

## **Farewell to Gravesend**

by Neil Robinson (R364755)

My final morning at the school is now something of a blur. Up at the usual time but without the normal marching up & down on the Promenade to be involved with, I breakfasted early and got my kit stowed in my seabag. I'd had my very last cup of that 'unusual' tasting coffee... Maxwell House - it was NOT !!!

Bunk stripped I got on with the "Farewell" bit and before classes started did the rounds of handshakes with my instructors.

Oddly, I remember the names of none of them now. Two classes had started and whilst talking briefly with the instructors I looked at the sea of pale faces in each room, no doubt the owner of each 'fizzog' was just yearning to be in my shoes... off to a ship... and the World.

"Tara lads, see ya in Capetown or Sydney !". This to my classmates with firm handshakes. "Bin good knowing ya mates !"

I'd left my seabag, emblazoned with a good sized replica of the MN badge and my name, patterned carefully and done in Indian ink (we all did it), standing at the entrance to Captain McKellar's quarters, my final call. A smart rap on his Office door and in I went.

"Now Robinson - where is it to be ? Cunard or P&O ?" He'd chatted me about this option the previous day. I said as it was Winter I thought Australia had more appeal...the Sun etc.. "Good decision lad" he said as he wrote out my introduction to the P&O people. Soon it was time to go. "Good luck Robinson, do well and uphold the School's good name". I thanked him for my training, picked up the P&O chit and my railway warrant and saluted him. The only time I ever did that. We shook hands, his wife came in to say "Cheerio-all the Best !" and I was off out of the door to retrieve my bag. I headed for the gates, freedom and adventure unbounded.

Thus ended my second sojourn at the famous Gravesend Sea School. I never again returned to visit. I regret that.

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My Deck days 'finito' at 17years old (duff mincer, copped a flying wedge) I'd had to retrain, back at GSS.

(The Doc at the Salford Pool gave the eye the thumbs down. "Sorry lad" he said. My heart sank to my bloody boots.

"All's not lost, son" said the Dispatcher " you can retrain in Catering. How about Vindicatrix for a change ?"

"WHAT ?!" Was he kidding or what ?! I'd sailed with Vindi lads and knew ALL about the perils of biding there awhile !

"Er, no Dennis, a warrant for Gravesend will be fine. My Granny will love seeing me again, she's there, living on her own ! ... Load of 'old cobblers' of course, I had a bird in Gravesend didn't I ? Grandma lived up near Newcastle.)

So back to GSS it was. This proved to be an absolute "doddle" as I had only the Catering syllabus to concentrate on having done the Deck side of things the previous year and with 16 months of practical seamanship experience to fall back on had no difficulties re study and exams.

It was like being home again, I swanned around as if I owned the place. When my class-mates realised I'd been before I was quite the centre of attraction, copping a million questions daily "How do we ? - What is ? - When do ?!" I'd have done the same in their shoes. I was glad to be of help. Hearing I'd been to the Moroccan iron ore ports one lad asked if I'd had a 'dose' !!!

I enjoyed being back at GSS. Being right on the River Thames, as it was, the almost constant procession of ships going up or down stream was a total fascination for us all. The Sun Tugs Station was right next door - always it seemed - very busy.

Ships deeply laden, all gear down would create all kinds of conjecture as they headed for the sea. " What's that company ?... Where's she off to Robbo ?" A fount of knowledge was I.

Training over I was sent to P&O HQ. 122 Leadenhall St London EC3.(EC3 - funny just what you remember). It was December 5th 1947 when I marched through those imposing iron gates at Gravesend Sea School for the last time. Sea-bag on my shoulder, I turned to wave to my mates and with a spring in my step retraced our excursion of the previous day and headed for the ferry to cross to Tilbury. The day before we Class H trainees had gone to the Tilbury Pool Office for Discharge Books and ID cards.

This time I was on my way to catch the "Fenchurch St. Flyer" up to "The Smoke" !

Standing on the ferry, impatient for it to get underway I watched an American freighter, the ss.' Biddeford Victory' head upriver, the Stars & Stripes ensign at her stern fluttering away. All her gear down she looked great, neat as a pin. She was obviously headed for the Pool of London or somewhere well upriver.

Pulling out from Tilbury Riverside on the steam 'choofer' the railway lines ran past the Tilbury Docks which seemed a forest of masts, derricks - ships galore. 'Ormonde' & 'Otranto', both Orient Liners and P&O liners 'Chitral' & 'Mooltan' all were berthed on the big wharf closest to the Main Gate entrance to the docks. With a bit of time to spare the previous day whilst waiting for the ferry back we'd been allowed to go onto the wharf to take it all in. We were all on a ' high', some taking notes of the event.

