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## **My National service**

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In recent years David Candlin and Ian Archer have published accounts in PROA Log of their two years with the R.N., back in the times when such service was compulsory for any fit young man. I hope I can produce something half as interesting.

Like them, I'm relying in large part on the journal we had to keep as evidence of our suitability for a commission. I found re-reading it some 60 years later nostalgic, as I'm sure did David and Ian. But also embarrassing, because of my all-too-transparent efforts to display O.L.Q.s --- Officer-like Qualities, or 'Oily Qs' as they were nicknamed.. But interesting it could not help but be, because between 27 April 1953 when I joined and All Fools' day 1955 when I left, a lot was happening in the world.

For me 1953 had already been an exciting year. Soon after my 18th birthday, I had been interviewed as a potential officer at Lee-on-Solent, and as potential aviator at RAF Biggin Hill. There they had found me adequate in mind and limb, but with an optical defect that ruled me out for acceptance as a pilot. Many friends since have deemed that to have been a blessing, saving the taxpayer many a bent aeroplane. For me the solace was an explanation of why on the cricket field I had been tolerably successful in the slips, but hopeless as an out-fielder -- I would fail to see the ball between when it left the bat and when it wizzed past me or, worse, made painful contact with some unprepared part of my anatomy. News of my acceptance for observer training had arrived on the 5<sup>th</sup> March; I know the date so precisely because it coincided with Stalin's death, which my mother seemed to think more exciting. I was designated as a NSUY(A) -- National Service Upper Yardman (Air).

So off to Lee on the 27th April, armed with nothing more than a travel warrant and such personal necessities as could be packed in an old gas-mask case; this was at the behest of the joining instructions which advised --nay ordered -- that we would be posting our civilian goods and chattels back home as soon as we had been issued with our Pusser's kit. This was to

include everything from boots to cap-tally, and included a 'hussif' which I use to this day when darning my socks. I still may also be using some outdated nautical terminology, so readers under fifty may want to consult Google.

I remember my first three weeks in the Navy with more terror than many claim to remember their first days at school. I never seemed to get to the right place at the right time in the right rig, which was habitually creased in the wrong places -- my mother had forbidden my use of her iron even when I had my CCF uniform to press. But my mess-mates were a helpful lot, and our instructors, well, very human. I can still hear in my mind's ear our C.P.O. barking 'Bedwell - scranbag - re-muster' after a single glance at my kit, laid out for its first inspection. But he knew he had a shared secret with many of us; these were the innocents who were naive enough to reply 'No, Chief' when he had asked 'any of you lads smoke?', to which of course he rejoined 'Right then, I'm having your tobacco coupons'. He would be over 90 by now, so he's probably had his eight bells; if so, may he be in some Caribbean heaven where rum and 'baccy' flow and grow like the proverbial milk and honey.

Back to 1953. My journal shows our class to have joined the Training Fleet in Portland on 18 May, my half to HMS Implacable. I judged it would do my promotion prospects no harm to mention that she was not my first carrier; in 1944 my older brother and I had returned to the U.K. in HMS Thane, having been evacuated to the U.S. four years earlier. (The full story was reported in the PROA Log of ...). From then till the time I was discharged -- or should I say "appointed"? -- to observer training most of my entries relate to the Queen's Coronation. I duly recorded how I managed to get there in person for this historical event, including spotting on the train the headline 'Everest Conquered' in another passenger's paper. I also noted that while HMQ herself was almost hidden inside her carriage, two other figures for me stole the show: first, Winston Churchill in a Tricorn hat gamely controlling his beautiful but restless white horse, -- *panache* in both senses --, and second the larger-than-life Queen of Tonga in her open landau, apparently reveling in the rain. But some other memories were kept secret from my journal, such as how I had bent the rules to get leave for the event in the first place. These rules were that to qualify, a member of Ship's company had to have either (a) a reserved seat in the stands or (b) a relation owning a TV set and living within 25 miles

of Southampton, where Implacable had by then moved. As I had neither, I stuttered out to the Divisional CPO a story about an invented uncle in London with a T.V. . Of course Chief was not remotely taken in by this, and told me in no uncertain terms that 'if, Bedwell, you are going to tell lies, I ain't taking responsibility for them!' In the event I settled on an apocryphal T.V.-owning uncle in Portsmouth as an alibi that would be more difficult to test.

