

## CHAPTER II

RM Volunteer – Moorgate – Commando Course – Bickley - Weekend Camps – Snowdon – National Service - Lymstone – Sea Service  
– Whale Island – Illustrious – Home Fleet - Corporal of the Gangplank – Ships band - Dingy sailing – Amphibious Wing – Landing craft – Stoker -  
Beach Control Unit – Signalling – Map making – Beach Survey Unit – Poole Harbour.

In 1948, the government decreed all men over the age of eighteen were to take part in two years National Service, in one of the three services. These years, could be, deferred – ensuring apprenticeships and training schemes completed before entering. I elected to do my National Service during my apprenticeship and serve an extra year to make up for the two years lost. That meant I would be ‘out of my time’ by the time I was twenty-one. The three years spent as an apprentice soon past by.

A group of us lads - in The Boys Brigade, decided to join the Royal Marine Forces Volunteer Reserve [RMFVR] based at Moorgate in London. I think it was only the thrill of the challenge and the uniform, which drove us on. By signing on allowed our National Service time to be spent in a unit that normally would not take two-year entrants. Meanwhile, my best friend David Villers left North London Polytechnic to start a job with a northern-based newspaper as a trainee sports correspondent.

The Royal Marines formed in the middle of the seventeenth century to be part of the compliment onboard capital ships... they were mainly to act as guardians to the captain and officers... accommodated on mess decks that separated officers from men. Their secondary job was to guard the officer’s quarters, gangways, embarkation entries, quarterdecks, cells and gunnery decks. During battle, they not only guarded those spaces but platforms in the ships rigging - to kill opposing sharpshooters and to maim the directing officers of opposing ships. In many instances, they provided shore going raiding parties - acting as Special Forces. The Corps of Royal Marines divided into three Wings: Sea Service, previously described, Commando and Amphibious.

The term commando originated from the Boar War. They were mounted light infantry commanded to hit and run as armed raiding parties. Their task was not to be bogged down by conventional warfare situations by holding positions awaiting backup troops and provisions but to be flexible in approach. Churchill ordered the forming of Commandos Units during The Second World War with a similar job in mind.

It was not long before splinter groups – Special Forces, began to be formed which attended to specific demands. All these groups: Landing Craft for Infantry and Tanks, Small Boat Raiding Craft, Special Boat Section, Beach Control Parties, Boom Defence, underwater swimmers, divers and shoreline specialists were amalgamated into the Amphibious Section Royal Marines at Poole.

As soon as we were kitted we had to attend lectures on the history of the corps and to fall-in for basic drill. It was all very informal and friendly, great emphases made that the detachment was a large family. It expected that we would attend as many lecture nights and informal occasions as possible. It did not take many weeks before we were considered fit to march in public and wear the uniform on every occasion.

Now most of my weekends were booked for rifle shooting. We all arrived at the Moorgate drill hall where a Royal Navy truck took us to one of the two ranges, Bickley or Pirbright. Our Saturday nights were spent in the huts close to the rifle range. Now, even my reading time taken over, evenings and weekends filled.

The commando training took place on the Welsh hills where camping out was normally held during the winter. Route and speed marches organized for groups and pairs. Map reading and survival training were all part of the experience. I do not remember anyone dropping out or

questioning what we were instructed to do. We were given, basic infantry training with a modicum of unarmed combat, cliff climbing, rope work plus the usual assault courses. After attending regularly for over nine months and passing a set series of commando exercises in the Welsh hills, route marches and target practice, we finally climbed Snowdon, which earned our green beret.

Every year, in November, the Royal Marines Volunteer Reserve invited to contribute a contingent towards the Lord Mayor's inaugural show. A squad, including myself, practised drill and marching on the Honourable Artillery Company's drill square, which was just next door, for weeks before the event. There was also a regular monthly dance, attended in walking out uniform; the canteen bar was always open which provided a decorative backdrop to the occasion. It was without doubt an excellent convivial company without any stress or bad feelings generated from any quarter. Everyone was a volunteer and wanted to be there and to take part in all the activities.

