

Memories of the Arethusa
By Doug Lawrence.
1927 to 2015

Trained on the Arethusa 1940 to 1942

The first week kept us busy learning how to wear a uniform correctly, salute, march in straight lines, get assigned to a division, mess, get a number, work place and learn about the ship and it's parts. I finished up as number 14 mess 7. In Nelson Division, work location the locker room, sweep twice daily and scrub on Saturdays. We also had a welcome speech from the Captain, Lt Cdr Rupert Gould, a pleasant man in his 30's very smart in his gold braid. The welcome speech from the Chief Officer was another story. Dire warning were laid on us from him. He was a big man who put the fear of God in me. I stayed as far away from him as I could, but did fall foul a couple of times. His kick up the backside could lift one of the deck if he was wearing sea boots, which he was when he caught me breaking one of the seemingly endless rules.

Each morning, weather permitting, we were required to climb up and over the first yard arm, coming down had to be quick as there was a PO Boy waiting to give the slow pokes a whack on the backside. This took place before breakfast. I missed a few breakfasts as I had a hard time lashing up my hammock tight enough to pass through the iron ring. You received the chance to do it again but by that time, the boys down in the mess had scoffed my food.

The food was pretty bad by any standard. I have tried blocking out memories over the years but porridge and fried herrings day after day stays with you. The only time there was change was leave days when there was a slice of fruit cake and hot cocoa, after the ship had been cleaned. There were times when there was No butter or margarine, so we had dripping for our bread, dripping and jam was not one of my favourites. Main meal was at noon. Why do I seem to remember that boiled spuds, cabbage and carrots and some sort of meat that took a lot of chewing? Saturdays were favourite, an individual meat pie, lots of pastry but a bit thin on the meat content. They were sold on shore in cafes for tuppence. If anyone in the mess wanted money more than a pie you could buy one for a penny, against the rules of course. One of my favourites was the suet pudding we had each week, known far and wide as duff, if it had sultanas it was spotted dick, served with custard or syrup it was plain sweet duff. Before turning in at night we got either a cup of pea soup and a ships biscuit or cocoa with a biscuit, a real taste treat. The cook was a rather scruffy individual who always seemed to have a roll your own cigarette hanging from his bottom lip, when the ash would drop off it got stirred into the contents of whatever pot was closest. The only thing that caused me joy was knowing that he also cooked for the officers.

A normal day went something like this :- Wakey, Wakey lash up and stow, wash and dress, up on the foredeck, exercise consisted of climbing up to the first yard and back. Then breakfast, clean ship, divisions on the quarterdeck, raise Ensign with bugle calls, prayers then inspection. If it was raining divisions were held below deck, outside of the officers quarters, in front of the carved ships coat of arms, 'Fear God, Honour The King.' A few physical jerks were held after prayers, then we were dismissed. Half of us went to school for the morning the others went to manual, which consisted of learning seamanship, knots, splicing, boat work and all that other good stuff, in addition attending to general maintenance of the ship. Schooling was not very good, but the teaching staff were kindly souls for the most part. Divisional Officers were what might be expected from retired Naval Petty Officers, generally good men with little

flexibility in dealing with young boys. But it was different times, I'm sure they did their best with what they had. We went swimming of course and once in a while we had a 'Make and Mend', which was an afternoon to set out all of your clothes and any other permitted gear, all set out in strict order with numbers in plain view. We also learned to mend socks and stitch seams from a dear old man named Mister Danials, The Clothing Officer and Tailor. I still have a shoe brush that has number 14 stamped on it.

After lunch you had a bit of free time, if not on mess duty that week. Time to get upon deck, maybe climb out on the yard just for the fun of it. A great time to see the Thames Barges sailing by with just a man and a boy as crew. Free time in the evenings were spent in various activities but whether or not you liked it somehow you found yourself in a boxing match at some time. The band had gone so there was a big gap, just the bugle lessons left. Reading was encouraged but sometimes it was hard to get a quiet spot. Sunday afternoon was free time, some of us would go ashore and walk all the way to Chatham skating ring, where we could get in for free of charge, to sit and listen to the music. Of course if a Parent visited you would hope to go out for a meal

We had the occasional movie down in the gym, the Captain and his lady attended. We lost the show for several weeks after the appearance of the leading lady evoked catcalls and whistles from some members of the audience. The projector was switched off and the Captain and his wife were escorted from the gym, we were kept in the gym in the dark for the length of the time the film would have run. I have often wondered if Valerie Hobson knew that she had a fan club on the 'Arethusa'.

