

The Next Bend

Part 1 - Gravesend Sea School

- Barry Wilton

I became aware of the Navy from the tales my Dad told me about my uncles and the trouble or fun they got themselves into, but he never really shared his own adventures, just reflecting on theirs. In later years I came to understand that his own adventures were far removed from those of my uncles and as with most veterans of a war, there was no point in discussing something the listener would have no comprehension of apart from the simple fact that they were there.

In my father's case he spent most of his sea time escorting the "PQ" supply convoys aboard HMS Seagull from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Murmansk, Russia, with respites into boredom at places such as Scapa Flow and Chatham! My uncles were all in the Merchant Navy. They served with very little public recognition or merit but in times of duress all stood up to be counted, comradeship and honour binding all ranks within the service. But boy.....did they have a good time during their time ashore!

With my uncles stories ringing in my ears, I recognised that there could be more fun to be had in the Merchant Navy, than was likely to be found in the Royal and that was as much thought I gave it until I was 16.

Just before leaving school, the Career Advisory Service came to the school. While being interviewed I was asked by the career advisor, what I wanted to do once I left school?

I replied "I would like to become a game warden in Africa", sir.

"You'll need a degree in biology for that, my boy", came the reply.

I thought to myself, a bloody degree to chase monkeys, hippos and elephants around the countryside, you're having a laugh?

"That is the minimum education level you'll need", he continued.

Staying on at school was not an option as far as I was concerned; all I wanted was to get out of the God-forsaken place at the most opportune moment.

"Well", I said, "that's what I would really like to do".

"Do you want to stay on at school and try for university", he enquired, "No", came my reply before he had even finished his sentence.

"Okay then, what do you like doing in your spare time?"

(I couldn't really say, chasing the girls and having a bloody good time) "I work part time for an outside catering company doing weddings, parties and the like," I informed him, still dwelling on the thought of having the need for a degree to wrangle monkeys around the tree line.

"Good, he said I've got just the job for you. Fanny Cradock needs a commie chef to assist her, I'll put you down for that, here are the details pop along and see her.....next!"

"Not on your life mate", I replied.

Now, Fanny Cradock was a noted "Celebrity Cook" on the telly at that time, but her legend extended past her lunch time for being a right royal pain in the ass. She was known as a diva in the kitchen and I could see no advantage in me trying to work for this person. She also lived a considerable distance from Radlett (my home town) by car or push-bike and the public services were just out of the question.

"Oh, alright then let's look for something else"; he said.

I could see he was starting to get a little frustrated with me, "okay here's one, a commie chef needed at a local hotel".....next!

I was ushered out of the room as quick as you like with a feeling of dismayed hanging over me at the thought of the need for a degree to wrangle monkey's and the like. However, the thought of Fanny Cradock.....still leaves me cold. So, for the next year I worked as a commie chef while continuing my casual catering job at weekends and days off.

Some of the guys I went to school with at the time, had either joined the Army or Navy. A couple of them had gone into the RAF and a couple had gone to university. One had even taken a year out to go to Timbuktu to try and find himself, only to find out some years later that he'd actually lost himself somewhere up a mountain in Nepal.

After a year at work it was starting to dawn on me that things just weren't working out for me. I was putting all kinds of hours in trying to make a living and was becoming more and more frustrated by the fact that I was getting nowhere, fast! Dad had suggested to me to join the MN to get a different perspective, so I phoned the Merchant Navy Offices to enquire about joining. They were very helpful and suggested that when I received the application form I should send it back by return as I was nearly at their intake limit, 16 years of age being the latest one could join.

I received the application forms the next day and immediately filled them out, having my Dad sign them, and gave the envelope to my mum to post.

Sometime later Dad asked if I had heard anything from the MN, to which I replied that I hadn't.

He phoned the MN offices later that day only to find that my application forms hadn't been received. It later transpired that Mum hadn't posted the forms as she was asked, (basically she didn't want me going to sea,) which resulted in a family argument and ended with Dad escorting me to the MN offices firing on all cylinders. On our arrival at the offices, we were informed that due to the late application I was now over the age limit. My Dad, still firing on all cylinders went into battle which turned into a very heated discussion between him and the official that concluded with my application being accepted. This was August 1970, a week later my acceptance for Gravesend Sea School arrived and I was off to the sea school at the beginning of October 1970.

I arrived at Gravesend Station on the joining day, at 08:00 having left home at 05:00. It was a cold Monday morning and transport to the sea school at Denton was at 9:00.

So I had to wait around in the car park. I got talking to a guy by the name of Derek Smith, from Bournemouth and it became obvious that he had about as much information of what we were getting ourselves into as I did. He was being sponsored by Shaw Savill and would be joining one of their ships after finishing his course, so he seemed to know a little more about the Merchant Navy than I. The car park was now starting to fill with other arrivals for the sea school all milling around looking very nervous and intimidated by the whole experience which was pushing everyone's comfort zone.

As we drew close to our destination, the sea school looked impressive and very imposing. The River Thames lay behind the school, and at the front was the concrete road we were travelling on. A rail track and then open fields running up a slight hill to tree line, there was nothing near the school, except for some old firing ranges and the Flying Angel Club.

After filling in the required forms and other documentation we lined up and were marched to our allocated dormitory, picked our bunks and stowed our kit. We were then given a few golden rules, school orientation and marched down to the quartermasters store for kit issue.

One beret for the use of,

One jacket for the use of,

One pair of trousers for the use of,

One pair black plain shoes size 8 for the use of,

Two utility jackets for the use of.....next!

I didn't realise it at the time but a few weeks later I would be in QM store issuing kit to the Peanuts (New Intakes).