More squeamish still do feel in now writing about how my day ended. Arriving back in Southampton with an hour or two to spare before leave expired, I found a cafe and sat down to fish and chips. Near me was the Leading Writer who, shortly after our class joined Implacable, had explained his part-of-ship during our familiarization tour. I attempted conversation. He may not have recognized me in person, but with my posh accent and a white band under my cap-tally, I was a sitting target for his vociferous resentment. To make matters worse, after he had stormed out a motherly lady came up to me and asked sympathetically "He wasn't very nice, was he dear? Is he in the same boat as you? ". I burst into tears.

If life thereafter was inevitably to be less dramatic, still to come was the Spithead Review, when we were out an anchor among so many other ships that it seemed there would no room left for HMY Britannia to steam past. But that she did, with HMQ just visible to acknowledge our hip-hip-hurrahs (not 'Hoorays', as our Chief had impressed on us). Ashore, there was a variety of foreign sailors, many in uniforms so grandiose that I felt it safest to salute any of them passing within a hundred yards; in my journal I made a comparison to the Scouts' Jamboree I had attended back in 1951. Back on board, I recollect but did not record my terror on being sent out to paint one of the ship's booms; once out beyond the stay, there was nothing but the boom itself to hold onto. This I did shamelessly, besmirching for all time with Admiralty grey my newly issued blue ovies.

We slipped moorings on a date I somehow failed to record, but from mid-June my journal becomes a less interesting read. The officers assessing our entries were not expected to be interested in events in the ship's routine, but rather in evidence of what we were learning outside the class room, including any nautical news we could glean from the newspapers. These, I suppose but don't remember, were available in the ship's library. Thus I tried to comment intelligently on the report that, of the huge Russian

submarine fleet, only about 60 were seaworthy, while in the next sentence offered the self-recriminating comment that I 'did badly at discipline', the term then used for marching and arms drill. There were also references to HMS Nelson, then a seagoing ship in action off the coast of North Korea, as well as to the re-naming of the Royal Naval Air Service as the Fleet Air Arm. Unrecorded memories turn on the lack of privacy and comfort in the crowded messdeck, the most draconian rule being a ban on slinging our hammocks during make-and-mends. This we could do only after 'Pipe Down', when tempers would sometimes flare; on one occasion, I remember, the sophisticates in the class decided to smoke and play bridge, perceived as an officers' game. We served by rotation as Upper Yardmen of the watch, and I learned in no uncertain manner that having been on middle watch was no excuse for nodding off in the classroom next morning – "Stand up!" was the unequivocal remedy. In my later life as a lecturer, I often wished that I could command such authority over my students.

But there were happy memories too, such as the Spithead *Revue* (sic) which was staged in the upper hanger before leaving Portsmouth. It was predictably a parody of HMS Pinafore, and I presume that an R.N. ship was excepted from the copyright restrictions that then applied to Savoy operettas. I recall one of the younger Engineer Officers singing to thunderous applause a solo that was way more risqué than anything Gilbert ever wrote. Other diversions were Sunday church, which offered for the godly and ungodly alike an escape from more menial duties and on one occasion the showing of the film *The Cruel Sea*. This had then only just been released, and while hardly amusement, no doubt brought trenchant memories to many of our instructors, while reminding us trainees of how safe and comfortable we were by comparison.

Being at sea in itself brought excitement that my wartime experience had not blunted. For since then I had never been north of Watford nor as far west as Cornwall; I mention this because I got a privileged view of Land's End when skulking at a scuttle I was supposed to be polishing. Our cruise was to take us round mainland Britain, though we NSUYs were to be discharged at Rosyth, hopefully as Midshipmen or Sub Lieutenants. On the way, Implacable had two points of call, the Isle of Arran in the Firth of Clyde, and the second in Scapa Flow. My journal records that at the first we took part in a 'delightfully chaotic' whaler race, a description which

drew the scorn of the monitoring officer. My more significant memory is of lunching in the island's main hotel, which cost more than a day's pay, and raised some eyebrows among the party of ship's officers at an adjacent table; they of course were in plain clothes while we were in uniform. But perhaps we at least showed them we knew how to hold our knife/fork/spoon, while enjoying food incomparably better than we had on board, and indeed, better than in most parts of a still-rationed Britain. My memories of Scapa are more vague, betraying a lamentable ignorance of naval history and finding only a Jack's canteen wherein to fill my face.

