

## **The Start of my Sea Career**

By Alf Corbyn.

I left school in 1945 when I was fourteen, and started work in a local cable factory on a Tuesday, a week before the end of the war. The war finished on the Friday, and on Saturday the factory sirens sounded sending everybody rushing to the Air Raid shelters before they realized that the war was over and it had been done for a joke.

I wasn't in my job very long before I realised that working in one place was not for me, and decided that I wanted to see the world before I settled down. Accordingly, I sent off to the Shipping Federation for the relevant documents.

The first my parents knew about my decision to join the Merchant Navy was when a letter arrived one Saturday morning addressed to me, with a large red Merchant Navy flag on it. My Dad, being the head of the household insisted it was for him, (same initial) although I said I was expecting it, and he opened it. In the forties, until you reached 21 yrs of age you were considered too young to have a mind of your own. Dad's face dropped when he realised that the letter was indeed for me, and on learning of the content, both he and my Mother immediately said I was too young to leave home.

I was now sixteen, and had been working since leaving school at fourteen, I said that the law considered me old enough to work, and I didn't see what difference it made where I worked. I told my parents that I wanted to see the world.

After some argument and a few tears from mother, my dad finally gave in and agreed that it might be a good thing after all and anyway, my mind was made up he could see no way to prevent me from going.

I was sent for a medical at a little place near King George V Dock Silvertown, where I learned that I wasn't the only one in the Country who was joining the Navy. After the medical, it seemed like an eternity while I waited for the Shipping Federation to send for me.

A few letters arrived with some forms to fill in, until finally, I received the letter with orders for me to report to Gravesend Sea School on 17/11/1947.

I handed in my notice at the cable factory, leaving myself a couple of days to go and see friends and relatives, and packing my meagre possessions into my suitcase.

The great day arrived, and using the travel warrant issued to me I left Brimsdown railway station Enfield, to go to Liverpool Street Station. I had been to Liverpool St before and also Kings Cross station during the War when I carried my ATS sister's luggage. I hadn't a clue where Gravesend was or how to get there.

Eventually I was directed to Charing Cross Station where I met a couple of the boys I had seen at the Medical Centre. We travelled down to Gravesend together and on arrival, went into a little cafe just outside the Sea School.

We were served by a very pretty girl of about seventeen and we immediately started flirting with her. She asked us if we were joining the sea school, and on our confirmation she said she would look out for us.

I asked her for a date before the others thought of it, and she agreed to meet me on the first evening I could get out. We swapped names and she gave me the phone number of the cafe, and I promised to call her to let her know when I could meet her.

It was time to report to the School and we entered the gates, handing our papers to a uniformed guard who gave instructions of where we would find the office. Once inside, we were told to sit and wait until our names were called. An hour passed; there were now twenty of us, and an Officer (who we later found out was the purser), came out and called our names, telling us to follow him. We were led to a storeroom where we were issued with uniforms consisting of black trousers; two; blouse one; striped jacket one; white shirts two; collars for same, two; pants and vests, white two; socks black, two pairs, one beret with badge, one pair black shoes, and two shoulder flashes.

The uniform was compulsory and was paid for out of our unemployment benefit, plus five pounds cash. We were also issued with sheets, blankets and one towel, returnable. Anything else, such as soap, toothpaste, shoe polish, and soap powder, we had to pay cash for. We were expected to do our own washing, apart from bed-linen, and before being allowed 'ashore' on any evening, we had to pass inspection, with white collars in particular being looked at. Most of us soon acquired celluloid collars, which were easily wiped clean with a damp cloth.

The course was for eight weeks, and each class sat at its own table for meals. The "First Weekers", (us) sat just inside the door and as the course progressed, moved up a table each week until eventually finishing the course at the other side of the dining room. The first week most boys considered the food to be so bad, that we didn't eat!

The food was collected from the serving hatch by each boy and then you sat down at your table. Breakfast was one and a half very thick slices of bread, and a scrape of margarine, a mug of tea, plate of porridge, heaped teaspoon of jam (you could put this in your tea or on your porridge) no sugar. We soon learned to eat porridge with salt.

We also had greasy fried potatoes and a sausage, or potatoes and one rasher of streaky bacon, and once or twice a week we got a rubber egg! Even kids who grew up through the deprivations of the war years found it difficult to adjust to the culinary fare of Gravesend Sea School!

The minute we as first weekers sat down, the second weekers were scrounging our food because they were starving. By the second week, we were scrounging too! We soon learned to sell any gash food for a cigarette or two.

