

Beyond the Waves: My Royal Navy Adventures

Sample chapter:-

CHAPTER 1

New beginnings

MAY 5th 1986.

This is a date forever etched into my memory, for this is the date that I joined Her Majesty's Royal Navy. The day dawned bright but cloudy in South Harrow. I was awake early, but it was surprising I had slept at all as I was full of nervous energy. I was already packed from the night before, prepared and ready to tackle anything that was thrown in my direction. But I was scared! I was scared of facing the unknown, of entering into a world that I had no experience of. This same scenario was undoubtedly being replayed in different houses up and down the country as other people's sons prepared to embark on their first day in the Royal Navy. We did not know each other, but within hours, we would be best mates, bonds would be formed that would last throughout our lives; we would be *shipmates*.

I ate a quick breakfast.

"You'll need energy for the journey down," my mum said.

Then I donned my best clothes and polished shoes, and waited nervously for the off. This was the 1980's and the first day at work was a "formal" occasion worthy of dressing-up in a suit and tie.

I travelled into central London on the underground, as I had done many times before, the distinctive smell of "The Tube" ever present; only this time I was accompanied by my mum and dad. We arrived early at Paddington Station and joined the throng of people waiting for trains, watching the ever-changing notice-boards as times and locations were updated. Eventually my train was called. I said an awkward good-bye to my parents and set-off for the platform. I did not look back, but I heard later that my mum was in tears, upset at losing her eldest son to the navy. Little did any of us know, but my brother would soon follow the same path as me.

I found a seat, put my bag in the storage area, and sat down, ready for the long journey west to Plymouth. I looked around the carriage. There were lots of people in it, some young men who looked equally as scared as me. Would they be joining the navy too? Logic would say to start a conversation, to ask them, but British reserve being what it is, we could not break the unwritten rule of all rail travellers by actually talking to a stranger. Instead, we all sat in silence, avoiding eye-contact. In fact, to this date, I cannot remember if any of them were fellow recruits as the arrival in Plymouth was a bit of a blur.

The train started edging forward, snaking its way along the track, through the suburbs of London, and out into the green fields beyond. This was to be my last view of London, of home, for the next month and a half. I did not know it yet, but there would be no contact with the outside world, no shore-leave, and no trips home for the first half of the basic-training phase.

The journey to Plymouth was uneventful, punctuated only by toilet-breaks and sandwiches. The world outside the carriage windows flew by at what seemed a million miles an hour. But it did give me time to reflect on how I had come to be in this position in the first place.

A few months earlier, I had been working for the NatWest Bank in Pinner, and then in Harrow. I had been there for the best part of 18 months since I had left college, but it was intended only as a stop-gap job until something better came along. It just got extended a little bit longer than planned. I worked behind the scenes in the machine-room, putting cheques and credit slips into the computer system. It was a mundane job, but it did pay well.

At the same time, I had joined the Territorial Army in Harrow. I was a signaller in the 31st Signal Regiment, 47th Squadron Radio Relay. This was my first experience of a military lifestyle, but in reality it was more of a hobby than a job. The Territorial Army was a totally different beast in the 1980's to that which exists nowadays. Recently, the TA have been deployed to the Afghanistan and Iraq warzones, and constituted a large proportion of the soldiers fighting in these conflicts. But in 1985, there was hardly any chance of getting sent abroad with the TA. They were nicknamed "The Weekend Warriors" and that is exactly what we were. We would arrive at the TA Centre on one evening each week to learn or practice military skills relating to our roles within the army. This might be marching, fitness, or weapons drills, but was more likely to be "tweaking" radio sets, or learning to use code-books to send messages. Then on one or two weekends each month we would either travel to the Aldershot area to play *war-games* with other army units, or spend the whole weekend at our TA centre, supposedly doing "training." This was the better option because it really consisted of doing a couple of hours of work, then spending the rest of the time in the subsidised bar getting drunk. It was more of a social-club than a job. Not only was it great fun and a good laugh, but they paid us to do it too! Definitely a "win-win" situation.

