

# Tribute to Bruce Lilley

## Part 1

Merril Lilley

### FORWARD

*I met Bruce in January 1980. We could not have been more different. Maybe it was an attraction of opposites. After leaving the Merchant Navy he was the owner of a small paint business making white line marking compound for sports grounds. I was a lecturer in English and Education at Middlesex Polytechnic. I was most intrigued by his tales of the sea and life in the Navy. He was bemused at the thought of my world of teaching and teachers.*

*We were married in December 1982. In our spare time we liked exploring London, trips on the river, wandering around the docks, seeing the development of Canary Wharf and the Dockland Light Railway, visiting Greenwich and the Maritime Museum., going to the theatre.*

*When we retired we bought a Regency house on the seafront in Dover. Both our mothers came to live with us. Then Bruce's mother died, aged 91, in 1989 and my mother followed in 1990, aged 87.*

*After this we travelled a lot on holidays and cruises always talking about the sea and ships. At this time I had joined a Writing Group via the U3A and we met once a month and as with all such groups our work led us to write about childhood memories and autobiographies.*

*It was then that I started to collect Bruce's*

*memories of his early days at sea from the age of 16. Much more interesting than my memories of a childhood in a grammar school in Wales, I thought.*

*I did this gradually over some years. He would tell me some anecdotes and I would write them and read them back to him and he would correct me or expand on them adding more each time. Sometimes he would find some photos or old documents. Sometimes he would remember useful additions when we went on holiday to Hong Kong, Singapore, Greece, the Panama Canal, Majorca and so on. Gradually I found I had written five chapters. Part of it I condensed into an article called 'going to Sea' which was published in the magazine, Sea Breezes.*

*For some reason, after five chapters he gave up. Maybe he thought he'd told me all the exciting parts. So here are his, and my, five chapters. He did talk about some of his later ships but not in sufficient detail to chronicle them.*

*I apologise for mistakes or inaccuracies in the details in this account. They are Bruce's version of events and I cannot now check on them. He does not touch on world affairs of the time. He does give details of the condition of the ships he served on and ports he visited but he seems more concerned with the job he was doing and how he coped with it and also, I think, how he enjoyed it.*

# Bruce's Story



## CHAPTER ONE The Early Years

I was born on 29th July, 1928, at Willow Walk Fire Station, Camden Town. My father joined the fire service when he left the navy. It was usual for ex-navy men to become firemen. The families lived in the fire stations. During my childhood we lived in four different stations. From Camden Town we moved to Deptford and later to Peckham and, finally, Brixton, where my father was made Section Officer. It was at the Deptford Fire Station that I had my first view of the river.

When I was ten years old we moved into LCC flats at Coldharbour Lane, Camberwell, built especially for the families of firemen. With an impending sense of war approaching, there was a move to transfer families to other accommodation, to leave only firemen living at the stations. I remember that all the occupants of the new flats were expected to help with digging trenches for the first makeshift air raid shelters.

I was eleven years old when the war started and I was evacuated to Cornwall. My sister, Brenda, who was only five, was sent to an aunt in Tiptree in Essex. Mine is a classic evacuee's tale, which those who experienced this uprooting will always remember. The parting at Denmark Hill station; the carriages with door handles removed; the sandwich lunch, the apprehension and the waiting and the sinking feeling in the stomach on arrival at our destination.

Our train arrived at Liskeard late at night and we were transferred by bus to Lerryn, where we waited to be allocated to a home. It was the luck of the draw. Some children were fortunate, some were not. I and one other boy were billeted with the local cobbler and his wife. They had no children and did their best for us, I suppose.

Now I have very little recall of the details of

my time there, although I do remember being sent to dig potatoes at a nearby farm. I suppose we accepted that our services had been offered to the farmer by our teacher and that he was pocketing our wages. Our schooling was rather haphazard at first, on a part-time basis in a village hall or institute. Later we had some lessons in the school building. I was not there for long, maybe a year at the most, when I received the news that my father had applied for me to go to the Royal Hospital School at Holbrook in Suffolk. The entrance papers were sent to Cornwall and I sat the examination in the village school there. After that my mother came to take me back to London. That was a journey to remember. When we got to Plymouth there was an air raid and we sat in the train for ten hours.

So I entered on the next stage of my adventurous young life as I was transported from a village in Cornwall to the other end of the country. There was a special train from Liverpool Street Station to take pupils to Holbrook. There were hundreds of us, or so it seemed to me, and I did not know any of the others. When we

arrived we had uniforms and kit, all provided by the school, I could not believe my good fortune and blessed my father for arranging it for me.