Dinner consisted of watery soup, meat or pie or fish and two veg, and duff and custard for desert, with a mug of tea. Tea was similar to breakfast without the porridge but with potatoes. By the end of the first week we had spent any money we had, on food and when that ran out, we starved.

The food was adequate but not very edible. It was either over-cooked or practically raw.

Every Friday was pay day. We stood in line and finally came to the first of three desks. After calling out our name, the Purser handed out our unemployment money. At the next desk, our week's debts were read out, and we paid back most of our money to cover them. Finally, at the third desk they took all the remaining cash, handing back half a crown (2/6d or 12 1/2 pence), to last a week. I often wondered why they went through all the rigmarole? An open window set into the wall served as the school's shop, so we came straight from collecting our half crown, to the shop and spent the lot on cigs or sweets or soap. There wouldn't have been too many lads who walked out with any money left over!

Not being a smoker, I would buy ten cigarettes and put them away until Tuesday or Wednesday, then those who had run out, would willingly pay two or three pence for one! By Friday I had enough money to buy another ten cigs, and still have money to go out with in the evening.

The girl from the cafe went out with me a couple of times the first week, but she was more interested in conquests than a steady boyfriend. She did play a trick on me though. She arranged to meet me at the clock tower and when I arrived, denied knowing me and said that it was her sister I wanted who was on the river front promenade.

When I got to the promenade and said hello, she also said she didn't know me, and sent me to the cafe, which her family owned. I found her laughing with her two sisters, they were identical triplets who played tricks on all the boys but never had a regular boy.

The local girls used to wait outside the gate for us and we always had a good time, they used to take us to the pictures and supply us with Durex knowing we had no money. One girl I went out with worked in the fishmongers. When I told a mate at school, whose father owned a Hotel in the Channel Islands, he said that if she could get him any crabs he would pay me for them, as he loved crab.

That evening, when I asked my girl if she could get one, she took me to the shop. I kept watch while she got in through a window she knew would be unlocked, and came out with two enormous crabs about a foot wide. I hid them under my jacket(blouse) and we went back to the school where I hid them on the sea front, under the school lifeboat. We then went for a walk along the canal which was the regular haunt of the boys and their girlfriends.

After saying an early good night to my girl, I went back to my bunk on the third floor, and changed into my work clothes so I wouldn't get my uniform dirty. Climbing out of the corridor window, over the roof, down the fire escape onto the seafront, where I quickly picked up the crabs, returning via the same route and hiding the crabs in my locker under the bunks. When the other boys came back from shore leave at ten pm, I showed Peter the crabs and he said he would have them both and gave me ten shillings. His family sent him money every week but he was always buying cigarettes off me and never had any money left by pay day.

Peter wanted to eat one of the crabs right away, but I said that I would be collecting the school mail in the morning from the local swimming pool, which was being used by the Post Office as a sorting office), I said that I could pick up a loaf of bread while he passed the word around to the others in our dormitory to see if they could grab some margarine from the kitchen, where he was working that day, and we could have a party.

That night after lights out we had a feast, with those who could, contributing jam, or biscuits and cake, either sent from home or stolen from the kitchen or the officer's rooms. We even had two bottles of Tizer, and by the time we had finished eating, it was gone midnight. We could only do this when Jock,(one of the staff) was on duty, as he stayed in his quarters playing the bagpipes if he knew we were having a party, and we kept quiet.

We had lessons throughout our eight weeks training, the first three being Catering. We learned how to wait at table, laying the table, composition of various dishes, what their French equivalents were, how to write and make up a menu, how to carve various meats, how to make various sauces, and how to cook crepes etc. at the table.

The fourth week was maintenance week. Our class, which had been whittled down to fourteen by the end of the first week. (After listening to a couple of "old Hand lads," who were on their seventh or eighth week, one boy didn't even stay for the first meal), had to do all the work, such as helping the cook, painting, scrubbing the toilets and working as officers stewards etc.

We worked in pairs, and I was put with Yorkie Bill from Durham. Our first day, we were designated for "General Duties", and assigned to the kitchen to help prepare the breakfast and dinner. We reported to the Cook at 0600 and were amazed when we were given a mug of tea with sugar in it, and then told us to make ourselves a bacon sandwich!

We made and stirred the porridge and cut and marged the bread, after which we made sure the fried potatoes didn't burn, while we cooked the sausages.

