

In 1947 I together with many other young sixteen year olds from various walks of life and backgrounds arrived at Shotley Gate eagerly seeking adventure but not realising that our lives were about to be radically changed.

The first four weeks were spent in the Annexe where we were kitted out and allocated a bed and a locker then immediately afterwards receiving a full medical and dental examination before being vaccinated with the dreaded TAB 1 and TAB 2 which protected us from Typhoid and Yellow fever even though we were only travelling eventually down to Devon.

This was quickly followed by a naval haircut by a so called barber who had obviously been trained on a sheep farm in Australia

A copy of that reassuring letter sent to our parents on arrival at "Ganges"



Dear Sir/Madam

Your boy has now arrived safely at Shotley.

He will be here under training for about one year. In order to get him used to naval routine and give him time to settle down he will spend the first four weeks in a separate part of the establishment known as the Annexe. While there he will be amongst boys who joined with him; he will be introduced to naval discipline, have a full medical and dental examination, be vaccinated and finally be put into the class for which he is best suited.

When this preliminary period is completed he will join the Main Establishment. One third of his instructional time will be devoted to ordinary school work, one third to seamanship or technical training and one third to physical and recreational training, religious knowledge, work on his kit and learning about the Royal Navy. He will be able to play games most afternoons or evenings. During this period many boys suffer from some degree of homesickness which is only natural. They all get over this, with only few exceptions, and your encouragement in your letters greatly assist the staff in settling your boy down.

Naval discipline involved getting up at 5.30 in the morning having a shower, doing your laundry, and in the case of able swimmers a choice of climbing the mast up to and over the "Devils elbow" or Cross country running plus of course those dreaded swimming lessons for non swimmers.

Most of the daylight hours were spent on the Parade ground where everyone was called "Sir" even though they were usually three badge Petty Officer Instructors who were continually telling us "If it moves salute it and call it Sir, if it stands still paint it or polish it"

Cross country running was seen as a form of escapism from the Annexe confines and involved running many unspecified miles through the East -Anglian countryside with a PTI instructor following on his bicycle keeping a wary eye on anyone taking shortcuts.



Being a fairly good swimmer before joining the Navy I had no problem passing the swimming test but I felt very sorry for those non-swimmers who clad in a canvas white bell bottomed suit were thrown into the pool and encouraged to swim by a PTI armed with a long boathook which was only used as a lifeline when they went down for the third time. Photograph of me ready to climb the mast wearing white duck suit similar to those worn by those non swimmers about to take their swimming test .

We were introduced to all kinds of naval tasks from tying various kinds of knots to ships navigation and interesting facts such as the length, weight and life saving capacity of a naval whaler which I still recall is twenty five feet, twenty five hundred weight and twenty five persons. At the end of each day we were all pretty exhausted and given a mug of hot chocolate liberally sprinkled with bromide in order to suppress any sexual desires we might encounter in our dreams.

After surviving the Annexe for four long weeks we were moved into the Main camp and placed in Drake division along the covered way where amongst other things we painted the coal white and cleaned the curb stones with a toothbrush in preparation for some impending Admirals inspection.

Relief arrived thanks to their Lordships deciding that all Devonport ratings be sent down to HMS Impregnable at St.Budueax in Plymouth and I for one was not sorry to leave the Ganges well behind me!



HMS Impregnable reopened as a boys training ship in 1947 and remained so for only one year before becoming a WRNS training ship. Situated on a hill at St. Beudeux directly opposite HMS Drake the Royal Naval barracks and with close proximity to Plymouth it seemed far less remote than Ganges.

Arriving here the boys all being Devonport ratings the majority from the West country and surrounding areas it became very much easier to make good friends.

Training continued with the Seamanship Manual as our bible we were taught navigation and naval gunnery on board HMS Roberts an old bombardment monitor ship anchored across the water at Drake. We were also introduced to new forms of weapons such as Bacterial and Chemical Warfare and Damage Control duties.

It was about this time I was promoted to Boy 1st. class but being paid only five shillings a week and half of that allocated home to our parents it didn't leave a lot over to celebrate! Of course not being eighteen we were not officially allowed to smoke so in order to facilitate our needs we always made a point of volunteering for Cinema cleaning duties on Thursday mornings fully aware that our instructors who received a duty free issue of tobacco always left generous cigarette butts behind after the film on the Wednesday evening for which we were most grateful.

