

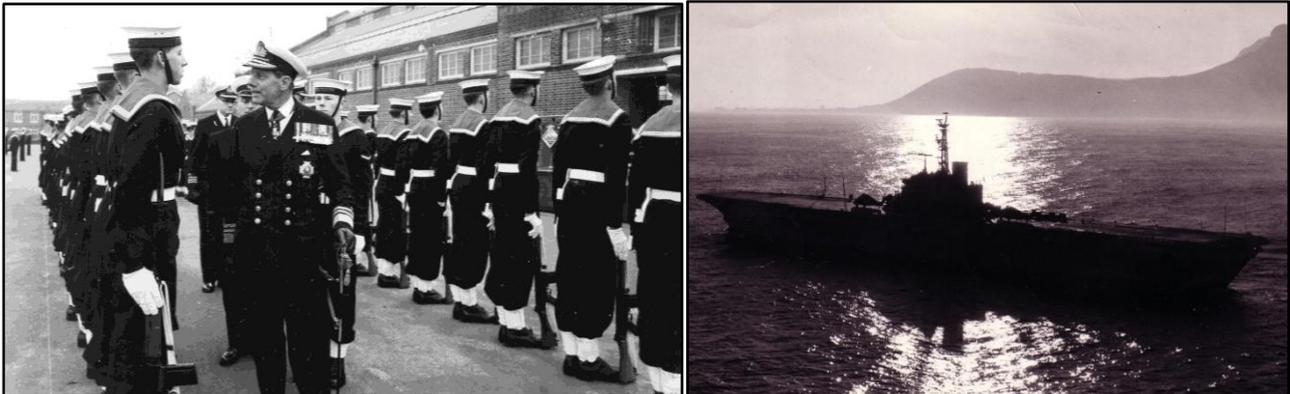


© Royal Navy Instructor Officers' Association, 2019 - all rights reserved

Service Story of Lt John Nixon RN

My entry into the Instructor Officer Branch occurred through a 'minority route' in comparison with the vast majority of my colleagues, who mostly entered as university graduates via Officer Training at BRNC Dartmouth.

In my case I came up a 'long and winding road' through the non-commissioned ranks to reach Chief Petty Officer with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) qualification in Electronics and Telecommunications. I had joined the Royal Navy at HMS *Ganges* as a Junior (Radio) Electrical Mechanic in 1968 at the age of 15, where Instructor Officers taught us in the impressive school we attended there; we were principally taught naval history and English and maths under the Navy's NAMET (Naval Maths and English Test) system. Instructor Officers played a vital role in our general education, while technical training such as electrical, engineering and telecommunications theory at HMS *Ganges* was undertaken by senior ratings (Petty Officers and Chief Petty Officers from relevant branches). This was common teaching/training practice within the Royal Navy.



Left: Leading Junior (later Petty Officer Junior) and guard commander at HMS *Ganges*; Right: Aboard HMS *Bulwark* basking in the evening sunset off Hong Kong in 1970

As well as my first ship, the commando carrier HMS *Bulwark*, which took me to the Far East, Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Malta, Italy, Japan, Australia, South Africa and one or two other countries I served on the paradise island of Mauritius at HMS *Mauritius*, the Type 12 Frigate HMS *Falmouth*, the Guided Missile Destroyer HMS *Kent*, and HMS *Falmouth* again during the Falklands War when we served as Gibraltar Guard ship. It was then time to consider my future prospects.

After assessing my options for a commission, I successfully applied to join the Instructor Officer branch via a fairly stringent Admiralty Interview Board (AIB) process at HMS *Sultan* in 1981. A condition of my promotion was the completion of formal teacher training, which I undertook at Garnett College in London to gain a Certificate in Education (Cert Ed). My teaching practice period was undertaken close to home at Eastleigh College of FE. Prior to my promotion I received my uniform grant and duly visited the famous naval officer tailors, Gieves and Hawkes, to purchase my 'Number Fives' for daily formal duties, 'Mess Undress' for formal evening functions in the Wardroom, and working uniform, which comprised black trousers, a navy blue jumper with lapels for our gold stripes, a white shirt and black tie. I began my career as an RNIO in 1982 by undertaking the six-week 'knife and fork' officers' training course with a wide range of Special Duties (SD) officers, at least in terms of their backgrounds, at the Royal Naval College (RNC) Greenwich.



Sub Lt John Nixon (back row fourth from left) at RNC Greenwich, September 1982

Most people making the transition from the so-called 'lower deck' to commissioned officer, as I was doing, have a number of concerns and sensitivities about what to expect and how to behave. An example of this arose after reading the RNC Greenwich joining literature, which stated that 'all cars parked in the college premises should be of good standard'.