At the time Holbrook School was exclusively for children of men who had served in the navy and it was expected that the children would follow in their father's footsteps. This is no longer the case today. Holbrook is still flourishing but only some of the pupils are the children of ex-navy men. This school was the Royal Hospital School, which had transferred from Greenwich in 1933 when it was officially opened by the Prince of Wales. The school opened with 760 pupils, all boarders, organised in eleven houses, instead of in barracks as they had been for centuries. The old figurehead from the blockship *Fame* at Greenwich was re-erected at Holbrook, overlooking the vast playing fields and a rigged mast, 100ft high, stood on the terrace above her. On a brief visit there in 1997, I was impressed by the gracious buildings, sweeping lawns and, above all, by the demeanour of the pupils going about their daily tasks. It was not at



*Royal Hospital School, Holbrook*

all as I remembered it from the age of twelve or thirteen. Our lessons were regular and well-organised. We slept in dormitories with about twenty boys in each, as far as I can remember. The most important figure in our lives was 'Matron' and the treat of the week was bread pudding served after church on every Sunday evening. But the war was, by now, at its height and there was the constant sound of aircraft overhead and an ever-pervading sense of danger. Most nights we ended up the air raid shelters.

Once again, this stage of my life was short-lived. The following year, 1942, a visitor to the school asked for volunteers from the pupils to join the Royal Marines and start training in Portsmouth. I was among them and soon on my way to Portsmouth to learn to be a boy bugler. Why? I have often asked myself that question. A friend I had made at Holbrook, lived in Portsmouth and he wanted to apply and so I did too. When I returned to London I was officially enrolled in the Royal Marines at the Admiralty Recruiting Office, Charing Cross, before I set off to Portsmouth. I have my Certificate of Attestation dated 29th July, 1942, my fourteenth birthday. 'To be given to a MAN at the time of his offering to join the Royal Marine Forces.'

Stationed at Eastney Barracks it was a hard life for the boys. We were given 5 shillings a week, of which 2/6d was sent to our mothers. We paraded on the sea front and practised pieces on our bugles while German bombers flew overhead. On Friday mornings we queued up to collect our pay. As I was in 1 company I waited a long time to get my 2/6d, which was usually spent on cakes at the NAAFI. Out of this pay we were still expected to buy things like boot polish for ourselves.

On one occasion I was given a new bugle

and it was hard work polishing it up to the required shining standard demanded. A friend advised me to dent it a little, which would make polishing easier. So I did! What trouble that brought me! I was 'on the carpet' in dire disgrace, threatened with all kinds of punishment and retribution if such a thing occurred again.

I went back to Portsmouth a few years ago. The former Eastney Barracks are now part of an elegant and expensive development of flats and houses and the officers' quarters house a splendid museum.

But Fate did not decree that I follow a career in the Royal Marines. Disaster struck. The following year I received the news from London that my father was leaving my mother and they were getting a legal separation. My mother wanted me home. I did not know what to do. I confided in my Drum Major who sympathised with my dilemma.

'If you really want to go,' he said, 'make a total mess up of your exams on drums and bugle.'

So, reluctantly, I did. I played all the wrong notes as best I could and I was allowed to leave. As it turned out, many of the boys who were with me at Eastney were posted to ships before the war ended and some of them perished at sea.

When I was ready to leave there was a problem. I had to give up my uniform and go back to London in 'civvies'. But the only provision for this process was clothing in men's sizes. So I arrived home in a much-too-large men's suit and a trilby hat! 'What do you look like?' cried my mother.

It was a bad time to be back in London. The 'Blitz' raged and there was no time to think of anything else apart from surviving each

day. I had a feeling of being in limbo, of killing time, of waiting to see what happened next. Any day one might emerge from a night in a shelter and find that home no longer existed. My mother was working at Menley & James, the pharmaceutical company. She wanted me to get a proper job and settle down but I could never really give up my ambition of going to sea. I was depressed at the thought that I had missed my chance of serving in the Royal Navy when I left Holbrook and of a place in the Royal Marines when I left Eastney. I drifted from one job to another without an interest in any of them and merely to earn some money. I did not stay in any of these jobs for long. Few people did in those days.

My first attempt at regular employment was at 'The Scotsman' in Fleet Street as a very junior office boy. I soon left that job having been harassed by one of the older women on the staff.

