

My Memories of being a Royal Naval Schoolmaster

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It's quite a task now in 2020 to call up memories of the Summer of 1945's Schoolmaster RN Course in HMS *Vernon* II & III, then the official names as I recall them of the two elderly battleships, HMS *Malaya* and HMS *Ramillies* which, having been decommissioned, were moored against each other on the mud of Fareham Creek. I believe that, after their time as accommodation ships to *Vernon* their final moves were to the Breakers' Yards.



Schoolmaster Class of 1945 aboard HMS *Malaya*

The Schoolmaster Candidates' Course which I attended was held in *Malaya* both for instruction and accommodation. The latter was in the old Midshipmen's flat which was close to the normal waterline, with welded scuttles, bad air circulation, and damp inner hull for all the attempts which had been made (historically) to reduce condensation by using copious amounts of cork-added paint. The old fitted furniture was in good shape however, and the folding copper wash-basin, and polished copper jugs, etc., were a credit to their makers, which incidentally, could have been made by my own coppersmith relatives at Gorseinon, Swansea, known as "Copperopolis" to the entire world.

The course must have taken place between the 8th May (VE Day) and 15th August 1945 (VJ Day) for I know I was at Royal Naval Barracks (RNB) Devonport on the first of those dates and was billeted at Goodwood House (stables!) on the second date. My hazy recollection is of a course lasting about four to six weeks.

Of my fellow-students, the five or six RNZN "Candidates" were most impressive. They played good rugby. They "took their drink" sensibly and never upset anyone, but nevertheless they were hard contemporaries to keep up with on evenings and weekends when they (and we) were drawn to the Southsea pub which just happened to be near the Pendragon hostel (the WRNS Quarters)!

Indeed, I was so "bushed" one Saturday, that I chose to skip lunch and have a good long therapeutic sleep. I missed dinner also but, when I did wake I panicked, convinced that I had missed the pipe-call to Sunday Morning Divisions. Perhaps I could arrive late and slip in to the rear rank. Complete silence reigned in our virtually sealed cocoon and, in my mind, all other residents of the midshipmen's flat were up there on the quarterdeck parading properly. Cursing the steward for leaving cold water only, I shaved hurriedly, threw on my uniform and, clutching my new leather gloves, I rushed up the ladders and stepped out on deck.....only to see very thin slivers of dawn breaking in the sky. The Corporal of The Gangway viewed me strangely and said "There's no boat for shore, sir, until oh-seven-double-oh". Flummoxed, I thanked him and "paced the teak" for a while, and for effect.... then slunk below in order to start the morning again, and to be first back on deck when the real Divisions pipe was called.

I suppose the historic term 'Schoolmaster Candidate' allowed The Admiralty to dispense with one's services if one was found lacking in any way. As far as I know, no-one failed the Course, but there may have been special circumstances about our being there in the first place. The War in Europe had drawn to a successful conclusion, and the Admiralty had to plan (as had the other two Services also) for a very large number of "Hostilities Only" personnel who expected to be discharged into "civvy street". Their future was being taken very seriously by the Churchill/Attlee Governments, maybe for voting potential, which then went for Attlee on the 5th July 1945. But advance measures had been taken well before this to reorganise or recruit personnel to fill new instructional and development posts intended to advise and train the thousands of anticipated "leavers". Our Schoolmaster RN Course reflected young men (I was only 20+ yrs old at that stage) who were unlikely to become low-level Education Officers teaching Boy Seamen in capital ships. It seemed to me that we all had above average OLQ (officer-like-qualities) and we all seemed able to manage men.