From this point forward school was full on, learning a whole new world and nomenclature. The first 3 weeks concentrated on boat safety, survival at sea and general seamanship which resulted in a Board of Trade exam having to be passed before we could continue onto our selected professional learning.

Within these first few weeks the whole process sorted out, the guys who wanted to be there and the guys who just weren't ready for this kind of disciplined environment with a new found independence from home. Having to take responsibility for our actions and then looking to the next guy and not letting him or ourselves down.



Within these first few weeks friendships were also made. Derek Smith from Bournemouth who I first met at the station and a guy by the name of David Bell who came from Bearsden in Glasgow were the closest friends I made. The three of us were virtually inseparable; David Bell, a well spoken Glaswegian was our interpreter for a couple of guys from Aberdeen and the Shetlands. These guys just couldn't be understood, even the instructors had trouble with the guy from Aberdeen, who spoke so fast and with a near Celtic tongue we were going to need time to attune our ears to his brogue.

This was the first time most of us had ventured further than ten miles away from our homes, so naturally it was a culture shock for us all. Dave translated everything the guys from Aberdeen said to us, though it didn't take long until his accent flattened and his tongue became slower, however when he became agitated he would be off gibbering again.

One day while we were putting the life boats back on the davits and clearing down, the guy from Aberdeen slipped and fell into the river, he started gibbering and waving his arms in the air. That was it; we just fell about laughing, we couldn't understand anything he was saying; only one word was clearly understood "bastards". We pulled him out and got him back inside and warmed up, but we still couldn't understand a word he was saying, however he did calm down enough to be understood.

Another buddy was a guy by the name of Roger Cocker, from Essex, who was in another dormitory to us. When I was leaving the sea school we said our good byes to Roger and Dave, certain in the knowledge that we'd bump into each other on our travels. Derek accompanied me up to London, crossing the Thames to Tilbury before catching the train to London and then Bournemouth where he would wait for instructions from Shaw Savill. I was heading to the London Pool and had no idea what the hell would happen next. Again, saying our goodbyes and expecting to see each other later, I left him at the station and headed for the Pool.



Once at Prescott Street Pool, I was called into one of the back offices. I handed over my documentation which was reviewed, and I was asked where I would like to go?

"Somewhere hot I think. Australia would be nice!"

"OK, there's a ship coming into the Royal Albert docks on Sunday named MV Otaki which belongs to NZSCo, how does that sound", asked the official?

"Great," says I.

He handed me my joining papers saying, "Here you go, report to the Chief Steward on Sunday."

The ship's arrival date allowed me a week at home before I had to join her, which would allow me time with friends and to get myself together. I left the pool and headed for home, I don't think my feet touched the ground on that journey home. By 14:00 that afternoon I had finished my training at Gravesend, gone to London, been given a ship and was waiting to head out to the big blue and Australia, and was now on my way home!

Telling my parents what was about to happen, Dad was over the moon, but Mum was very subdued about the whole thing.

Sunday arrived cold and bright. Dad asked if I wanted him to accompany me down to the ship? "No," I said, I felt that I should do this by myself, "I can handle it." I said my goodbyes and let the folks know that I would call them when I knew what was happening. It was time to leave. I made my way off to London, across town on the underground to Stratford and then a bus to the Albert Docks, which dropped me off directly outside the dock gates. I had never seen anything like the docks in my life before. There were ships, barges, people, and trucks everywhere, a hive of industry moving around me at speed, while everything I

seemed to be doing was in slow motion. I looked on in complete awe of these new sights that were unfolding in front of me. I spoke to the policeman, who was on gate duty, "Can you tell me where the MV Otaki is berthed?" "She ain't in son, she won't be in until next week." "There must be some mistake, the Pool instructed me to join her today".

"Okay let me check with the office", he says, picking up the phone. "I have a lad down here with orders to join the Otaki, OK, I'll send him up." "Alright son, you need to go up to the office. Up the road to the building on the left, the one with the Federal NZS sign above it."

I followed the policeman's instructions, struggling to carry my heavy suitcase to the office. The guy at the office informed me that the Otaki wouldn't be in until Monday or Tuesday and the best thing for me to do, was to go home again and call the office in the morning, to see if she had arrived. I was told that I could leave my suitcase at the office, to save me carrying it back and forth. "Thanks I'll do that and I'll call you tomorrow," I said.

The next day I phoned the office and they informed me that, Otaki still wasn't in, however she was in the River and would be docking later that night. They also instructed me not to bother leaving home until the afternoon, so as to allow time for the crew to pay off.

The next day my Dad and younger brother decided to accompany me. Dad was really impressed with the ship and I left him and my brother having a good look round while I went over to the office to retrieve my bag. When I arrived back on board, I was sure that Dad was trying to sign on too, and was offering to throw my brother in for free! The Chief Steward welcomed me aboard and asked a young lad to show me to where the catering boy's cabin was, while he continued chatting with my Dad. Once in my cabin, I stowed my kit and reported back to the Chief Steward. "OK" says the chief, "see your Dad ashore and say your goodbyes then turn to in the galley." I walked back to the gates with my Dad and brother and said tarra, once again confirming that I'd let them know what was happening as soon as I found out. As I was walking up the gangway, I thought to myself, "Now the adventure begins!"

Footnote: To this day I haven't seen any of the guys since leaving the sea school. I guess our travels were just too far and wide. Derek did try getting in touch with me while I was away at sea, but I didn't get a number to get back to him. It was while I was looking on the "All at Sea" web site that I saw an old mug shot of Roger Cocker which jumped out at me. Immediately my mind went back to the 8th January 1971, the day I left Gravesend. That was some 35 years ago.....where does all the time go? I managed to contact Roger via email and we have also talked on the phone, sharing some memories but as yet failing to get together.