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Joining through the Royal Naval College Greenwich in 1939 Brinley (Brin) Morgan



Early in 1939 I applied to join the Instructor Branch of the Royal Navy and in February was interviewed by Instructor Captain A H Saunders in a small office in the Peter Jones Building in Sloane Square. The interview lasted all of about 15 minutes, during which the Director, Instructor Captain A Hall (later to become Instructor Rear Admiral Sir Arthur Hall), burst in, saw that I was being interviewed, shook my hand warmly, said, 'How nice to see you'.

He bounced out again, remarking as he left, 'Come and see me later Archie'. The most important question I was asked was, 'Do you dance?'

I left the interview with no great hopes of success and heard nothing until, answering a knock at the door of my home in South Wales, I faced a man who said he had come from Gieves to measure me for my uniform. He assured me that I had been accepted, measured me and said the uniform would be sent. There was no question of payment, since I would have an account at Gieves.

Sometime later I received confirmation of my acceptance from the Admiralty with instructions to acknowledge my appointment to the Royal Naval College at Greenwich in the approved manner with, 'I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient Servant ...' I duly joined Greenwich with four other New Entry Instructor Officers in May 1939.



Royal Naval College, Greenwich in the early 1980s

The course was run by an Instructor Commander and consisted mainly of astro-navigation with no opportunities to take a sight, lots of chart work and a few lectures in mechanics. There was no drill; in fact, I never set foot on a parade ground until I was a Captain. A proposed visit to the swimming baths at Woolwich was cancelled, which was probably just as well, as it would have exposed my inability at that time to swim anything more than one width of the baths. Our

duties at sea and naval customs were explained to us during lengthy stand easy periods, and we were warned that we were likely to be made responsible for the Wardroom Officers' mess bills and the wine accounts. Little was said about cyphering and the hazards of Evening Quarters, nor strangely about meteorology. All meals were taken in the newly renovated Painted Hall, and early on I misguidedly said, 'Good Morning' at breakfast to a Commander who sat opposite. He looked up, stared at me and rapped out, 'Good Morning, Good Morning, Good Morning', and said he hoped that would suffice for the rest of my stay.

Early in the course I bought a second-hand sword from Moss Bros for £3 and, at some stage, added 'tin pants' which spent the war wrapped in black tissue paper at my home. I also acquired some white kid gloves, which I still have, and an uncomfortable pair of half Wellingtons.

The most memorable occasion during the course was the Dinner attended by His Majesty King George VI on 11 July, held to celebrate the reopening of the Painted Hall as the College mess after extensive redecoration.

During the Second World War

Emerald and Gold

Brin Morgan

I joined the light cruiser *Emerald* at Chatham in July 1939. The Commanding Officer was Captain AWS Agar VC DSO, who had been awarded his Victoria Cross in 1919 when, as the Commanding Officer of a three-man motor torpedo boat, he sank the Russian heavy cruiser *Oleg*. His second in command in *Emerald* was Commander Fogarty Fegen, later Captain F Fegen VC of *Jervis Bay* fame. The other officers were a mixture of serving, reserve and retired officers. The Wardroom and small Gunroom included one future Commander-in-Chief and three future Rear Admirals.

No time was lost in making me responsible for the Wardroom Officers' mess bills. The Commander, Chief Engineer and Captain Marines were all addicted to liar dice and woe betide any officer unwise enough to get involved. Finding that the Wardroom mess had no refrigerator, the First Lieutenant, whose seniority as a Lieutenant Commander was 1924, went ashore and bought one. The ship's company was composed mainly of Reservists.

From Chatham we proceeded to Weymouth where His Majesty King George VI reviewed the Reserve Fleet from the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert* on 9 August.

The 133 ships of the Reserve Fleet had assembled in Weymouth Bay, and included three battleships, the aircraft carrier *Courageous*, and 16 cruisers. The BBC broadcast the review from *Emerald* but this did not attract the notoriety of the famous 'The Fleet's lit up' broadcast in 1937. I remember in particular Sunday Morning Divisions on the Quarterdeck dressed in frock coat and sword, then compulsory church service, followed by inter-ship visits for pre-lunch drinks.