I did quite well as a milkman for a time. After sketchy training, where I was told 'Never let the horse step between the blocks' (i.e. the wooden blocks on the road) I was on my own. I managed the round easily because the horse knew exactly what

to do and stopped automatically at every house where we delivered.

Another job I tried was in Wardour Street, where one of my duties each morning was to remove condoms from the railings outside. 'I can't do that', I said. 'Somebody has to', was the reply.

Throughout this time I knew I could not comply with my mother's wishes and that I was biding my time until an opportunity came for me to go to sea, which I suppose I felt had always been my destiny.

My last option now was to join the Merchant Navy. My chance came when I was accepted for an eight week course at the London Nautical School of Catering, which was organised by the Westminster School of Cookery and held at the Red Ensign Club in Dock Street. At the end of the course it was 'PC5. Upstairs. See the Doctor. Back to me'. Then each successful student was allocated to a ship. At the Board of Trade Office in Dock Street, after being signed on, photographed and fingerprinted I was issued with a British seaman's ID card and given a rail warrant to travel to Southampton to join my first ship. I was sixteen years old.

## CHAPTER TWO

# My First Ship

The ship I joined at Southampton was the Dalfonn, a Norwegian tanker. The crew were all Norwegians and they could not go home to Norway, which was occupied territory. Some of them had bases in London or New York. There was one other English boy who joined the ship with me. We were the only two English members of the crew. The rest conversed

in Norwegian most of the time, although many of them could speak English.

When we first joined the ship one of the first things we saw was an amazing spread of food; eggs bacon, ham, cereals, fruit, everything we wanted to eat. But the abundance of food did not make up for all the other aspects of the ship, which we found strange. It was difficult for us to

settle in to our new life. We were the youngest crew members. We had to sleep in our clothes. We were isolated by the language barrier.

When we got to Falmouth where we had to wait to join a convoy before leaving Britain, we wondered if we would jump over the side and swim ashore. There was no way we could have done this!

The Atlantic crossing was rough and I was proud of the fact that I was not sea sick. The crossing time for a convoy was ten to fourteen days for any convoy could only go as fast as the slowest ship. When we were under way and had regular gun drill, I was ordered to stand by the Oertikon gun. We gradually got used to our new life. The two of us shared a cabin. It was not until many months and ships later that I realised what a luxury that was!

When the convoy anchored off Halifax, it split up and the ships went their various ways. Our ship received orders to go to Baltimore for dry dock in the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard, Sparrow's Point. On reaching Baltimore one of my first impressions, after experiencing years of the London blackout, was that the whole town was ablaze with light.

We discharged all the ammunition and the ship went into dry dock for three weeks. Most of the dockyard workers were women, doing 'men's jobs'. The crew slept on the ship but went ashore for meals in the shipyard canteen. Ashore the members of the crew could spend time at the Seaman's Mission and could also visit the clubs of any of the services, though we tended, quite naturally, to frequent the Navy Club. It was my first experience of a foreign country. We found the Americans very friendly and hospitable. One of the security guards at the docks invited me and

my friend to his home to meet his family and share a meal with them. This was my first impression of Americans, which I retain until this day.

When we left Baltimore we went to Chester, Pennsylvania, to load our cargo of oil and then to New York, where we loaded a deck cargo of fighter planes, which were crated for shipment to the U.K. When we were anchored in the harbour there was a U.S. prison ship alongside and we could see the cages. At intervals we heard a shout of, 'Liberty men, fall in aft of the after smoke stack! This is one thing that sticks in my mind.

I also remember in New York I queued for about half an hour in a department store to buy some nylons to take home for my mother.

Then we waited to join another convoy to cross the Atlantic. We were bound for Liverpool to discharge our cargo. The Dalfonn berthed at a dock in the Dingle, Liverpool, and we had to wait for a train warrant to London. One of the dock policemen asked us what time we would be leaving. When we told him he advised us that we could take ashore with us anything we wanted to, providing we came up with an offering for him. 'A few bits of bacon and some eggs would not come amiss!' When the time came for us to leave we duly delivered his request and the eggs and bacon disappeared under his helmet. I was sorry in a way to leave the Dalfonn. It had been a good trip and the crew were a kind crowd and looked after us. We did not know it at the time but our two-berth cabin and abundant food were luxuries. We expected to receive the same treatment on English ships, but we were to be cruelly disappointed.

I had been away from home for nearly

*Albert Dock*

three months without being in touch with my mother. There were no arrangements for receiving mail on this trip and she had no means of knowing when she would see me walk through the door. I had missed Christmas in England and my mother had spent it with our relatives in Tiptree.