I got quite a big BUZZ as I went through the Peninsular & Oriental Company portals. Hallowed Halls indeed. Here was I standing in the Headquarters of the Biggest Shipping Company of all.\*  
...This was a day to remember !

"Are you musical" said the guy ?

With a wry smile I said I was. Hands of my vintage will remember the comic significance of the "Are you musical ?" question from radio of the times, that is, the late 1940's.

Turned out they wanted a Bugler for RMS 'Strathaird'. He gave me a chit for the Salford Pool to the effect I was appointed and my pay started that very day and that I would join her Dec.12th 1947. Till then I was on leave. Going to Australia ! Wow ! I was on cloud nine ! In some sort of "Heaven" I made my way across London to Euston to catch a train for Manchester & home.

Previous seagoing trips had only taken me to those Iron Ore ports in NW Africa (Ropners) and Tanker Alley.(BTC)

Joining her at Walker on Tyne, I was made up ! Had been a Bugler for years, Scouts, Sea Cadets, Sea School.

The ship was then being reconditioned after trooping since 1940. Worked by and buggered about, 'skiving' & dodging the duecer mainly. Amazing how many times you can get 'lost' on a 23,000 ton ship !!! The sheer size of her was bewildering ! The ship smelt beautiful, all French Polish and new Paint and new upholstery up in the Public Rooms. New bedding for us.

The grub - after what I'd copped previously on the small number of ships I'd been on - just GREAT ! If you wanted more you got it !

On trials out in the North Sea the Skipper sent for me.

"Bugler, I haven't heard any sound of you practising AT ALL !" says he !

'HE' was a ferocious looking bugger with eyebrows like distemper brushes. Size and build of Captain Bligh in that old movie. Commander Allen happened to be the P&O Fleet Commodore and what he said 'WENT'.

Prewar P&O Liners all carried Buglers and he was going to carry on with the old tradition. As it happened none of the other 'Big White Sisters' or C class ships coming back into the Australian or Far East services ever did have a Bugler. So...I became the only postwar P&O Bugler. The last of the line in the Line. (Company Historian contacted re this)

" I haven't been issued the Bugle yet, Sir " says I in reply. It was found in a store, tarnished to hell, looking as if it would take a fortnight to shine up. The book of Company Calls did not appear and the search for it went on. I had no idea what I was supposed to play and told the Skipper so. After telling me he would instruct London HQ to have a call book sent to Tilbury he said he didn't want any calls other than a P&O call blown. Under no circumstances was the Army call "Come to the Cookhouse Door Boys" to be blown at mealtimes ! As Skipper of the ship

during her trooping days I suppose he was "up to here" listening to the squaddies meal call from the Service Buglers.

The Company call at such times was titled "Roast Beef" he informed me and "did I know it ?" When told I didn't he said he would have to teach me and did - by whistling it ! But...the Skipper couldn't whistle through his lips. He could only produce that canary type trill through his teeth !!! I wanted to explode and why I didn't have a 'urinary accident' I'll never know.

Dwell on the situation if you will shipmates. I'm in the Day Room of the Commodore of the P&O Fleet and he's teaching the 17 year old Ship's Bugler a call by whistling canary style !! With my hand over the end of the Bugle I repeated the notes and got the tune off-pat quicksmart. It's a long call so it did take a little while. ...But that's how I learnt "Roast Beef of Old England". Straight ! I've told the yarn a million times and had an equal number of smiles.

But... I wouldn't disparage my old Skipper. Despite his appearance he was no ogre and in fact was a Father figure to me.

I traipsed along behind him, always... as he said "On my port quarter !" Ahead of his entourage I might add, on all kinds of occasions, Weekly Inspections, I blew 'Sunrise & Sunset' from Bridge Wing in port, ' Boat Stations Dismiss' same spot, and the 'Last Post' at Burials at Sea of which there were a surprising number.

Regarding burials. One that I have never forgotten concerned a young Scottish Mother in her mid-twenties whose 6 month old infant died during an oppressively hot, day stay in Aden. She apparently did not wish for her child to be buried ashore in such a spot. And the ship could not be held over in the port for further discussion or arrangement. Mail Ship time is important.