At seven thirty the rest of the school lined up for their breakfasts which we dished out, and while they were eating, we sat down with the cook and ate bacon, two eggs, sausages and beans, with fried bread, two slices of bread and real butter! What a feast!

After breakfast, we washed all the plates and pots and pans, cleaned down the Mess room, and had another cup of tea. Our next duty was to 'help' prepare dinner, but from my recollection, we ended up doing most of the work. We washed and cut up the potatoes and vegetables, put them in the saucepans and onto the stove. We made the gravy, then the cook told me how to make the pastry for the meat pie, and Yorkie Bill made the duff, while the cook was dicing the meat.

Our day in the kitchen was very instructive and also very rewarding food-wise what with making porridge, pastry, gravy and custard plus frying potatoes, bacon, sausages, eggs, and learning about different quantities for different dishes. We also found out that if you were Jewish or any religion other than Church of England, you either ate the same as the others or went without.

Although we both enjoyed working in the kitchen, we felt that the cook was getting paid just to supervise, and we were doing all the cooking!

The potatoes and veggies were peeled and cleaned by the defaulters and those who were on duty in the afternoons after dinner. There was never a shortage of defaulters; the 'crimes committed' as paltry as failing to salute an officer, having dirty shoes, running in the corridor and the favourite on inspection before going ashore, having a dirty collar.

The next morning after breakfast, the Maintenance Officer Mr Day appeared and told Bill and I to have a cup of tea and a smoke for half an hour as the coalman was due at nine am. We had eleven tons of coal to shift!

The lorry arrived at ten to nine, and Mr Day took us from the Quadrangle, down to the cellar which was a very large room and nearly as big as the quadrangle.

"That's where the coal comes down", he said, pointing to a hole in the ceiling that the coalman had uncovered, "and you have to shovel it from there, to that bunker over there," pointing to the opposite wall about twelve feet away. There were two timber partitions about twelve feet apart, standing at 90 degrees to the brick wall, and there was already a small amount of coal in them. Mr. Day smiled and disappeared up the stairs, leaving me with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"Cheer up", said Bill with a grin, "Its a piece of cake; the first thing to do is rip one of your trouser buttons off and put it in your mouth", which we both did, "now" he continued "Ill stand by the hole and shovel it into a pile about seven feet away, and you shovel it the rest, right to the back of the bunker". He then went on, "I worked down the pit before I came here and I'll bet we're finished quicker than they expect".

I found that sucking the button in my mouth made me salivate and stopped my throat from getting dry, and once Bill had shown me how to use the shovel with rhythm, we were going great guns.

Mr Day came down about ten to eleven to tell us to get cleaned up as it would be time for dinner by the time we had a shower, and his mouth dropped when he saw how we had progressed; we only had about a ton left to move. Bill said we would carry on and finish saving washing ourselves twice, and all while we were talking to him we didn't stop shovelling once. He said he would tell the cook to keep our dinner warm, and left shaking his head. We finished at 11 10am including sweeping, then went up to have a shower and change, before having our dinner, Mr Day came up to the dormitory while we were getting dressed, and told us that he had never heard of anybody finishing in under three hours before, and leaving it swept as well, so we could change into our uniforms after our shower, and have the rest of the day ashore.

On our third day, Bill and I were taken to the Captains quarters and told to paint a spare room which the Captains daughter was going to be use. We decided that if we made a good job of it we might get some more time off, and when Mr Day inspected it he said that we had done a very good job, he then called the captain who agreed and asked us if we would like to help him out at the weekend. Neither of us were due for leave so we said we would, thinking that he wanted some more painting done. We thought that it would be better than some of the jobs we might otherwise have been given. He then said that his daughter was having a birthday dinner party and he would like us to wait at table and take drinks round during the evening.

The next day, Bill and I were cleaning windows in the morning, and after dinner were put on peeling spuds with four others, in the room just behind the main gate, which was also our laundry room. This allowed two of us to wash our clothes while the others kept watch, and then we would swap over with two more.

I'd finished my washing and was peeling potatoes when one of the guards poked his head round the door, "anyone called Corbyn here?" he asked with a little smile, "you know my name" I said, "what's the joke?".

"There's a gorgeous bit of stuff out here asking for you", he said, still with the silly grin on his face, "you're having me on", I said "try someone else, I'm not stupid". Just then the Purser, white haired and looking like a general, stepped into the room, "Is one of you called Corbyn? There's a young lady would like to see you". "Yes Sir" I said, springing to attention, "I thought the guard was playing about".

