

## Prologue

*As a school-boy I was asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, I replied “Join the Navy!”*

*At 15 I applied for the examination for Engineering Artificer Branch. After a gruelling long weekend at Rosyth I was told that I had passed but, as was nearly always the case, the top three applicants couldn't be accepted because of bad eyesight.*

*At 16 (1951) I discovered that the only branch which would accept a myopic recruit was as a Writer so persuaded my father to allow me to apply.*

*A few weeks later I was on my way to “HMS Victory II” in Portsmouth.*

I arrived, very thin and underweight (the result of a very unpleasant step mother), and found the Lee Enfield 303 very heavy on my bony shoulders whilst doing the obligatory square bashing! The only other thing I can remember, in my last week I was sent to the swimming pool to do a swimming test - I had to put on a very voluminous and very heavy white sailor-suit and told to jump in. I went straight to the bottom. My Service Certificate was duly entered with "Cannot Swim"

Considerably fatter and fitter I was then sent to HMS CERES as a Junior Writer 2. My abiding memory of my time there was endless days of learning to type on a large heavy Imperial typewriter to the tune of "La Cumparsita". Unlike a previous writer I don't remember the "Wetherby Ladies" but I do remember the "Leeds Commandos"! After having to do the course twice, which I passed successfully, I was promoted to Junior Writer 1 and sent to HMS PEMBROKE (Chatham).

From Chatham I was then sent to my first ship which was about as far away from the sea as it is possible to go. HMS HORNBILL a Royal Navy Air Station near Abingdon. It had a good complement of post-war propeller aeroplanes - Seafires, Sea Mosquitoes and Sea Furies with their huge radial engines. My job was as a correspondence clerk logging mail in and out. During this period I was promoted to Probationary Writer. All the pilots were reservists and I did manage to get my first ever flight in an old Harvard trainer. The pilot was a bit out of practice and he apologised for bouncing me down the runway on landing.

Unfortunately I had a teenage nervous breakdown and was sent to the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar, Gosport for a couple of months. I recovered completely and was sent back to PEMBROKE

In PEMBROKE I was employed as a typist preparing the vouchers for reservists that had been called up for the Korean war - one memory of this work was the sad fact that many members were called up as Chiefs & Petty Officers and demobilised with an Able rating! During this period because I was now a qualified typist I applied to go to HMS CERES to do the Shorthand Course. Unfortunately I was a fast typist but my writing was very slow (a by-product of my draughtsman father insisting that I write very clearly at a school) so I returned to PEMBROKE. On my 18th birthday I became a full "Writer"

After 18 months at PEMBROKE I was suddenly sent to Portsmouth to join HMS BERMUDA as a typist for The Flag Office Flotillas (Home Fleet)

The Admiral's office was very small under the quarter deck with a single scuttle and containing a Chief and Petty officer on one side and a Leading Writer on the other. I had to sit in the space between them under the scuttle with my old Imperial typewriter. If I wanted to get in or out the others had to move out!. I soon found out why I had to sit in such a awkward space - The typewriter has a very free running carriage and if I had been in any other position it would have moved on its own every time the ship rolled which, being a little top heavy, was all the time at sea. I also learned very quickly to keep the scuttle closed after leaving it open and the ship did a sharp turn - I spent the rest of the day drying out and re-oiling the typewriter.

One advantage of being a typist on a ship was that, when we were at sea, I couldn't type! As a result I was allowed to wander around the upper decks of the ship all day and I was able to take many photographs.

In harbour it was a different matter - I had very little contact with my colleagues as I was continually at the beck and call of the Admiral's secretary and all his staff officers. As anything typed for the Admiral was copied to an endless number of Captains and other senior officers I very seldom typed on paper but on Gestetner wax masters for a hand-cranked copier. This meant that the typewriter keys had to be constantly cleaned and any errors, although correctable, were frowned upon as they always showed so I soon learned to type error free.

I had to type everything from complete NATO Fleet Exercises to menus and place cards for the Admiral's dinner parties when we visited ports."Baked Alaska" was always on the menu as dessert!

6 months later the Flag was transferred to HMS GLASGOW.