Then there was "coaling ship". From time to time we would get up in the morning to find a lighter loaded with coal, tied up alongside to port. This meant a good number of us would be involved in getting the load on board, not a favourite job. We were rigged out in any old clothing stored away for that very job. The canvas curtains were rigged around the bunker plate area to keep the dust contained when the coal was dumped into the bowels of the "Arethusa". Two sets of stages were rigged for the lads to stand on as the baskets of fuel were lifted from the lighter up to the main deck where they would be dumped into a chute that went down to the bunker. This job took all morning and it was a back breaking job for all those concerned. Thank goodness we were relieved after about an hour by another ten or so poor souls.

Then came the chore of cleaning the deck and washing down the deck-head where the canvas curtains had failed in their intended purpose. the coal, of course, was for heating the living areas, for showers and also the galley. I don't know where the heat went to because it was never warm between October and May, except in the shower or in my hammock. We would get a food treat on coaling days. Perhaps a chocolate biscuit with our cocoa.

It was the early 1940's and the civil defence organizations such as the Air Raid Precautions (ARP), Enhanced Fire Services (NFS), First Aid & Rescue, Heavy Rescue Services, Emergency Feeding & Housing and many others were staffed by a mix of volunteers and full time men and women. They all did outstanding work as time went on. We knew things were getting serious when "Bobbies" on the street no longer wore the traditional helmets but instead were kitted out with blue painted "tin hats".

It seemed that everyone was involved in something, even the "Arethusa Boys" were pressed into service. One morning after breakfast, we went ashore where we were loaded onto a bus which took us to a large hall in Rochester. We were informed that we were to play the part of bomb victims. No. 2 Cox (Always a bit of a radical) said that acting as a victim would be no problem, as most of us were victims of something or other every day on the "Arethusa".

During the day, I was rescued from a collapsed building, suffered burns, a head injury, a broken leg and at one point was declared dead. By the end of the exercise we had been tagged, banded, splinted, bruised, squeezed and lifted by seemingly endless stream of enthusiastic life savers. We had however been treated well during breaks in the proceedings. a group of motherly ladies in charge of the catering saw that we had as many sandwiches, cream buns, mineral water and teas as we could put away. some of the more daring in our group even talked some of the adults into giving them a puff on a cigarette. One of the motherly ladies obviously took a fancy to me, as we were boarding the bus she slipped a sixpence into my hand.

We were late getting back on board and no food had been left for us "Heroes", who had served on the front lines that day! But who cared. we had eaten like kings and I knew where to hide my sixpence until next shore leave.

When reading, I. S. Morgan's book "Painting The Last Post", I noticed that he mentioned a laundry lady. That brought back some memories of a prehistoric time, when we were broken down into groups of three and assigned to a wooden half barrel two thirds full of very hot water and a bar of Sunlight Soap. A second tub was nearby for rinsing out the scrubbed articles, sitting on a mess bench, one had to move to a sharp pace to get the whites done before the first bloke tossed in his blue, often smelly socks. It took about an hour before the whole job was completed. Wringing out was a shared job as there was no mangle to do that job. the under pants presented the biggest challenge as they were large, old fashioned things that I swear were made out of heavy sail cloth. As I recall it, there was a drying room down below next to the boiler room.

What about those collars! when issued they were as blue as could be, with out being black. The objective of all Nozzers was to get those washed out to an ocean blue without getting the blue dye into the white stripes. Fortunately, I had a "Townie" on board, he had been a sea cadet and new the secret of washing new collars. He had a nail brush stashed away some where. He was also a dab hand at tying bows in cap ribbons

. P.T. was never one of my favourite activities. Climbing ropes, jumping over boxes and horses or tumbling on hard canvas mats seemed to have little relevance to my ambition. All of this might have been useful if one planned to become a circus performer. I wanted to serve in submarines where opportunities for this mad physical activity would be limited. Climbing to the sports field was perfect training for anyone who aspired to be part of a Royal Marine assault force. Once at the peak, I would volunteer for any game that had a position that involved as little dashing around as possible. Playing full back on a football team was ideal. Tug of war was OK but cross country racing left much to be desired.

Once during my time we were graced by the visits of two admirals. First was Admiral Of The Fleet, The Earl Of Cork and Orrery. A compact, good looking monocle wearing gent who seemed to have gold braid up to his elbows. As new boys, three of us were ordered to give our name, number and where we came from. When I told him that I came from Reading, he looked me up and down and said "Ah, yes, biscuits". Yes sir I replied, with regional pride. "Biscuits, Beer and Bacon", to which he gave a snort and moved on. That was the day I learned to answer a question without editorialising. "I've got my eye on you boy" said our divisional officer, after the admiral had left the area, "you have a big mouth and talk too much".