Soon after our arrival at Rosyth, we were interviewed – or did we say 'boarded'? - for our commissions. Again I have to rely on memory for precise dates, but I have vivid memories of the interview itself and of the aftermath. The Captain beckoned me to a seat, but I mistook his gesture for the offer of a handshake, which made a bad start. He and his two assisting officers were however relaxed and made me feel as comfortable as the circumstances allowed. When asked in later years what questions I was asked, I have habitually replied ...

....'As officer of the day.

(1) How many cannon would you fire if a Vice-consul Plenipotentiary were coming on board?', and

(2) what action would you take if two men were found sharing a hammock?'

I presumably I gave the right answers, the first being '17', and the second a longer explication that included the term 'unnatural offence'. My account may be apocryphal, but both topics had been covered in our instruction, irrelevant as they were to any of my subsequent experience in a blue suit. My most uncomfortable recollection was of the one classmate who failed the board, and I see him now scuttling up the ladder when the rest of us had been directed to an adjacent lobby. For some reason he'd joined us not at Lee but in Implacable, and I'd not got to know him well. He'd already started his career as music critic with a provincial paper; I've often wondered since if this had made him an oddity among his largely public-school and philistine classmates.

From this date on my journal becomes of less interest. This for at least two of reasons: we were thenceforth required to make entries only once week, and as aviators we spent most of our time on shore stations where life is inevitably more routine, if no less exciting for a boy not six months out of

school. While the pilots went off to Siskin (later, HMS Sultan in Gosport) for their initial air training, the four observers among us were dispatched to Cornwall, initially to St Merryn near Padstow, and then to RNAS Seahawk Culdrose, near Helston -- where, readers will know, it remains to this day. Although I'd spent half-an-hour in a de Havilland Rapide as the highlight of a Scout visit to Lee the previous year, my familiarization flight in a Sea Prince was the first time I'd been airborne in long trousers. On both occasions I distinguished myself by being air-sick

Although air-sickness remained a continuing weakness and potential threat to my success as an observer, I look back on my time in Cornwall as one of comfortable routine and relative luxury. A bed in a Nissen Hut -- albeit in a shared 'cabin' -- was a considerable advance over a hammock, while the food in the Gunroom was copious, if not quite up to Mum's standard. Readers may muse that stews and suet puddings were not the most sensible preludes to an afternoon in a light aircraft flying low-level in one of the stormier parts of the Kingdom -- but however badly I treated my stomach, I was very fond of it, as I remain in my 81st year!

The Observers' School instructors kept us busy, the day beginning with P.E. and 'Buzzer' (Morse Code) either side of breakfast, and ending with parade training in the dog-watches. In the first term we even had classes on Saturday mornings, but to enliven our leisure hours there was a regular Pusser's bus service into neighbouring towns. Best of all, many of the older members of the course had cars, essential in those pre-breathalyzer days for visiting the village pubs for which Cornwall was renowned. I should explain that these 'older' men -- some admitting to 26 -- were mainly permanent-service Upper Yardmen, ranging from a hard-nosed Leading Writer RAN to a Chief Artificer (Air); as I recall, they all messed together with us Midshipmen in what had been designated as the 'Half-Deck', though in practice referred to as the Gunroom. The few Sub-Lieutenants and the one Surgeon Lt among us were in the Wardroom, whence they leaked any 'buzzes' circulating round the station. They were even more valuable in knocking some worldly wisdom into us spotty youths; the most colourful character among them was a life-loving MG-owning Chief Aircraft Handler who confessed ruefully that he'd once spent 'time over the wall' in Portsmouth Detention Quarters after a fracas with some Officer of the Day; fittingly, he was to end his R.N. career as Commander i/c that very place.

Many of these messmates I was to lose touch with after May 1954, when we were awarded our 'wings' and sent to be trained for our various specializations. For us National Service men it was Hobson's Choice: anti-submarine, which took us to RNAS Eglinton in County Derry. Although this was before the worst of the Irish troubles, we found social life there dull compared to Cornwall; pubs were more like drinking holes, and allowed ladies in only if escorted by a male; this necessarily made ladies difficult to find for a shy nineteen-year old. But professionally there was progress; we were now in the single-engined battle-hardened Firefly operating over the less balmy waters of St. George's Channel. We were generally exercised in tracking a notional 'Orange Forces' submarine sent out from Londonderry Dockyard for the purpose. The sub would obligingly delay diving until she had spotted one of us patrolling aircraft; we would then be ordered to a specific point ahead of her probable track, there to drop a sonobuoy, and listen out for tell-tale propeller noise. For the life of me, I can't remember how we avoided mid-air collisions, but I do recall tales of buoys being trawled out of the water before an exercise had finished. This would be detected by Irish voices coming over the airwaves from fishermen who earned handsome rewards for returning these costly items to the MOD.