I might have had a slight advantage in this respect due to my previous NCO status in the RAF's Air Training Corps, ratings' field-training at GOSLING V, and additional general duties whilst for several months I served at The Depot School, RNB Devonport. These latter duties had included by short roster all-night watch-keeping at Stoke Damerel School, Devonport, which was in use as a barracks for ratings from Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS). With plenty of testosterone "on board", I tried to show that the blue and gold "shoelace" on my uniform sleeve was not as new as it looked; especially-so early one afternoon as I passed a public-house at the lower end of Stoke Hill. Through the pub's open door I saw a group of matelots "knocking seven bells out of each other" and a

distraught publican watching his furniture flying around. My rising temptation was to disappear sharply and let them carry on with it, but was I being watched myself? I realised I had to get inside and stop the fight somehow. So, trying to look larger than I was, I found a good parade-voice and shouted "Stop! Stand just where you are!" (or some such words) and was surprised when it worked. My own lower-deck time reminded me of a Pay-book's identity value so, with another parade-ground bark, I ordered, "Pay-books to me please!", and surprisingly the four matelots did so. I managed, "Tidy up the furniture, and you'll get your pay-books back in due course," but I still wanted to disappear and have no repercussions. The nearby Dockyard Gate seemed to beckon a solution to me and, crossing over to the Dockyard Police Post, I handed in the pay-books as "Found, please return to the respective ships". So, as far as I know, the event ended as well as I could have expected, and this is the first time I've ever written up the occasion for someone else to read!

And so back to the Schoolmaster Course. The themes of those days were Educational Vocational Training (EVT) and Resettlement, all very much "on-the-job" measures. Even so, I remember nothing of receiving remark or comment about them on the course. I do remember sessions about Magnetism and Electricity and about the 'The Post Office Box,' a theory and device for using cross-section area of a conductor of known length to help find a hidden break in continuity. It seems that in 2020 no Royal Mail engineer, or anyone else, can remember The Post Office Box. Elementary coastal navigation was demonstrated from admiralty charts with some easy plots, but I do not recollect using equipment other than dividers and a parallel ruler. There was a little mathematics, and a little talk about ships' code-books. We were left to deduce for ourselves RN procedures, mainly by uniform inspections, Sunday Morning Divisions, and saluting anyone with more arm-braid than our own 'shoelaces' (but not 'under a deck-head'). It seemed also to be almost a religion that one should get into a boat, lowest rank first, thus allowing the most senior rank to disembark first.

My First Appointment – The Royal Marines

At the end of the Schoolmaster Candidates' Course the Staff assured us that our choice of appointment would be taken into account. The first to be read out was "RM Engineers?" and I raised an arm for selection; too late because someone else (unseen by me) was chosen. Then it came: "And RMs for you too, Roach. Headquarters Commando Group, Petworth."

And so began my career with the Royal Marines, then largely supervising mixed Army and RM headquarters ranks as they shared wood-working on a couple of carpenters' benches, and others who had obtained correspondence courses. I was soon in trouble over both groups. Complaints kept coming back to the

Deputy Assistant Adjutant Quartermaster General (DAAQMG) from the senior chaplain (later to become Bishop of Bermuda) who made frequent tours to UK hospitals where commando soldiers and marines were under long-term treatment but were often waiting for correspondence-course material. My superior, Senior Schoolmaster C. Huggard (in civilian life, Headmaster of a large London School) and I would have been able to deal with such complaints promptly. Instead I had first to receive frequent criticism 'from above.'

The same DAAQMG objected to the exhibition of woodworking and craft items which I had set up in the black-and-white tiled hallway of Lavington House, Group HQ itself, but owned by the Black and White Whisky family. "Get rid of it now!" came explosively from this eminent City Solicitor doing wartime service as a senior staff officer. Incidentally, he later became Chief Commoner of The City and his and my paths crossed on a number of occasions, but not again explosively!

The woodworkers never knew that the admirable Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) borrowed some of our tools for an urgent post-mortem examination when his own shiny, silvery ones were not available.