I went outside and found my sister standing there. She was a cook in the army and was stationed near Salisbury Plain. She told me that she had seven days leave and had got her travel warrant made out via Gravesend.

The Purser allowed us use of his office for ten minutes. Once inside, my sister opened a large holdall she'd borrowed from an officer, and said that she'd heard we were starving, so she'd brought me some food. It was mostly army issue.

The Purser returned, and told me to change into my uniform while he entertained my sister with a cup of tea. Upon my return, the Purser gave me permission to go ashore with my sister, to retain my "Watch Card", stay ashore after curfew, but to return via the roof near the sea wall. This route was well known, and quite often one of the boys would sneak out through the small door, used to take the rubbish to the bins which were across the road outside, he would then have to go over the roof to get back, because you had to hand in your watch card to go out, and collect it when you returned. The Purser sternly warned me not to use this route without permission

My sister and I went up to the town station and had a drink in a cafe, before she said she had to catch her train. She gave me ten bob and I said I would see her during the Christmas week if she got leave. After her train had departed, I walked around to the shop where my current girl was working. I said I'd wait for her at the cafe, and after she arrived we went to the pictures.

After the pictures we met up with my mate Tony and his girl at about eight pm. We went to the pub where we got someone to bring us out a drink, as we were all too young to be served. After our drink, we walked down the road to where two bombed houses were, and went inside the ruins for a kiss and a cuddle. A drunk came in and started to put his hand between me and my girl. My mate hit him over the head with a lump of wood, and he went down on the rubble. We searched him, took his money and ran, with the drunk shouting after us. When we got back near the school we stopped and counted the money. We had six pounds, so we had two each and gave the girls a pound each. We didn't think we had done wrong, he should have left us alone, and he wouldn't have lost his money.

That weekend after the lucky ones had gone on leave, Bill and I were told by the chief steward to get out our striped stewards jackets and to ensure that they, and our trousers were clean and ironed, that we had cleaned our shoes and put on clean socks, shirts and collars. We would be in the Captains Quarters most of the day, as well as the evening.

We hadn't realised until the Chief Steward took us over to the Captain that we would be serving lunch at 1pm, as well as dinner that evening. This meant that we had to lay the table with cutlery, side plates, condiments and glasses, and hope that it was alright.

Yorkie Bill carried the food from the kitchen and put it onto plates, while I served the Captain and his wife, daughter and her boyfriend. This was my first experience of waiting on table and I was a little nervous, but I soon got over that when the Captain said how nice the table looked. His daughter said she thought I had been a waiter for a long while.

The first thing I had to do was place a basket of warm rolls on the table together with a silver dish of butter rolled into balls, then I served bowls of soup, from the silver tureen that Bill had put onto the dumb waiter, and then withdrew to the pantry for a quick smoke, while Bill was getting the next course, (steamed fillet of Plaice) from the kitchen.

Bill transferred the Plaice onto a hot silver salver, while I collected the empty soup bowls. I then placed warm plates in front of each person, and served the fish from the salver onto the plates.

The main course was then served in a similar manner, the meat from a salver and the veggies from divided silver veg dishes. The gravy was served from a sauce boat. The meal was rounded off with an apple roll and cream, followed by cheese, biscuits and coffee.

One advantage of serving the Captain was that we got the same food, and plenty of it, so once again we struck lucky.

About 3-30pm, I served afternoon tea which was easy, as the tea was in the pantry and the cakes were delivered by the baker across the street. Bill and I cleaned up the left over cakes!

At six pm. Bill and I were back in the Captains Quarters, along with the Chief Steward and two more of our class, who had been roped in to help out with the dinner. Altogether, including the First Officer and the Purser, there were twelve guests sitting at table that evening, most being friends of Marie, the Captain's Daughter.

As this was to be a party dinner, we decorated the table with coloured ribbons and a centre piece, consisting of a large, cut glass bowl of water, with flowers floating in it.

Two of the lads fetched food from the kitchen and placed it onto silver salvers, while Bill and I served at the table. The Chief Steward, supervising and giving advice.

The Chief Steward told us to sit down and have a cup of tea and a smoke until seven twenty five, when we could go in and be ready to help seat the ladies at the table.

At last the moment arrived; we went in and stood one each side of the long table, while the Chief Steward went into the lounge and announced that dinner was ready. As the guests moved into the dinning room and found their place-cards, Bill and I pulled back chairs for the Captain's wife and daughter, assisting them to sit down, by which time three of the male guests and the Chief, had done the same for the other four ladies.