Some highlights when I was at sea:

- Low point - never having a hot meal on the BERMUDA - meals were taken to the mess deck and I was in the Stokers' mess who ate earlier than I was permitted to go back for a meal so it was always lukewarm or usually cold.
- High point - the GLASGOW had been one of Mountbatten's flag ships so he had the aircraft hanger converted into an American type canteen.
- Went to see the Medical Officer on the BERMUDA complaining of chronic constipation - he looked at me and said "You must eat more fresh fruit and vegetables!" I just looked at him and he burst out laughing.
- Went to the dentist on the BERMUDA and he sat me on the chair and picked up his mirror. The BERMUDA then let rip with a full broadside of her 6-inch guns - end of treatment!
- Steaming through the Kiel Canal early in the morning and seeing people coming out of their cabin cruisers brushing their teeth and looking-up in surprise at this huge ship silently cruising past.
- Meeting a couple of very nice girls during "Kieler Woche" and being taken home to meet their mother. It turned out that every male member of their family had died in submarines.
- Whilst visiting Helsingborg in Sweden we were taken to a stately home and were taken into room where the owner talked to us - on looking around there was a beautiful portrait of the person speaking on the wall behind her and on the facing wall was a full size portrait of Goering!
- Visiting Trondheim in Norway and climbing up a steep hill looking over the town and seeing a whole NATO fleet in and around the harbour.
- Refuelling a Destroyer at sea and being refuelled ourselves by a Fleet Tanker.
- Transferring a Medical Officer to a Destroyer and bringing back an injured man.
- Jumping out of my hammock and running naked to the exit because I thought the ship was turning turtle!
- Being dry-docked in Gibraltar. Was taken by one of the Flag Staff Officers to the top of the Rock and walking along the full length - it was so narrow that you could look down both sides at once and the path was held together by old anchor chains - quite scary!
- Steaming across to Tangier and all the stokers clubbed together to give me some money to visit a "Bar" the following day. Unfortunately the ship sailed out that evening!
- Typing a Mediterranean Fleet Exercise and reading that this would be the first exercise where a submarine could attack surface warships. I asked the Admiral's Secretary if I could go on-board the submarine for the exercise and he arranged it. One of the most interesting days of my life. I was allowed to stay in the periscope control centre and it was very much like being in an aeroplane particularly when she banked at speed. At the end of the exercise

the submarine captain took her down to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea so that he could announce the contents of the very rare Admiralty Fleet Order which announced a long overdue pay rise for the Navy. In the meantime the captain asked me if I would type up his Exercise Report on the typewriter in the ASDIC compartment so it is possible that I may have been the first Writer to have ever worked in a submarine!

I was then transferred to HMS NEPTUNE (Reserve Fleet at Chatham) in the Captain's Office.

## Epilogue

*I was intensely miserable at returning to effectively dry land knowing that it was highly unlikely that I would ever go back to sea.*

*One night I got catastrophically drunk and ended up in the Sickbay. The Medical Officer asked what was wrong and I explained the problem. Somehow or other it was agreed that the only way to get back to sea was to become a Stoker (EM1) and he arranged with the Admiralty to have me transferred to the Training School (HMS NEPTUNE).*

*I did the whole training whilst keeping my full rating so I was the highest paid EM trainee in the navy.*

*One day I was made a part of the guard of honour for the visit of the First Lord of the Admiralty - Lord Hailsham. As he was walking past he suddenly stopped in front of me and said "You're not a new recruit are you?". I replied "No Sir".*

*At the end of the schoolbook training we had to do watch-keeping in the boiler room of a destroyer in the harbour. One day I was watch-keeping on a turbo-generator when there was a sudden inspection by a senior officer (I can't remember whether it was a Flag Officer) when unfortunately my glasses steamed up. The officer ordered me out of the boiler room there and then and that was the end of my career in the Navy!*

*Continued.....*

# *Stormy Weather*



Robert D. Wallace - Royal Navy Writer & Engineering Mechanic

Note: All my negatives have been donated to the Royal Navy Museum in Portsmouth - I hope they don't mind my using this one!