Sport was greatly encouraged and having played Rugby at school I found myself playing for both the Division and HMS Impregnable as open wing forward now I believe called flanker. Playing Rugby gave me the chance to play against local teams including Dartmouth RN College colts and Kingsbridge where the ground sloped similar to Yeovil FC and we all shared a bath in a large cattle trough followed by a Devon cream tea.

Amongst the other various sporting activities we were introduced to "Milling" which was a form of boxing which took little or no regard of weight or size and I found myself matched with a six foot giant ex- Seaton fisherman called Ginger Gooding a name I shall never forget. He really had no idea of boxing and came on to me with wild swinging arms and after two of the scheduled three rounds I was already celebrating an early victory when one of his flailing arms connected and I saw stars in the middle of the day. That was the end of my boxing career but Ginger and I were great friend afterwards. Other friends I still remember were Phil Joslin from Exeter and Tommy Hole from Redruth in Cornwall who taught me Cornish wrestling and never ever stopped singing "Going up Cambourne Hill coming down"



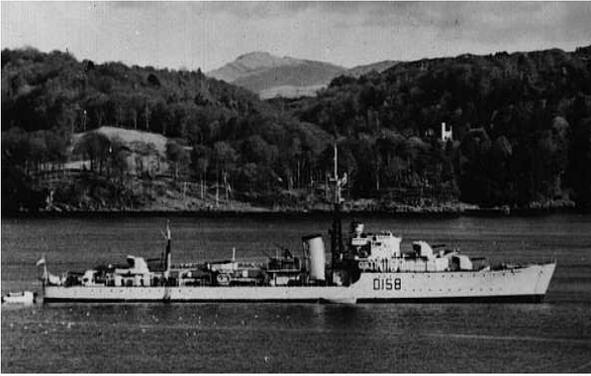
Our Instructor was a three badge Petty Officer called Tubby Hogan a fair person but always played it by the book. It was him that ensured we were up each morning and made certain that we were turned in at lights out, that our mess was always shipshape and Bristol fashion and not only our kit but also ourselves were kept clean and tidy.



These youngsters in bell bottom trousers were not particularly clever but gave so much and were invariably encouraged by their proud parents back home who treasured the photograph of that smiling young face on their mantelpiece completely unaware of what he was going through!

My training completed I got selected for Destroyer training at Rosyth in Scotland where I joined the two American liberty ships Dodman Point and Girdle Ness whilst awaiting transfer to HMS Wrangler operating between Londonderry and Rosyth.

It was during this period as the Naval detachment we lined Princess Street in Edinburgh in honour of the late King George VI and the royal family's return from South Africa aboard HMS Vanguard.



1948

HMS Wrangler which formed part of the “Red Hand of Ulster” squadron operating between Rosyth in Scotland and Northern Ireland on which I completed my destroyer training

It was on board this ship that I first saw a large fleet of captured German U-boats anchored in Loch Foil just outside of Londonderry and I was amazed how small they were and wondered how such tiny boats could have inflicted so much damage to shipping during the war.

In July 1948 now fully trained I was made an ordinary seaman and was drafted to HMS Onslaught an old WW2 destroyer with a distinguished war record now attached to the 3rd submarine squadron based at Rothesay and used as a target ship for submarine training.

Being my first operational ship I was eager to fall in with my new surroundings and of course new people who in turn introduced me to mess catering. This involved each member of the mess on a rota system acting as cook irrespective of their ability to do so the result usually being some sort of pie containing oxo with a mug placed under the pastry to hold it up. This was then taken up to the ships galley handed over to the cook who if he was in a good mood transformed it into something edible!



As an ordinary seaman I was allocated an action station and made available for watch duties on a 24hr basis (morning, forenoon, afternoon, first dog ,second dog and night watches).

My action station was No3 breech loader on a 4.7 gun using fixed ammunition where you took good care when inserting the shell not to lose your fingers when the breech closed. We had many gun drills but never thankfully fired in action but I still to this day remember the order of drill (Layer on ,Trainer on , bores clear, standing to) and the reply (All guns follow Director )

When it came to watch keeping one got used to it after a short while but for me the morning watch was by far the worse especially if you were detailed as look-out on the bridge in mid winter. One of the requirements before completing your night watch was to wake the officer for the morning detail and give him the latest weather report. Ratings however were never allowed to actually touch an officer but find some other method of awaking him sometimes by coughing or making some other distraction.