After the review the ships dispersed to their war stations and, with exercises in the North Sea en-route, *Emerald* proceeded to Scapa Flow and joined the 12th Cruiser Squadron commanded by Vice Admiral Sir Max Horton, later the renowned Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches. War had not yet been declared which gave us a few more days for exercises, and during that time I was sent ashore to Kirkwall to buy a piano for the Wardroom. To everyone's surprise, not least my own, I found one. It was lucky to survive its transport from the shop to the jetty, transfer to the ship's cutter and hoisting aboard; it subsequently more than earned its keep.

We sailed from Scapa on 31 August 1939 to patrol the gap between the Faeroes and Iceland where our task was to intercept all merchant ships, irrespective of nationality, bound for Scandinavian or German ports, and enemy warships, raiders or supply ships attempting to break out into the Atlantic. Northern Patrol was generally uneventful and I remember only one interception and boarding of a trawler, though we saw a fantastic display of the Northern Lights, and I learned later from the Captain's memoirs that we had had several narrow escapes from U-boats. We returned to Scapa about once a fortnight to refuel, collect mail and for a night's sleep in harbour.

At sea the Schoolmaster and I ran the plot on a 'watch on, watch off' basis; a boring occupation memorable only for the fact that whatever time he took over, be it midnight or 0400, he always appeared wearing a stiff wing collar.

I had the aftermost cabin in the ship over the propellers and shared a Marine Steward with the Torpedo Officer in the

next cabin. At sea the constant vibration and, in bad weather, shuddering movements of the ship's stern were very unpleasant but it is extraordinary what one can get used to. There were two ways of getting from my cabin to the 'plot' abaft the bridge: either along the upper deck, weather permitting, or between decks, which at night meant working one's way in a stooped position under sailors sleeping in hammocks slung in the passageways.

After about a month, we were ordered to proceed to Plymouth with all dispatch. There, our anti-aircraft armament was supplemented by some 0.5-inch machine guns. We topped up with stores and ammunition and were told to get tropical uniform, which led to the not unreasonable mess-deck buzz that we were bound for warmer climes. Not a bit of it. Before sailing, a railway truck arrived alongside the ship and an Admiralty signal directed the Captain personally to unload the explosive stores. This was done in great secrecy at 0300 by six sailors who manhandled boxes each weighing 130 lbs from the truck into the small arms magazine. Only the Captain knew that the boxes contained gold bricks from the Bank of England destined for the United States and that we were to take them to Halifax, Nova Scotia. We sailed the same morning and, as we emerged from Devonport into Plymouth Sound, were waved goodbye by wives and friends who had assembled on the Hoe.



HMS *Emerald* in wartime camouflage
by permission of NMRN

A few days later I was told that the Captain required a weather forecast; our RNVR (Special Branch) Met Officer had been put ashore because he was totally incapacitated by seasickness. I had no idea where to start but got a copy of the Naval Weather Manual and turned to page one. After a while I thought that I had the hang of what was required, found some charts, and got weather messages from the Wireless Office. Unfortunately the messages didn't make sense. It turned out that this was because I was unaware that they had to be decoded. Then, when I thought I had more or less cracked it, the Communications staff switched from UK broadcasts to reading the weather messages from Canada, which required a different code book. It took me two days to produce my first weather forecast. I don't think the Captain cared very much what this and my subsequent forecasts said, as long as he had a forecast.

Our passage to Halifax took ten days and on arrival the bullion was transferred, under cover and guarded by the Royal Canadian Mounties, into a special train waiting alongside. There used to be an Order in Council dating back to the Napoleonic Wars that the Captain of a man-of-war carrying bullion was entitled to one eighth of its value when the cargo had been safely delivered. Unfortunately, sometime between 1936 and the outbreak of the war, someone in the Treasury had this Order in Council cancelled. The value of this first shipment at 1939 prices was £2 million, which at today's prices would be about £190 million; the Bank of England Securities transferred at the same time were probably worth ten times the value of the gold.