Arrangements were made for a Burial at Sea. The Skipper sent for me and put myself & the Serang in the picture. We cleared the port and at an appropriate distance from that desolate land the ceremony got under way on the short and private mooring deck aft. No sooner had the Skipper pronounced - "And now we commit...." when the Mother leapt onto the bits and was almost gone 'over the wall' following her infant. Everybody was caught at "Attention" delivered by the Skipper and this was, with his nod to me the signal to sound that mournful call 'The Last Post'. The reaction of 2 Lascars was incredible... how they managed to hold onto her I marvel at today, all these years on. Considering that most of her was 'over the wall' it was a miracle indeed that they were able to keep a grip on her. Held by her ankles she swung like a pendulum and crashed into the ship's side... outboard! Hauled back by a number of the Lascars in the party she was unconscious, blood pouring from her split forehead and what turned out to be, her broken nose.

Her slight figure was her Salvation. Anybody heavier would have slipped through the hands of the Lascars and been gone to the depths. Lascar lads are not of the Charles Atlas build. I could have lifted, bodily, any one of them.

She spent the rest of the voyage in the Ship's Hospital. She was travelling out to join her husband in OZ.

I did play the call, when almost all had gone. Just the Skipper, the Serang and myself in attendance.

I visited her in the Hospital to acknowledge a "Thank You" note she'd passed to the hospital people for my part in things.

Unmoved by the experience then as a "self imagined hard knock" I find it saddening to recount at this stage of my life.

Some older hands will remember the French liner with the enormous stack. She carried troops out to Indo - China. We'd meet her in Colombo and the Bugler aboard her and myself would engage in a 5 -10 minute contest each time. "Duelling Bugles" if you like !

I'd stand on the Bridge Wing 'sounding off ' in this musical confrontation, my notes and those of my "frog oppo" ringing clear over the open water. All of which was heartily encouraged by the Old Man. He enjoyed it all immensely, usually sitting in a deck chair under an awning, nearby. Perhaps as a young fellar he'd been a Bugler himself... I never once thought to ask him.

He'll have "Crossed the Bar" long since. May God Bless him !

For me they were good times. 7 pounds a month and a shilling a day for bugling and...as many tins of Duraglit as I wanted for polishing my cherished bugle. And with loads of young birds aboard all in all I had a great time in the job. "Can I have your autograph Bugler ?" or "May I take your picture ?" I heard it every day. You had to be very careful tho' - any evidence of what they called 'fraternization' with passengers could land you in hot water. As I found out ... More than once !

Personalities galore travelled with us. Valentine Dyall "The Man in Black" I remember one trip. I expected to hear a different voice but it was just as on radio in "T M i B".

The Australian Test Team of 1948 with Don Bradman and his Merry Men made the trip with 'Strathaird' back from Sydney in March/April '48. I almost bowled the late Sir Don over whilst on my rounds blowing the Dinner Call. He came out of his cabin and at the end of his short thwartship alleyway we collided gently. "Can I have your autograph Mr Bradman?" I certainly could and he about turned and back we went to the cabin. "Come in lad" said he, producing a souvenir booklet of the players bios & pictures with space for each to sign in. He promptly signed for me. Vice Captain Lyndsey Hassett was next door - so there we went for his. Over the next day or two he very kindly took me to the other players' cabins to collect their signatures.

I still have that booklet... I cherish it !

"Good on ya' Sir Don, I Thank You for being so Approachable, so Warm & Friendly and for making the memorable events so 'unforgettable' in the life of this, then... 17 year old kid ! God Bless You !"

All that was over 50 years ago and I'm still blowing my own trumpet ! !

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Many of the lads in the Brotherhood would have been, like me, a Sea Cadet Bugler / Drummer and will be familiar with the tune "Shillings". (Oh ! for a shilling a day) I would dearly love to hear it again & should anyone have it on tape would they kindly contact me at:- [robcaruso@xtra.co.nz](mailto:robcaruso@xtra.co.nz)

Anybody put me in the picture re the name of that French Trooper with the huge funnel ? I'd appreciate it. Over the months I saw more than one or two squaddies leap off as she was leaving Colombo heading for Indo - China !

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\* Some may dispute this detail. It should be remembered that P&O had many years before assumed control of the likes of NZSC in 1916 which had itself absorbed FEDERAL in 1912, both of which traded as previously. British India SN became part of P&O in 1914.

P&O had controlling interest of ORIENT LINE in 1919. UNION STEAMSHIP of NZ became part of the P&O giant in 1917. HAIN Steamship & the MOSS HUTCHINSON Line were taken over in 1935 plus others along the way, and after.

Much of which was "news to me", till recently. NR.