I recall Gunner Doyle, the middle-aged Messman at Burton Park House, 'B Mess' for junior HQ staff. His breakfasts were noted for frequent inclusion of elvers, and surprisingly roast pheasant appeared occasionally for dinner. It seems that Doyle knew of a sluice which he could finesse to hold back the tiny eels for his bucket. And he claimed that a sick-bay chloroform pad on a long stick stupefied the birds as they roosted, taking them to his bag when they fell. I must have been too junior to have a place at the table when Earl Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations came to B Mess for what Doyle considered a Mess Dinner. It seems that six-foot-barrack-room tables, covered with bedsheets, took up most of the room, and fold-flat chairs must have provided the tightly arranged seating. Apparently, there was little room for mess-servants to serve, and Doyle helped by placing the first soup in front of the Admiral. Helpfully it seems, Mountbatten raised his spoon, probably to signal that all should start the meal as soon as they received it, but before it touched the Admiral's lips, it seems that Doyle's urgent call could be heard as, "No, No, Sir! Please pass it up."

But Doyle was still in post when I left B Mess, and Group Headquarters, on my way to Goodwood House Grounds, the location of Holding Commando (Light), and the nascent unit for a commando training centre intended for Lake Beale, North India, and the anticipated Operation Zipper, the relief of S.E. Asia. The nuclear bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima intervened and the Lake Beale training Centre never materialised. HC (Light) was broken up and I found myself in 45 Commando RM instead, which service I enjoyed.

We were based initially at Slinfold Camp, and I arrived there with trepidation, as the very first RN Education Officer appointed to a Commando Unit. I had heard of "Joey", the RM 2nd Lieutenant, getting constant ribbing in both wardrooms and ships, and feared that by my 'shoelace braid and blue' I would receive a bad time of it. I could not have been more wrong. My first Commanding Officer was Lt Col T.M. Gray, DSO, MC, and he made it clear to his officers that I was to be welcomed into the 45 Commando family. He expected the RSM and Senior NCOs to behave similarly and I have no recollection of ever being shunned or "side-lined". Within weeks (and a couple of cross-country runs) Colonel "Tim" declared that all personnel, including the Chaplain and Schoolie, would wear the green beret and that was how we would board HMS *Rajah* for Hong Kong. This was just Colonel Tim's style. He made firm decisions, was completely trustworthy and always showed a friendly disposition. From the beginning we two RN people always attended his Order Groups along with the Second in Command, Adjutant and Troop Commanders, always as equals. Our Doctor of course exceeded us all. He was the brave Captain John Tulloch of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), who had a Military Cross, which many thought should have been a Victoria Cross. His green beret had been in battle, for the habit of the Commandos was (and still is) to wear the beret instead of a steel helmet in action.

45 Commando RM had transitioned as a complete unit from 101 RM Brigade, not as individual Army and RM personnel who trained on specialist commando courses on a volunteer basis. This difference persisted for years as grounds for the criticism of RM Commandos by earlier Army Commando Soldiers. Valour and proven experience on the part of RM Commandos, as well as the passage of time, have now reduced such criticism to a minimum.

The untimely death of Lt. Colonel T.M. GRAY, DSO, MC, from a medical condition in 1960, soon after he left Command of The Officers' School RM, denied the Corps of an undoubtedly able Commandant General. I enjoyed his friendship and style during the years when he was my commanding officer in 45 Commando.

Hong Kong

Then came HMS *Rajah* and the voyage to Hong Kong. The luxury of that shop-front office in The Peninsula Hotel did not last long, and the Brigade Education Office soon reappeared with other Bde HQ offices at commandeered buildings in Mody Road. Losing the services of Miss Amy Lim, a secretary provided along with the Peninsula's shop/office, was a loss even though we had only depended on her for location directions, handling the telephone, and making coffee! Before we left The Peninsula, we visited their club and had our first 'Cheesy Hammy Egg Toppies.' My children have enjoyed them ever since.

The advantage of the Mody Road location was that my fellow schoolmaster, A.E Curtis and I (and most other staff officers) could easily stroll over to The Dairy Farm in Nathan Road for stand easy. It was the only air-conditioned location in Kowloon, and they also made ice-cold milk drinks very quickly.