There were 50 to 100 ships in Halifax harbour, all fully loaded with food and war materials for England, and our first convoy (HX1), consisting of 40 ships, left the following morning. *Emerald* stayed behind until they were 50 miles clear of the harbour, whereupon we left, caught up and took station for the night one mile ahead of the convoy. While steaming out of Halifax our departure was broadcast from Germany by Lord Haw Haw in his best English style which later became so familiar ... 'Germany calling' ... 'Germany calling' ... 'The British cruiser *Emerald* is now leaving Halifax harbour with a large convoy ...' So much for security!

The convoy practised signalling, emergency turns and zigzagging, and the crossing to the UK took 13 days. It was not

easy for the older ships with a maximum speed of 10 – 12 knots to keep station and avoid making smoke, and occasionally we spent some time whipping in stragglers. We had no alarms during this trip and the inshore destroyer escort from the UK took over about longitude 15° West, which was the furthest point west that U-boats were likely to be working. *Emerald* then left the convoy and zigzagged at high speed to Portsmouth, luckily avoiding U-boats in the SW Approaches, which later sank two ships including that of the Commodore of the Channel part of the convoy.

At Portsmouth each watch was given two days leave, a primitive form of heating was fitted on the mess-decks, the ship was painted by dockyard mateys and, after six days, we sailed again for Halifax, stopping briefly at Plymouth to pick up another three tons of gold. After a high speed crossing we arrived at Halifax and went to Bermuda for firing practice before returning to Halifax to be part of the escort for the first Canadian Troop Convoy (TC1). This convoy included five of our largest Atlantic liners and on this occasion it was the battleship *Resolution* which limited the speed of the convoy to 20 knots – much to the concern of the Masters of the faster liners. Halfway across, the convoy escort was reinforced by units of the Home Fleet, including *Repulse*, *Furious* and a flotilla of destroyers. We turned back then to Halifax.

As we entered Halifax we encountered biting westerly winds with frequent snow blizzards, and how the fo'c'sle party managed to work the paravane lines in these conditions was beyond comprehension. The Royal Marines Band had as usual assembled on the Quarterdeck to play as we entered harbour but had to pack it in when their wind instruments froze. Winter clothing supplied by the pusser was totally inadequate but within 48 hours, thanks to the Canadian Red Cross, cases arrived on board containing warm horsehide gloves used by Canadian lumbermen, woollen scarves, sea-boot stockings, leather headgear lined with wool and fur outside for ear protection, and woollen underwear of long pants and vests, with enough for every man in the ship. In spite of the cold, I enjoyed our time in Halifax. Not so enjoyable was a flight in the nose cone of a Hudson bomber, or a cold, wet and windy afternoon in the ship's whaler.

Our next convoy was a slow one that took 18 days. We sailed on 20 December with fog and gales dogging us all the way. On Christmas Day the wind reached almost hurricane force and by daylight next morning, we had virtually lost the convoy. Between the hailstorms, there were no more than a couple of ships in sight. However, one by one they linked up again, all except a few Greeks and Panamanians, and by the time we reached our rendezvous with the destroyer escort at 15° West they were once again in convoy. *Emerald* suffered only minor damage during the gales but most of our boats and life-rafts went overboard.

Emerald was not designed or suitable for service in the North Atlantic. Her low freeboard meant low gun platforms and the seamen had to keep watch as lookouts, day and night, at the guns, which were not in turrets, and in other exposed positions. They simply had to face the weather, whatever it was, and stick it out – as did the watchkeeping officers on the open bridge – sometimes for nearly three weeks on end. In fact, the weather gave us much more trouble than the enemy, as the U-boat menace had not yet hotted up and spread west to the mid-Atlantic; otherwise I fear my story would have been very different.

We arrived at Portsmouth in early January 1940 and were given nine days for rest and repairs, and to get ready for another gold run to Halifax. The one thing that was neglected during this period was the instruction of *Emerald's* six Midshipmen in navigation. I rarely saw them, as there were always reasons why they could not be made available. How they managed to pass their Midshipman's examinations remains a mystery.

So ended my first six months in the Royal Navy; it was unforgettable but hardly what I expected when I joined.

Postscript 2019

Brin Morgan enjoyed a highly distinguished career as a Royal Navy Instructor Officer, reaching the rank of Instructor Rear Admiral and becoming Director of the Naval Education Service/Head of the Instructor Branch (1970-75).