I think that in the years to come my mother became used to this pattern of my seafaring life. She would not know for how long I'd be gone or when to expect me home. When I was on shore leave it might be for days or for weeks and I could be off again at a day's notice. Later, when the war was over, I was able to give her an itinerary with a list of ports of call where mail could be collected.

The neighbours got used to my comings and goings. 'I see your son's home again, Mrs. Lilley. I saw the salmon tins in the dustbin'. Apart from the nylons, on many future trips I tried to bring home presents of food, which depended largely on the cargo of my last ship. It might be tinned meat or fish, a huge hand of green bananas, a net of oranges, or maybe half a carcass of lamb. I would roll up in style in a taxi with my offering. My friend John remembers calling at my home one day and being given some oranges from a large bag I had brought home with me. I was not there. I

had gone back to sea. Once I arrived home with an African Grey parrot which was not a popular present. My mother did not like it at all and I had to sell it. I was quite sorry as I had grown quite attached to it after sharing my cabin with it for several weeks. After hiding under the bunks for some days, the parrot was coaxed out and made himself at home, strutting around the floor of the cabin. I think there were about eleven parrots on board for that homeward trip. The man who purchased my parrot was interested in acquiring more and told me what to look for if I ever had the opportunity to bring home another African Grey, but I never did.

When on shore leave the number of days due would be calculated on the time we had spent at sea. There was an extra day for every Sunday we worked. New postings were obtained from the Pool in Dock Street. Sometimes they required seamen urgently, other times one might wait weeks for another ship. There was always a queue of seamen at the Pool and a list of ships in port was posted just inside the door. Of course, when I first joined the queues I had no means of knowing anything about the various ships available or which one to opt for, even if there was any choice left.

Dock Street was a busy bustling place, with dozens of pubs which opened early in the

*London Docks*

morning and were filled with dock workers drinking coffee and rum. The Pub directly opposite the dock gates was called the 'New York Stores', probably because most ships bound for New York left from London.

Some men, as soon as they got their pay, deposited most of it behind the bar and asked the landlord to tell them when the money ran out. The Red Ensign Club was also in Dock Street and was a very popular venue with seamen and dockers coming and going all day long. The whole place was a constant hive of activity, with trucks, barrows, trolleys, carts everywhere and taxis dropping off passengers and picking

up new ones. There was strict security on the high dock gates where a pass was needed to get in or out.

On a nostalgic visit to Dockland in the nineteen eighties, I walked along the river from Tower Hill, through Wapping, to the place where I remembered the dock entrance to be. Turning the corner I had a shock to see the gates had disappeared and there were no recognisable landmarks, apart from the pubs. Preparations were under way to start the construction of the Dockland Light Railway and the Canary Wharf development. Now little remains of the dockland I remember.

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS - AUTUMN 2014

**Sheila R. Cope Membership Secretary**

**I**n connection with the White Cliffs Walking Festival we joined a tour of Deal's Blue Plaque Trail and congratulate the Deal Society for their energy in continuing to record the fame of many former residents. The circular plaques that we saw commemorated people rather than events and we were grateful to the vice-chairman of the Deal Society who led a very interesting walk.

In spite of the summer break we have recruited new members, some of whom joined as a result of our outings, thanks to "the Pats" whose hard work demonstrates that the Dover Society is such a worthwhile organisation.

We therefore welcome (in order of joining):- Mr F Field, Mr J & Mrs J Duggan, Mrs P Barber, Mr D & Mrs C Donnelly, Mr I Keyser, Mrs S-J Hart & Mr R Hart, Miss S Beer and Mr D & Mrs J Kay. We now number 471.

Due to late notification Mr Keith Wells from Sandwich was omitted from last year's obituaries.

At 479 our membership number is higher than it has ever been, thanks to those who have introduced new members and to those who have paid their subscriptions on time.

A record number are now paying their subscriptions by standing order which is excellent from both the members' and the Society's viewpoint because it avoids the need for reminders, saves money on postage and provides us with an income which can be safely anticipated.

Our welcome new members in order of joining (or re-joining) are:- Mr D & Mrs P Carter, Ms C Hawkins, Mr K Vincent, Mr B & Mrs C Walters, Mr JL & Mrs FL Sykes, Mr H & Mrs L Tbh, Mr L Brooks, Mrs M Harcourt-Ronaldson, Mr P & Mrs A Castle, Mrs J Bygrave and Mr W Fawcus.