I had always been destined to join the armed forces or to join the police service. Ever since I could remember I had been fascinated by stories of war, of soldiers, of sailors, and of the police. As a child, I would play with my friends, fighting pretend battles. The local building sites became our bombed houses; the sewer pipes and drains our Vietnamese insurgent tunnels. We would climb trees, build camps, and fight our make-believe wars. Health and safety was non-existent in those days, it was normal to be out playing for hours at a time, our parents having no idea where we were or what we were doing. It made us adventurous. It made us brave. We made mistakes, got hurt, got dirty, but we learnt from this, which made us stronger. The modern world is totally different to what it was then. As a parent, I would not even consider letting my daughters go off on their own to play, out of my sight, away from the house! You do not know who is out there! It was no different in the 70's and 80's really, except people were not brought up in a state of fear. It was still as dangerous, but people just got on with it, they were more trusting of the community around them.

Throughout my childhood, television was a major influence, pointing me towards my future careers. It was a time where you watched World-War-Two films on a Saturday afternoon (glamorised as only Hollywood could do). TV programs consisted of things like "Allo, Allo," "Escape from Colditz," "The Sweeney," and best of all, "The Professionals." Who would I be today in my adventures? Bodie (ex army) or Doyle (ex police)? It is not surprising, then, that when it came to choosing which job I wanted to pursue, I was torn between the forces and the police.

Then, in 1982, the Falklands War erupted! To a 16 year old who loved the military, this was like manna-from-heaven. The reports were on all channels, at all times of day, live from the front-line. To me, it was as close to being there as I was likely to get. From the comfort of my armchair I watched as our brave forces personnel fought the war against

Argentina. But this was no made-up, sanitised, Hollywood film; this was real life! I saw the real effects of war, the injuries and death caused by such conflict. The outstanding image I have is of a soldier on a stretcher being brought ashore from a burning, bombed troop-ship; his stump of a leg raised above the stretcher, tattered, smoke-blackened bandages hanging off the remains of what once had been his knee! This was something of a reality-check to me. But did it put me off the idea of joining-up? No, if anything, it reinforced my ambition to do so.

My first attempt at a military career came whilst I was at college. I decided I wanted to become an Army Officer, so off I went to Woolwich, home of the Royal Artillery. I must have had some potential, because over the course of the next year, I attended numerous interviews, selection-boards, and assessment weekends, all of which operated on a knockout basis. If you failed at any stage, you no longer continued in the process. This culminated in me attending the AIB, the final selection stage before going to Sandhurst. Needless to say, I failed. But, in retrospect, I was very young, very naive, and not ready for that sort of responsibility at that stage in my development. But it was an experience, and one I am proud to have given a go. My fellow candidates were all sons of high-ranking army officers (Captain this, or Brigadier that), so in some respects, it is no surprise that I failed. The army in those days operated on a “who-you-know” basis rather than a “what-you-know” one. I am sure that the experience of going through this selection procedure helped me greatly in subsequent applications to the navy and the police.

So, back to 1985... I decided to hedge-my-bets when deciding which future career to pursue after my job at the bank, so I applied to the Royal Navy and the Metropolitan Police at the same time.

The Metropolitan Police was easy. I visited New Scotland Yard in London to have a chat with the recruitment team, and to make my application. A little later, I visited the Hendon Training Centre to complete an assessment day and interview; and then it was simply a case of waiting for a decision to arrive by letter, in the post. There was no email or internet at this point (at least it was not as widely available as it is now); everything was done with paper and snail-mail. So I waited patiently...

In the case of the Royal Navy, I went to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Recruitment Office in High Holborn, London. I had no appointment, but I spoke to a recruitment officer who told me all about what they offered. They asked me,

“So, which part of the navy do you want to join, then?”

Up until that point, I had not really thought about it! I just wanted to join the navy; I did not know that you could actually choose a job within a job. The Royal Marines had always interested me, but after talking to the recruiter, the fitness requirements seemed to be way beyond my capabilities. So we talked “navy.”

“Well, I don’t fancy being an officer,” I said, having been put-off the idea by my experience with the army.

