jacqueline as Scotland was a long way from Wales, in those days it took fourteen hours by train.

My time at Harrier was drawing to a close and soon it was time to vacate the house at 63 Blue Anchor Way in Dale. The journey up to Scotland was nothing short of a nightmare, what a trek, all our worldly possessions (not that we had much) the baby, the pram, the suitcases and the dog! We were to stay with Shells Mum and Dad to start with and I wonder what she felt when we all turned up, plus the dog. I had to go back down to Harrier for a few more weeks until it was time to be drafted to Drake on the 13th March, 1960 for the final time, as my days in the navy was drawing to a close.

It was a long tedious journey and I arrived and checked in on the 14th March. It was the usual joining barracks routine again, this time I was given a job with the regulation staff looking after the bad boys in the cells. It was a cushy little job and nobody bothered me, they knew that I would soon be leaving the navy for good. For three or four days prior to leaving, I did absolutely nothing, there was no point in me getting involved in anything where time mattered. Then the big day arrived, 17th April, 1960, no bands, no banners and no golden handshake, it was all over, just like that. Ten years had gone by, from a fifteen year old boy to a twenty five year old married man and Dad. What was in store for me now?

Civilian life was another big step, my travelling days were not over by a long chalk, I was to travel the length and breadth of the U.K., Germany and Saudi Arabia. I would think nothing of travelling a hundred miles a day to and from my work, seven days a week. I think what I'd learned in the navy on how to face a challenge and get on with things certainly helped, as I knew how to get on with people at work and at play. There would be laughter and tears but that's another "untold story. "

As told by ex L/Seaman Keith Best (Banjo)
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