This where my mate Peter Silk got himself in hot water by waking up the first lieutenant and when asked “How is the weather Silk” Peter replied “Blowing a gale sir” . You could hear the bad language coming from the the bridge when the first lieutenant appeared dressed in several woollen jumpers and a thick duffel coat on a beautiful sunny morning.

We were at sea most days of the week operating off the west coast of Scotland attempting to outrun and avoid their torpedoes at which we were usually very successful until one day something went drastically wrong and we received a hit in the tiller flat which began to flood the after steering position. Geordie Banks who was captain of the quarterdeck immediately screwed down the watertight hatch unaware that Phil Joslin was still down below fast asleep in a waste cupboard. On been told this the hatch was quickly reopened and he was severely dealt with, thank god only blow head torpedoes were used in training. As a result of this incident we had to enter dry dock in Troon in order to remove the offending object.

Peter Silk a great character from Bristol who had been a marksman at Bisley before joining the service, an asset which came in extremely handy at Troon when a farmers bull trespassed onto the championship golf course and Peter became a local hero overnight by shooting the beast. We both had great times exploring the empty ships docked there for breaking up and raiding the local crab and lobster pots early in the morning before the fishermen arrived.

At Troon at that time there was no drinking on Sundays so one had to travel into Ayrshire and sign in as a bone-fide traveller to get around the law so for much of the time we visited the Army camp at Dundonald where they held a dance every Sunday evening and beer was no problem.

After repairs we once again returned to normal duties each day travelling up and down the Clyde acting as target ship until one day the Captain decided to take a short cut back to Rothesay by way of the Kyles of Bute. All went well until we passed Tighnabruach but in giving way to the ferry, Onslaught ran aground which resulted in the Captain and Navigation officer being severely reprimanded and a rapid return to Troon. I think the Navy was more than pleased to get rid of Onslaught which they did by selling it to Pakistan in 1951.



Leaving Onslaught in dry dock at Troon I found myself drafted to HMS Drake at Devonport for dispersal. Everyone avoided whenever possible entering the RN Barracks as it usually meant a full kit inspection which could prove costly and yet another of those dreadful ACBW courses. The only good thing to come out of it was you were able to sleep in a bed rather than having to sling a hammock every day.

Another added bonus was that you could enjoy a great run ashore down Union street with its various and sometimes dubious attractions.

Still a ordinary seaman with very little money and in those days paid fortnightly it was common practice on what we referred to as "Blank weeks" to regularly pawn our Burberry's in order to survive financially.

Barracks routine involved parading on the main parade ground each morning to be given your daily tasks I soon discovered that the answer to avoid being given some dreadful duty was to walk around most of the day with a printed piece of paper in ones hand. It seemed to work as I never heard of anyone who was challenged by some PO or senior rate as to its contents.

Once again luck played its part and I have to thank their Lordships for coming to my rescue by issuing yet another Admiralty Fleet Order which stated that the navy was desperately short of supply assistants and were looking for volunteers to fill the posts. I gave it some thought and having a fair aptitude for figures and seeing it as a chance to escape those chilly night watches I applied and was accepted for training at HMS Ceres at Wetherby in Yorkshire.

HMS Ceres was the Naval supply and secretarial school directly opposite the racecourse where we were taught various aspects of accountancy in my case specialising in victualling and ships supplies. Victualling comprised of keeping the ship fully provisioned with all foodstuffs, issuing of Rum rations, loan clothing and keeping records of all personnel arriving and departing the ship.

I spent my shore leave visiting nearby places such as Harrogate and York and sometimes at weekends a trip to Roundhay Park in Leeds to watch cricket. Before going ashore at a stipulated hour you had to be inspected by the officer of the day but by joining the ships bugle band you were as a reward given a free gangway which allowed you to go ashore at any time without inspection. Realising this I learned with some help from my mate Harry Giliatt how to play the bugle but not brilliantly I might add. When giving displays at places like Boston Spa no one noticed the chap in the middle was not actually playing but the game was up when I attempted to play solo at the sunset ceremony.



I successfully completed the course which lasted some three months and with a change of official number (no longer being in the Seaman branch) I returned once again to Drake to be allocated a ship.

Within days I received a drafting to HMS Falcon a naval air station at Halfar in Malta and being my first foreign posting I was quite excited. Taken to Liverpool I boarded the Oxfordshire which had been used as a hospital ship but now a troopship and after ten days reached Valletta a journey which today would take only two hours courtesy of Thomas Cook.