Although there was a menu the meal was "table de hot^e" which meant that If you didn't want a dish, you waited until the next course was served.

The dinner started with hor's deovres, a selection of tit bits to whet the appetite, then soup, followed by fish with a white wine, an entree', in this instance jugged hare, with a rose' wine. The

Main Course was "Beef Wellington" with vegetables, served with a full bodied red wine, and finally a soufflé with chocolate sauce, followed by cheese and biscuits. The Chief Steward announced that coffee would be served in the lounge, and after serving that, we left them, cleared the table and then had our meal.

At 9-30pm all four of us were back in the lounge handing round drinks and snacks, and at 10-pm the Chief bought in the birthday cake, with all the candles alight. After they had all sung "Happy Birthday," Marie cut the cake and we took a piece to all the guests. Marie then insisted that we also had a piece and said that we had made it the happiest birthday she had ever had.

This completed our fourth week at the school, and the following weeks were spent learning seamanship, although we were still being taught Catering as our main instruction.

The only other thing I remember was just before Christmas. We were decorating the hall for a dance and I was up a ladder with a boy nick named Tarzan, holding the bottom of the ladder. He was a bit simple and when someone called him over, he left the ladder unattended and I ended up in sick bay for two days! The school closed for the Christmas break and upon our return, I only had one week left to do. During this week we were issued with 64 clothing coupons and these we promptly sold at half a crown a time a total of eight pounds. We were told by a seaman that any clothing we needed could be bought on the ship without coupons.

The final week was taken up by exams, both written and practical. We each had to take charge of the class and give the correct orders for launching the lifeboat. Four of us got top marks and seamanship stars, then we had to lay a table and answer questions on cheeses, sauces and makeup of various French dishes, plus making menu's for complete dinners, for this I think seven of us got Catering stars.

At last the great day arrived. Our class was taken on the ferry across to Tilbury and issued with Discharge Books and Seaman's Identity Cards, and after having our fingerprints taken, we were now genuine Merchant Seamen.

When I left the Sea School at Gravesend, together with most of my class of 14, we ended up at the P&O offices in Leadenhall Street. because I and three others from my class had two stars for Seamanship and Catering, we were automatically selected as bellboys, whilst those who had one star for Catering were interviewed. Some were accepted, some weren't. The same applied for those with seamanship stars.

Having decided on who they would employ, we were told we were on half pay and would be called when vacancies occurred. Our retainer was £3-10s per month, full pay was £7-0-0 P.M.

I was invited home by my mate who lived in Leyton, and stayed with him for a couple of days, going roller skating in the evening at the local rink called "The Madhouse."

While I was waiting for my first ship I got a job working for a fishmonger named Bill at Hoe Lane fish shop in Enfield. I had to be waiting outside the shop at 3-30 am every morning and he would pick me up in the van, then we would drive to Billingsgate fish market, stopping at a cafe near South Tottenham station for our breakfast.

When we got to Billingsgate Market, Bill would see the supplier and sort out what fish he wanted, then while we were waiting we would go into the pub and have a pint of beer, at half five in the morning. I was only sixteen but a couple of the boys were younger and drinking beer. After our beer, we loaded the fish on the van and drove back to Enfield. Next job was to clean the fish, skin the skate with a block of wood and a pair of pliers, fillet some of the plaice, then wash the marble display slab and lay the various fish out, before we opened at nine am.

I would help to serve, make tea and do any odd jobs, one of which was to split and gut herrings, Bill would then drive me down to Ponders End Aden rd, where he had a smoke hole. This looked just like a building site toilet. Bill would leave me there and I would start a fire which I would then make smoke and smoulder with tea leaves and oak shavings. I ran thin iron rods through the heads of the split herrings which after smoking, became kippers. The unsplit, gutted herrings were bloaters and there was also haddock, plus large round cods roes hanging in mutton cloth, two of which were mine.

Bill picked me up about two hours later and we would return about four pm to collect the smoked fish. We would leave his wife in the shop and go round Flamstead End and district, selling fish from the van.

Bill told me that he had been a Sergeant in the army during the war and he was put in charge of a transit camp, somewhere in Cumberland I think. Every month from 1940 to 1945 he received supplies for 2,000 troops in transit, and he and five other soldiers shared the proceeds from selling food, lumber and all the equipment, such as petrol, coal and clothing, that had been issued to the camp every month, for 2,000 soldiers who never arrived. He bought the fish shop with his share.