I had spent some time arranging cultural contacts for our Marines with the New Territory Chinese. In detail these subjects had been social as well as educational, for they dealt with death, and it was very important that our Marines did not upset the local Chinese. Earthenware pots arranged on a hillside contained ancestors' remains, removed there after burials several years earlier, and on no account were they to be moved or desecrated. Men in red and white clothes, running intermittently whilst carrying a pole-load covered by red and white sheets, could suddenly dart from one side of the road to the other. There would be a burial party in Chinese mourning colours trying to throw off unwelcome devils, and our Marines had to understand and be respectful of these scenes at all times; laughter was certainly not permissible.

But a whimsical event did refer to the first of 3 Commando Brigade's troops to arrive in the recaptured colony as they marched through Kowloon. Expecting cheers, the men had difficulty keeping good marching order because the crowd just pointed at them and laughed. Hours later came an explanation. In a Chinese village a cuckolded man was ridiculed for being unable to keep his wife with affection, and the mark of ridicule was to make the cuckolded man wear a green hat. And here were hundreds of Europeans, all wearing green head-cover!

When 45 Commando arrived later we too marched up Nathan Road, Kowloon, to the commandeered Diocesan School which housed us all. Unfortunately the whole place and staff were much less than hygienic and Col. Tim tried his best to have the area policed more effectively, but it was not before the unit had an outbreak of really serious dysentery, myself included, and the affliction called for strong thighs over the noisome 'holes in the ground.' We were all glad to leave the area.

I recall now that in 1945, and still feeling the effects of Japanese occupation, of the then three million population of Victoria, Hong Kong Island's main city, one million had to sleep on covered pavements in front of shops. It would be many years before improvements came. Naturally, the extreme poverty brought with it criminal activity, notably theft often skilfully designed. When we left the Diocesan School for Castle Peak, a mainly tented camp, we suffered much theft before learning more secure ways of living. Thieving was admired by New Territories Chinese and they practiced it simply, or by probing buildings or tents with long poles joined scissors-like to lift property silently and from a

distance. Trained monkeys could burgle efficiently for their masters, and there was instance of an entire guard-tent being released of its pegging, lifted from its poles, and taken away. The story concluded with "and the Guard slept on," but I think that was apocryphal in order to annoy 40 Cdo, then occupying Castle Peak Camp after us.

40 Cdo appears just here because it became so after the renaming of 44 Cdo which latterly in the war had fought so well in Burma. Thus originated today's 3 Cdo Brigade of 3 full-size units: 40 Cdo representing 2 Cdo Bde's activities especially in Italy and The Balkans; 42 Cdo representing the 3 Cdo Bde of the SE Asia campaign; and 45 Cdo representing the 1 and 4 Cdo Brigades which had operated in the European Theatre.

Before leaving Castle Peak the elders of Yuen Long gave a lunch party for 45's officers, where we learnt much of Chinese hospitality. A large circular table carried identical dishes accessible to everyone. There were no choices, just a recommended dish, and chopsticks! But as soon as dishes were cleared another set were brought out, and it went on and on before we realised that, as long as we ate, new dishes would keep appearing, and so would the rice-wine too. To this day, "Yama" calls for a compulsory sip to greet the caller. But "Yam Singa" means the greeting has to be a continuous drink until both glasses are empty. Eventually Colonel Tim managed to persuade the hosts that, out of all our much-appreciated humility the meal should come to an end, although the latter part of the meal was hazy for us all. I can just recall a troop of girls, seating themselves one to each officer-lap, cleaning us up with warm damp flannels.

My service in Hong Kong was split frequently between my parent unit 45 Cdo and Brigade HQ. Sensibly, the Brigade Commander circulated his main troops to give everyone as much experience as possible. A Commando would spend about three months in each of Fan Ling, close to the Chinese border, Murray Barracks on Hong Kong Island, and Gun Club Hill Barracks in Kowloon. Murray Barracks was old Victorian. Gun Club was more colonial being intended originally for Indian Army troops, especially The Maharajah of Jaipur's Guards and their families.