Although I wasn't to know it then, my flying time was coming to an end, even though I was barely half way through my two years' service. Looking back, we know that between the end of the Korean war and the building of the Berlin Wall was a period of comparative peace and a reduced defense budget. So from Eglinton I was first sent on leave long enough for me to get a job as a 'gardener's boy', thereby adding happily if illegally to the funds I could enjoy at university later on. This was followed by two sea-going familiarization 'jollies', the first in a Castle-class corvette operating out of Portland, and after a time back in Eglinton as a supernumary with 814 squadron, in *Illustrious*. She was not of course the *Invincible*-class carrier that was to operate Harriers for some 32 years,; 'my' *Illustrious* was a WWII veteran due to be paid off the next year. It proved a memorable period for three reasons: one was that it coincided with my promotion to S/Lt, so with the Mess President's permission I was able to celebrate by standing drinks – duty-free, of course -- to the mainly Canadian pilots who were 'going to the deck' for the first time. These chaps also provided the substance of my second reason in giving me the only opportunity in my

career to witness fixed-wing deck operations. There were no serious accidents, though I remember one undercarriage failure, and more vividly, the Commander (Air)'s censorious declamation at the de-brief that 'Mr X is lucky to remain alive'. This was in reference to the pilot who'd broken one of the fundamentals of deck-landing; 'when signaled to cut the engine, CUT!' In those days, as older readers will know, that signal was given visually by the batsman (*sic*) who was posted perilously by the round-down for the purpose. I still have a photograph of the Firefly climbing at a vicious angle towards the island, which invokes numerous invectives and the term 'torque stall' when shown to seasoned pilots.

The third reason that I remember *Illustrious* so well is that we experienced weather which was heavy even for November. During the 26<sup>th</sup>, in the Channel, the South Goodwin Lightship broke loose from her moorings, losing the lives of all but one of the crew. David Candlin gave us a fuller account of this tragedy, though I recall with some disagreement about dates. *Illustrious* was in the relatively sheltered waters of the Irish Channel, but we had to spend an uncomfortable two days patrolling around the separated halves of the tanker *World Concord*. Google records that there were no serious injuries, and the two halves were satisfactorily re-joined and remained in service until 1974.

After Christmas leave, with a number of my ex-NSUY contemporaries, I was sent to Ford, a place in Sussex that has since earned some notoriety as an open prison, but was then a naval air station hosting one or more R.N. squadrons as well as the RNVR Channel Air Division. The notional intention was that we should serve alongside the part-time aviators at week-ends, taking our leave mid-week. In practice, and not unreasonably, the seasoned people took priority while they were there, the aircraft being serviced Monday to Friday. So not surprisingly, I logged only some 20 hours in those last three months of my full-time service, most of these as a mere passenger. Flights I remember are one in a Vampire, my one and only time in a service jet aircraft, and two in Fireflies with Brian Calvert, then another Sub/Lieutenant but subsequently Captain of the BOAC Concorde Fleet. Like so many of my contemporaries, Brian is no longer with us, but I did meet him again some years later in President when he was the guest of our own Jeanette Hartley.

I remained attached to Channel Air Division until its closure at the



beginning of 1957, but during that time was either working abroad or at university. I did get in a little more air time, once or twice in Gannets, then the latest in anti-submarine warfare, but my commitment was insufficient to earn me a permanent commission.

That was a privilege that had to wait till I volunteered my services to President in 1960. I was by no means confident of success, for while the mantra drilled into us in Implacable was that we were to be 'officers, first – seamen second – and aviators by sub-specialization – the truth was the reverse. But I buffed up sufficiently on my 'fishead' knowledge, so a week after my interview with Commodore Noble, no less, I received an impressive scroll confirming my commission, This was as a Lieutenant (E), on the questionable basis that by then I had reached 25 and received a Bachelor of Arts in mechanical science.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history, and is too recent and too well remembered in President circles to risk recording here. In my subsequent thirty years in the RNR I made many awful mistakes, but even more wonderful friends. Patient readers, I salute you.

Mike Bedwell