“But I’ve got 13 O-levels and 3 A-levels, so what would you suggest?”

From that point on, my fate was sealed; the recruiting officer steered me towards the role of an Artificer. A what, I hear you cry? An Artificer (or “Tiff”) was what the navy referred to as an engineering apprentice. The details were given to me and I was sold on the idea. I left the office happy that I now knew what I wanted to do, but things were not set in concrete just yet. I had the small matter of passing the initial selection exams in Maths, English, and Science; and also passing the fitness-test. A week later, and this was done. I left the Recruitment Office clutching my acceptance certificate for the Royal Navy, with a huge cheesy grin on my face. I had just joined the navy... In fact, I hadn’t. The formal attestation did not happen until day-one of training in May 1986, but as far as I was concerned, I was now *IN*.

A few days later, I received a letter telling me I had also been accepted for the Metropolitan Police! That was typical. What should I do? In the end, the decision was easy. I could join the police and end-up dealing with drunks, violence, and domestic situations; or I could join the navy, gain qualifications in engineering, travel the world, and have fun. It was no contest, so I wrote to the police saying, “Thank you, but no...” And I awaited a letter from the navy detailing my joining routine and start date. It arrived a week or so later, and May 5th 1986 was to be the big-day.

The train had been juddering along the tracks for what seemed like hours. I had no idea where we were, but I was starting to get a bit frustrated with the time it was taking. I just wanted to get on with my life, and become a sailor.

As we passed through the Teignmouth area of Devon, the track passed parallel to the south coast. I could taste the salt in the air, and I saw the flat, grey sea out of the carriage windows; it felt like I could almost touch it if only I was to stretch out my arm. I now knew I was nearly at journey’s end. I still had butterflies in my stomach, only now that I had almost arrived, they seemed to be the size of giant moths!

The next few minutes were a blur of preparing my bag, straightening my tie, and putting on my jacket (I had to create a good first impression, didn’t I?). As we slowly crept into Plymouth Station, I looked out of the window to see a man in smart naval uniform stood by the platform’s exit gate, holding an official looking clipboard.

This was it. Almost bursting with nerves, having what felt like a lump the size of an egg stuck in the back of my throat, and all of a sudden finding I was desperately in need of the toilet, I got out of the carriage and approached the navy man.

“Name?” he said, in the most official voice I had heard up to this point in my life.

I told him. He ticked me off on his list.

“Stow your bag in the bus and take a seat.”

He pointed to a relic of a coach from the 1960’s. There was no “Welcome to the navy,” no hint of a smile, and no sign of friendship. I did as I was told, and waited as the bus slowly filled-up with equally worried looking men and boys (some looking so young that they could barely have left school). Was this how it was going to be for the next few months? A feeling of dread started to descend! What had I done? Was it too late to go home?

The sailor got on the bus and sat at the front. He did not speak to us, and we were too scared to speak to him, so we remained in silence, a stalemate, as the bus drove us through Plymouth, and onto the Torpoint Car Ferry. Minutes later we arrived at the main gate of HMS Raleigh, the Royal Navy recruit training establishment.

If you enjoyed this excerpt from my book, the entire story is available from Amazon Worldwide in Paperback and Kindle E-Book formats.

Alternatively, you can access further information on this (and other) books, and click through to the sales page via my website at:-

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Also by the author:-

Book #2 in “The Memoir Series” – Single-Crewed: My Life as a Police Officer.

Having travelled the world in the Royal Navy, the author was unable to settle into the slower pace of life as a civilian. He yearned for action and excitement. He missed the camaraderie of his former life. His search led him to the Lincolnshire Police Force...

Full of energy and enthusiasm, he became a Police Constable, patrolling the rural flatlands, towns and villages of the county. **“Single-Crewed”** follows his progress from a raw-recruit with an idealistic image of a police officer’s role, to a streetwise experienced officer, and tutor.

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“Single-Crewed” is the second book in “The Memoir Series.”

Both books are available via my website (above), or from Amazon Worldwide.