Whatever had been the tactical reason for 3 Cdo Bde RM being in Hong Kong, it eventually ended and a strategic move to a more central location in the Mediterranean arose. The Hong Kong scene had been unclear anyway. There were so many essential dates to be considered. The annexation of the Island; then Kowloon up to Boundary Street, The Forbidden City (a walled city now demolished) in Kowloon which no-one relished entering, and the New Territories. There were provisions for ratifications 50 or 100 years hence. I suppose slip-ups could have been expected anywhere, so it had been handy to keep a brigade-sized force to

hand. Evidently Libya, Egypt and Palestine now had prior claim, as had the colonial responsibilities to Gibraltar, Cyprus and Malta. So began 3 Cdo Bde's presence and influence in Malta.

Malta and back to the UK

The Naval Instructor and Schoolmaster branches merged in 1946, which meant a welcome promotion for me to Instructor Lieutenant, and two gold stripes on my uniform. In Malta 45's 'home' eventually became St Patrick's Barracks but some commandeered family-married-quarters had to be taken also as officers' accommodation and Mess. The field telephone system from quarter to quarter and to St Patrick's main building was a constant problem. Poor Hugh Walters was duped into thinking a call through St Patrick's Main Building went on via Valletta to London and to the concierge of flats where his girl-friend lived. The 'concierge,' really Leslie M impersonating, gave Hugh scurrilous news of his girl-friend, and Hugh took plenty of whisky to overcome it. Grown men, often ex-Public School, can be very hurtful with their jokes and pranks.

St George's Barracks included the margins of St Andrew's, a very pleasant Officers' Mess overlooking a WD-owned Lido in the natural inlet bounded on the other side by Dragonara, the imposing Palace then owned by a principal Maltese family. The 'price to be paid' was the ancient two-storey Victorian family flats at the entrance to the Bay. The ground floor flats comprised HQ offices around a central yard. The upper-floor flats formed very basic accommodation for officers below field rank. That included my very good friend, A.E. Curtis who soon afterwards was given a UK appointment and finally left 3 Cdo Bde.

For a time, I remained firstly at Ghadira, then at St Patrick's in a more modern requisitioned family quarter, and then began again to share my duties between 45 Cdo and Brigade HQ until another Instructor Officer (also an ex-Warrant Schoolmaster) arrived to take up the appointment of Brigade Education Officer.

It was during my time at Ghadira that I met my future wife who was in the RN Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) on the staff of the Hospital at Bighi where they supplemented the QARNNS (Queen Alexandra's RN Nursing Service). We married a few years later and remain so to this day, after almost 71 yrs.

When we had arrived at Ghadira our nights were broken by frequent explosions, apparently the fireworks hobby for which the Maltese are well-known. Detective work in the village found that the delivery-postman had found a cache of shells in a rocky dump left there unwisely by a WW2 unit. The postman was not afraid to prise these open and extract the explosive mix which he used to make his bangers! A word in the Mayor's ear reduced the noise and the postman seems to have lived to a fine old age.

Perhaps to thank us, the Mayor of Mellieha invited a representative team of 45's officers to attend his daughter's wedding at that enormous and very beautiful church just off The Square. Probably with our Yuen Long experience in mind, Col. Tim got us into best uniforms, RM Officers with swords, and made us walk in a group from Ghadira Camp along the shoreline and up that tortuous, steep road to the Square. We sat in the church for the Wedding and Nuptial Mass and then joined the family in the Mayor's walled garden where, seated against the wall, we received glass after glass of whisky, but no food.

