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Service Story of Commander Robert (Bob) Young RN

Having been born and bred in the industrial North East of England and being not particularly fond of academics, I was delighted to leave school after some very mediocre 'O level' results and be accepted as an apprentice draughtsman in a local shipyard. This proved to be just the focus in life I needed and after some first class training in the drawing office, augmented by five years of evening classes, I had acquired a Higher National Certificate in Naval Architecture and the will and determination to progress further.

Four years later, as the recent recipient of a BSc in Naval Architecture, I found myself looking to 'fly the nest' and find 'pastures new'. During this search I was particularly intrigued by an advertisement posted by the Royal Corps of Naval Constructors seeking naval architects for warship design and I eagerly started to explore this potential employment option.

Quite by chance a colleague in the shipyard design office, said he had just seen an advertisement for the position I was researching. It turned out that he had mistakenly been looking at an advertisement for 'Instructor' not 'Constructor', but nonetheless the Instructor Officer (IO) prospect peaked my interest and I duly responded to the Ministry of Defence and asked if a naval architect with a smattering of some computer programming experience would be acceptable as an IO. The answer was affirmative.

A few months later, as a newly married man, I arrived at HMS *Victory*, Royal Navy Barracks Portsmouth (now HMS *Nelson*) for a four-week Divisional Officer training course for new entry short service officers. At the end of the course, I was appointed to HMS *Caledonia*, Rosyth to instruct artificer apprentices in a host of technical subjects including 'Ship Calculations' – essentially a subset of Naval Architecture.

I can still vividly recall turning up in the academic block on my first day and being given a teaching schedule with a few days to prepare for my first time to stand in front of a class without any instructional technique training or previous teaching experience whatsoever! As luck would have it, I took to this new environment like 'a duck to water' and enjoyed the whole experience associated with the training of RN apprentices; particularly the Resource and Initiative Training (R&IT) aspects. I was also fortunate that the Senior Instructor Officer (SIO) agreed to my teaching schedule being formatted to facilitate my attendance at a weekly (half-day) computer programming course in a local Edinburgh technical college.

On reflection, my then latent interest in computer science probably helped to influence my next appointment, which was to HMS *Dryad*, where, as an instructor in the Operations Section, I taught radar theory and an 'Introduction to Computers' course. This was very much a time when computers were becoming more widely used within the UK military and certainly the Instructor Branch already had some very talented forerunners involved in this rapidly developing discipline. Having joined on a five-year short service career, as all other IOs, I was now past my three-year point and in truth hadn't really given much thought of applying for a longer commission, until one day my boss brought up the subject and it seemed that within weeks I had been offered and had accepted a Permanent Commission. At this stage of my IO career I had never had any direct dialogue with a naval appointer (and most certainly never thought that one day I would be one). This changed with my award of a Permanent Commission and a congratulatory letter from my new appointer which included a statement to the effect that he thought the best course of action would be for me to stay at HMS *Dryad* for the next couple of years! Two months later I received another letter from him saying a new complement position had been established on Flag Officer Submarines (FOSM) staff for a computer project officer to be based at the Admiralty Underwater Weapons

Establishment (AUWE), Portland and I was the 'chosen one'. So, in the summer of 1969, the Young Family headed westwards.

Evidently, the then three-phased 'master plan' was that I should: contribute to the development of a new submarine automated tactical data handling system; go to sea with the system; and then return ashore to design and implement the requisite training packages. As things transpired, the three phases of the plan did not materialize from my perspective because of system development delays. However, towards the end of the phase one period, I was sent on a short submarine training course, during which, particularly as an ex-ship designer, I was absolutely amazed at the amount of systems knowledge every submariner needed to acquire (down to each individual valve). I also discovered that being well over six feet tall was not always comfortably compatible with the space/headroom afforded by HM submarines!

Working at AUWE in a team composed of fellow RN officers, Scientific Officers and various contractors was very fulfilling and certainly helped me to learn how to work efficiently in a multi-faceted project environment. It also enabled me to travel ("flying backwards" with the RAF) for the first time ever to the USA for exchange meetings with our US Navy counterparts in Dam Neck Naval Base, Virginia (little did I know at the time that 15 years later I would be moving my family to Virginia Beach just five miles away and ultimately spending 17 happy years living on the shoreline of the beautiful Chesapeake Bay). Meanwhile back at AUWE, because the development phase was running over schedule, my boss on FOSM's staff had evidently told my appointer that I really needed to be given a sea appointment and the best way of achieving this would be to do the long Meteorology and Oceanography (METOC) course. So once again my career took me westwards, this time to the Royal Naval School of Oceanography and Meteorology (RNSOMO) at Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Culdrose in deepest Cornwall. To the best of my recollection there were about ten of us on the course; not one of whom had any previous inkling about things meteorological and most of us not particularly enjoying being complete novices. However, we had a good 'all in this together' esprit de corps and at the end of the course we were all given our first METOC sea appointments.

In my case, I was appointed to the Guided Missile Destroyer, HMS *Devonshire*, which had recently returned from an around the world deployment. We spent the next couple of years in various areas of the Western Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. One of our more memorable Mediterranean trips being the time of the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, when we assisted with the evacuation of British residents and tourists from the island.



Lt Cdr Bob Young and children on Families' Day aboard HMS *Devonshire*: Source: Bob Young

Towards the end of my time in *Devonshire*, I requested my next appointment be back in the computer sub-specialization. The Appointer said he would give it some thought and then the next thing I knew, I was to be appointed back to RNSOMO as a meteorology instructor. So once again Westward Ho!