My rather impulsive response was to convince my wife that we should purchase a new Renault 19 as I wasn't sure if our fairly elderly Morris 1100 Estate quite matched the Navy's expectations for a 'typical officer'. Having done this, on my arrival at the college I couldn't help noticing all the 'old bangers' that were scattered across the car parks. In fact, as I would soon discover, driving a 'classic' car – banger or otherwise – was possibly more in keeping with what was expected of a typical British naval officer.

Greenwich was an awe-inspiring and enjoyable experience as we dined every day in the highly impressive Painted Hall, studied international law and politics, naval discipline and how we were to administer it, gave and attended lectures, went to the chapel every day and took turns to do the readings, entertained visiting dignitaries, and most important of all, learnt how to write formal letters - both social and official. After a short course in early 1983 at the Royal Naval School of Educational and Training Technology (RNSETT) I was appointed to HMS *Sultan* as a Sub Lieutenant Schoolie, where I would be responsible for teaching artificer apprentices and Petty Officers in the Academic Training Department (Brunel Block), headed by Lt Cdr Alan Jones. My students were working towards BTEC qualifications involving electronics and electro-technology modules, among many other technical subjects associated with those qualifications. All Schoolies had additional responsibilities and one of mine was that of CCTV Officer, and as part of my work I produced a training film based on trainee profiles/experiences with one of my colleagues (Lt Newman – and yes, his name was Paul) entitled 'Sultan the Movie' (not an epic but still available today at the Wessex Film & Sound Archive and a piece of naval history).

In 1986 I was promoted to Instructor Lieutenant and moved to HMS *Mercury*, the Royal Navy's Telecommunications School near Petersfield, to teach Leading Radio Operators (LROs) and Radio Supervisors (RS), and sometimes Principal Warfare Officers (PWOs), the fundamentals of radio telecommunications. Apart from teaching a class of PWOs, at very short notice, a lesson on an obscure helicopter radio transceiver one afternoon – something I knew absolutely nothing about – this was an enjoyable appointment due to the advanced laboratory I taught in, which had many state-of-the-art pieces of technology such as spectrum analysers and audio-visual displays. The impressive history and setting of the establishment that comprised HMS *Mercury* were also a bonus – especially the iconic Wardroom in Leydene House, which was always a pleasure to socialise and spend time in.



Instructor Officers of the Academic Training Department (Brunel Block), HMS *Sultan*, 1985

Following training courses in computer fundamentals and programming at the training centre at Blandford (Army) I returned to HMS *Sultan* in 1987 to teach computing principles and microprocessor control technology. My fellow Schoolie and close friend, Maurice Moore, had established the section and associated courses. After Maurice left, Michael Rose joined as section head – we were fortunate enough to work with some advanced teaching equipment, as shown below. As well as hardware theory, we taught our students how to program in machine code and then solve projects using CPU units and various input and output modules, such as pressure sensors and indicator units. Our students included artificer apprentices undergoing BTEC courses and others needing knowledge and training in microprocessor control systems.



Lt John Nixon teaching Leading Artificer Apprentices at Parsons Block, HMS *Sultan*, 1989

I then spent three enjoyable months working for the International Military Staff (IMS) department at NATO Headquarters in Brussels – the Grand Place was always a favourite place in which to wind down after work – before undertaking a specialist training course to become a systems analyst. This was followed by a two-year appointment in HMS *Collingwood*, where I worked on computer security and the design of Management Information Systems (MIS).

An important aspect of all Royal Navy officers' lives revolves around the Officers' Mess, namely the 'Wardroom'. This includes Mess dinners and ladies' nights. As a musician (classical/folk guitar) I often accompanied various singers at such events as part of after-dinner entertainment. In this endeavour I joined ranks with other musicians, including my close friend and colleague, Mike Rose, who is a highly accomplished pianist and keyboard player. We also played music after lunch in the Wardroom although I recall on one occasion being asked to 'turn it down' by the Mess President.

I left the Royal Navy in 1992 having completed a total of 24 years' service with nine years as a Schoolie. Most of it was enjoyable and stimulating with many enduring friendships, but at times it was a gruelling experience when undergoing long periods on exercises in storm-force gales with mountainous sea conditions prior to winning my commission as an RNIO. When retiring to begin a second (or third) career as a health economist at the University of York after completing a PhD in Health Economics, I had no suspicions that the Instructor Officer branch would soon be dismantled and the roles of Schoolies devolved to other departments and civilian instructors.

My mixed experiences stimulated me to write and publish an autobiography of my full career entitled *My Royal Navy Letters: Through Calm and Troubled Waters* (2013). In the final analysis, as well as the many ships and establishments, it was always the countless and inspirational people I served with that made my experience what it was.



At HMS *Collingwood* in 1989, and graduating at the University of York in 1995