As to 3 Cdo Bde's purpose in Malta, it was much connected with US Forces who thought more full-scale amphibious landings may have to be made somewhere. Hence the large operational exercise named "Combine I" (they expected II to follow later) where a mixed fleet would land a complete military force on two adjacent beaches in Southern Sardinia which would be taken simultaneously, but withdrawal would be over the beach of the other national force. The UK Brigade Group would land light, laying beach roadways for soft-skinned vehicles and proceed inland quickly. The Americans landed heavy stuff and envisaged a large beach prison for captured 'enemy.' As usual, both were dawn landings and there was the usual excitement of splashing ashore through a barrage of (prepared) noise. Surgeon Lieutenant Hugh Walters and I were to stay in 2nd Echelon, an area close to our beach, supervising some of the forwarding of transport, ammunition and food up to 'the front.' Also, in Hugh's case, he stood by with his HQ Sick Bay Attendants (SBAs) for 'True Bill' accidents as well as the exercise-planned ones.

I was always impressed by the Brigade's forward medical arrangements, considering that the military nature of them had to be practised and used by RN SBAs who were initially trained in ship-borne emergencies. Regimental Aid Posts (RAPs), Casualty Receiving Stations (CRS) and Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS), reminded one that when land battles have casualties they usually come in large numbers. Indeed, the early RM Commando Units had RAMC Officers, until our own Surgeon Lieutenants RN volunteered and were trained in military methods. RN Medical Officers in RM Commando Units deserve more books about themselves, partly because they seem to have mixed professionalism with sometimes riotous, behaviour, not to mention their sheer bravery.

As Combine I's withdrawals started, I watched the Americans prepare their beach prison. The exercise-prisoners certainly had a rough time of it. Face down in the sand, wrists tied, their interrogations began in earnest. There must have been the usual mix-up as withdrawing troops found their groupings and the Landing Craft Infantry vessels (LCIs) which would take them out to the Tank Landing Ships (LSTs), and gradually, together with Hugh and his SBAs, we found

our way off the American beach which seemed decidedly less crowded than the British one. There seemed to be no end of Press and other observers.

The return to Malta was an LST cruise after a couple of days of shore-leave around the Bay of Naples, that exquisite Bay, but then draining away all the noxious waste of the Neapolitans.

Enjoyable though those years in Hong Kong and Malta had been, I was now keen to get back to UK and start marriage preparations. These included buying the 'blue-lined' blankets and sheets from 'slops' at Manoel Island, which I placed into my sea-chest, to protect the three-tier wedding cake which Beryl had arranged to be made by her friends at the RN Cookery School, Ricasoli. Rationing still existed in UK! There was unbelief on the face of the Customs Man at Liverpool when I declared a Wedding Cake, but he ticked the chest and I was through. "Calling The Banns" at Bickleigh Church, the almost totally deaf Vicar had great difficulty with my names "Ieuan Elfed" but (and perhaps because) no-one raised objection.

The rest of the personal bits have no place here, and my short commission at HMS *Ganges* started. 'Short' because I was selected to march in The Coronation Procession of 1953. Immediately after Coronation duty, and without continuing the commission at Shotley, I was re-appointed to The Royal Marines. I now know that this was by strong request from Colonel David Fellows, my previous Brigade Commander, who wanted me in his team at The Depot RM, Deal, as soon as he could arrange the vacancy. Those were the latter days of the unwritten policy of Senior Officers selecting their own teams. It meant that RMB Eastney was to be my base for several months whilst waiting to join the Depot RM at Deal.

I was therefore available, though not keen, to spend Stand Easy mornings at Teapot Row, which included the Major General's (MGRM) house, in order to coach the General's son in elementary Latin for his Common Entrance Examination. Beyond the Minton Coffee Service, "Lady General" had no idea that my standard of Latin was abysmal but, and perhaps by some other device, the son passed and I took the credit! There was only one other case of 'out-of-area coaching' years later, when a dear friend and my CO asked me to teach précis-writing to his daughter, a scholar at Tal Handak, Malta! I eventually got her to speak and then write in reported speech, but her resultant and satisfactory GCE précis-writing was purposefully credited to the English Specialist at Tal Handak School.

My memories as a Royal Navy Instructor Officer are recorded in a sequel to this article.

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