We lined up on the quarter deck for our second admiral. A very large man dressed in a brown suit and a bowler hat. Shattered my image of an admiral. I can't remember his name. He inspected us and spoke to some of the lads as he walked through the ranks. I offered up a silent prayer as he started up our line. One chat with an admiral had been enough for me. My prayer had obviously been answered when he stopped at our senior hand, a huge, gentle giant, known to us all as "Tiny". "How old are you boy?" He asked. "Fifteen Sir", replied our champion in his fog signal voice. "Fine lad for your age", said the admiral giving Tiny a thump on the shoulder so hard that he fell into the line behind us causing a major pile up, that made the whole day worth while.

I learned later that both admirals were patrons of the Shaftesbury Homes and Arethusa. The brown suited gent, recalled from retirement, sometimes served as a convoy commodore as the war at sea expanded.

From time to time, the "Arethusa" received donations of foodstuffs from some of the larger grocery chains. I recall one occasion when we received a case load of tinned butter from the International Foods Company. I don't know whether they had a sell by date on butter back then. If they had, I'm sure the butter was hovering on the edge of its limit. The butter would probably have been OK if it had been given to the messes right away, unfortunately someone thought it should be given out in some sort of rota. By the time it got to us in 7 mess, the contents of our tin smelled like coal gas, but much stronger.

Stewed prunes were regulars on a limited menu, the heads were very busy by evening. Things were however kept in balance by having plum duff next day.

On Friday evenings, the canteen was open to those who had money in their account. To get that money one had to line up until the officer called "Next", you then stepped up to the desk, saluted, took off your hat, placed it on top and called out your number. Of course, there were times when you were sure you had at least six pence in the kitty, only to be told "No funds". Then it was on caps, salute, step out of line, hoping some kind soul might give you a bite or suck of their goodies. Despite firm discipline, harsh living conditions, (as compared with later conditions, which I saw, when in 1948 I spent a pleasant morning on board with Captain Le Mare). A relative poor academic education, but yet a good seamanship program, the *Arethusa* was, I believe, a happy ship in my time. While the aim was not to make or break young lads, some could not make it, I saw several boys who had to go home. Sure there were bullies among the lads and among the staff for that matter, but we learned to live with people of all types and temperaments. These learning lessons would stand us in good stead in the years ahead. Looking back, one can not help but recognize the hold the ship had over us, we went on leave and yet we returned on time to face another period of tough living.

There came a time when we sensed that something was going on, but nothing we could pin down. One lad said he had overheard two officers talking about evacuation. Then one morning at divisions, Captain Gould told us that due to our proximity to Chatham Naval Base and its danger of being bombed, we were to be sent home soon and would be recalled when alternative facilities were found.

This was shattering news to those of us who had come to the "*Arethusa*" to escape from home. Over the next while some of the rules were relaxed, for example, we were allowed to climb to the top of the foremast, boat races were organized and school work was wound down. Mr Gummer held evening reading sessions so those of us who were in the middle of "*Martin Rattler*" could hear the remaining chapters. On Wednesdays we had shore leave, if we wanted it. I'm not sure how long it was before we went home, but when that day came, it was a sad event for many of us. When I got home I had to get a job until I got a recall letter. The *Arethusa* would now be accommodated in quarters in Salcombe, Devon. It was time for me to make a decision about my future. Being a bit of a romantic, I could not see myself living in the former hotel, despite my kinship with the lads and the program. My hopes for a Navy career had gone out the window, when my divisional officer told me not to get my hopes up in that regard, due to a very dry skin condition. "The navy does not want blokes who cause a snow storm of dry skin every time they undress". Anyway, I was still too young for the R.N. The Merchant Navy seemed to be the best option. So with the support and guidance of Mr. Sadler of the Shaftesbury Homes and *Arethusa* Training Ship, I got a job as a deck boy on the Orient Lines "*Orion*", and the great adventure began.

PS. As a young boy Doug found circumstances dictated that he should be fostered out to various relatives for differing lengths of time. These were not happy days. Changing homes and schools with strange rules, expectations, chores and punishments was hard on him, but he learned to deal with it all. Unfortunately, emotionally he did not.

He was a caring boy and often found himself on the side of the underdog despite his own problems, not always the wisest position. When he finally escaped from the foster home and stepmother circuit he was accepted by the naval Training ship Arethusa at the age of thirteen. It was a hard school but had a consistent structure which was important. As the instructors said "This was all meant to make a man of you".