The adage 'If you really want to learn and understand a subject thoroughly - try teaching it' certainly applied to me on my return to RNSOMO when I was suddenly no longer a student but the guy standing up front, who was supposed to know everything. Certainly, I burnt a lot of midnight and weekend oil just trying to stay 'one step ahead' of the game and trying not to be found too wanting by my fellow IOs – who just happened to be students. It was, however, good to be back in a naval aviation environment; particularly if one could keep up with the hectic and most enjoyable social life, which included the weekly (sometime five hours long) Friday happy hour! It also facilitated the occasional opportunity to provide METOC support to squadron shipborne detachments involved in major exercises. Fortunately, I do not suffer from sea sickness because these exercises normally took place in stormy seas way up North.

As ever my appointer, quoting that well known maxim, "Trust me I have your best interests at heart", informed me that in the interests of my career I really needed to have a staff job in the MOD. So, after two years in Cornwall, it was no longer Westward but 'Eastward Ho' to the halls of Whitehall and a staff officer job within the Directorate of Naval Oceanography and Meteorology (DNOM). On reflection, my appointer's crystal ball was clearer than mine, because 18 months later I was selected for promotion to Commander. What happened next was almost like 'completing the circle' because I was appointed to HMS *Fisgard*, the new-entry artificer training establishment in Torpoint, Cornwall. The difference this time was that I was no longer a first job IO but was destined to be the Training Commander in charge of all academic and workshop training. So once again Westward Ho for the Young family!

What a totally enjoyable and rewarding appointment it turned out to be. It was a privilege to head a terrific instructional staff consisting of lots of young IOs, many serving in their first naval appointment and all displaying a willingness to participate in every facet of artificer training; not just academics, but R&IT, all sports, amateur theatre etc., etc. Augmenting the younger officer element were a strong team of some 20 Civilian Instructor Officers, many of whom were ex-RN artificers who, via workshop training, engineering drawing etc., passed on their skills and experiences to the new generation.

Prior to joining *Fisgard*, my Appointer and I had discussed next job possibilities and had tentatively agreed on a married accompanied appointment to the staff of Commander-in-Chief, Iberian Atlantic Command (CINCIBERLANT), the NATO HQ in Portugal. This was a prospect that certainly pleased my wife who was very keen on an abroad tour of duty. When I next talked with my Appointer I asked him if the intended married accompanied appointment was still on the plot. His answer was yes - unless I would prefer to go to the new aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*. Naturally, I said yes, but did request my next appointment after *Invincible* would be a married accompanied one. Although he agreed, this tweak in the plan was not particularly well appreciated by my other half.

After the two years in *Fisgard*, the appointment to *Invincible* offered a real change in tempo and I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to enhance my METOC skills in a fixed wing environment. Of course, the main memories of this appointment centre around our involvement in the 1982 Falklands War. I still vividly recall being on Easter leave when I received a telephone call at 0400 one morning instructing me to return immediately to my ship which was under short notice to sail to the South Atlantic. I remember at the time thinking that this was like a line from a movie!

Certainly to be at sea continuously for 166 days steaming some 52,000 miles in support of the recapture of the Islands is an experience that I will not quickly forget. Another significant memory from that period, was that during the long cruise back to UK, I received a letter from Director Naval Officers Appointments (Instructors), DNOA(I), offering the option for me to become an appointer instead of taking up the previously planned married accompanied tour abroad, which by then, was a NATO post in the USA. The appointer option seemed attractively challenging and entirely different to my previous 18 years of service, so (much to my wife's ensuing chagrin) I opted for Whitehall instead of a posting abroad.



Cdr Bob Young aboard HMS *Invincible* in 1982 (left Met office, right on the flight deck): Source Bob Young



Sub Lieutenant (Prince) Andrew RN aboard HMS *Invincible* with the media and Cdr Bob Young (rear)

One of the perks of being an appointer was the ability to select my next appointment. I did this, with an eye to the future (i.e. employment post-RN) and took up a position in the Directorate of Naval Manpower Planning (DNMP) which largely involved computer modelling of the various (Seamen, Engineering, Supply, Instructor, Medical) RN branch structures, with a particular emphasis of forecasting the numbers of new recruits needed each year to support the individual branch structures, taking into account wastage, promotion rates and other relevant factors. Towards the end of this appointment (having again been bitten by the 'computer project bug') I decided it was time to voluntarily retire from the RN and venture out into the civilian world. But then 'out of the blue' came an offer I couldn't refuse, namely a married accompanied posting as Director Command and Control Information Systems on the staff of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Much to my wife's pleasure, I duly withdrew my request for voluntary retirement and happily proceeded to what was to be my fourteenth and final Royal Navy appointment.



SACLANT HQ Flag Plaza, 1992.
Source: RNIOA Gallery, all rights reserved.



Cdr Bob Young; Val Young; Gill Channon; Cdr Mike Channon - Norfolk, Virginia, 1988
Source: RNIOA Gallery, all rights reserved.

Once again, I found myself “flying backwards” on an RAF flight to the USA, this time accompanied by my family to commence a four-year tour in uniform, directly followed by 13 years as a NATO civilian in the same directorate. Throughout this period, I was most fortunate to have a great team working alongside me and together we achieved some significant technical advancements.

Of course, it wasn't all work and no play and by retirement time and return to UK my wife and I had visited 49 of the 50 states (never did make it to Alaska!) and a whole myriad of other NATO countries

Would I do it all over again? MOST CERTAINLY YES!