The year was up... It was now 1953, I was eighteen, Mrs Dale's Diary the most successful radio soap, gave the life of a doctors wife, that was distinctly upper-middle class in content. Fifty percent of all children went to Sunday school and about the same percentage of boys enrolled in a youth organization. Although I did not recognise the fact the consumer society was about to gather momentum.

My call-up papers arrived and off I went off to Lymptone, Devon, to do my infantry training, which was to take seventeen weeks. I became one of the 843 squad. During our training we had instruction on personal hygiene - how to wash and iron, how to clean our teeth, what to wear, how to wear it and how to clean it. Corps history was emphasised reinforced by a simple written test, contraception matters and a medical with its attendant jabs and inoculations. We had the pleasure to make up a concert party for the annual Christmas party.

Most people would think that the training would follow how things done in the conventional army - after all, it was infantry training? There was a concerted effort by RM Instructors to be different from the Army. I never heard a swear word used by our company sergeant major during drill nor by our small arms instructor. In fact, swearing never adopted by any of the staff. The raised voice too was something frowned upon. All commands made only loud enough for those men under instruction to hear. There was no exaggerated stamping of feet. These changes from Army habit to Royal Marine difference was recognised and emphases made - it was instilled in us to be different not just for differences sake but because it was considered to be a better way. Every man who passed the entrance inspections was accepted whatever his height. There was a further emphasis on initiative, freedom of movement - to achieve the objective and sometimes choice of weapons carried. The *esprit de corps* - engendered a dedication... not to let down the squad or section - to those around him, who were to be considered a close-knit family.

My ten-week infantry training started October 1953. I arrived at Waterloo Station and travelled down to Lymptone in Devon in company with some other lads who were joining up. I had to leave my uniform behind, to be re-issued when I got there. We were to make up the compliment of 843 squad for basic training, led by Colour Sergeant Snowden... There was about fifty of us split into two huts, with a Corporal in charge of each.

We started our training... a more complete version of what we volunteers had been doing for the past year. Towards the end of our ten-weeks - Christmas 1953, the squad enrolled in a Christmas concert party to sing two songs... Marbella Margarita and Little David trained and conducted by the Surgeon Lieutenant. Two days later, we went home on leave to start our next assignment when we arrived back - to continue training in our chosen Wing.

After our initial training, we had to make a choice between the three Wings: 45 Commando, who were in Malaya, Amphibious Section at Poole Harbour and Sea Service. Having been in the Commandos I elected to go into Sea Service fancying a trip round the world with sunshine, grass

skirted native girls, the sound of Hawaiian chants and the sun glittering of the wave tops around Gibraltar, Singapore and Barbados. What a shock I was going to have!

I was detached and sent to Whale Island Gunnery School, Portsmouth, with a small group to attend a gunnery course, scheduled to last four weeks. Here all recruits had to double to all lectures, demonstrations and practices. It was freezing cold being in mid winter and it snowed most of the time I was there. The practices completed firing the four point seven guns - the standard gunnery piece. All the equipment was old and much used evident by the amount of paint that had been built up on the carriage. The four training weeks went by quickly - found the squad hanging round the Company notice board to see what ship allotted.

At last, my name appeared telling me to present myself to Portsmouth Harbour where HMS *Illustrious*, a large [by British standards] aircraft carrier, was taking in stores and additional crew. Built by Vickers Armstrong and launched on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1939, commissioned a year later at Barrow, to carry fifty-two aircraft ... the ship was now nearly twenty years old. I was one of a half dozen Royal Marines who had to present ourselves to the Officer of the Watch, get ourselves new kit, be introduced to the hammock - be shown our mess deck... where I slung mine and ate there, for just over a year.

It would be nice to be able to say that for all that time I spent onboard I learnt valuable lessons, was introduced to new exciting experiences, prepared myself for taking an active life in modern Britain and be shown how efficient and up-to-date our military might was. However, I cannot say that. We were a training ship for aircrews and sailed out into mainly coastal waters to fly-off and land-on planes. At action stations, my post was on the island operating one of the seventeen-bofor guns.

The ship was leaking to the extent that the pumps could hardly control the inflow of water. Most of the equipment was out of date and extensively used. There were many crashes and frequent ditching of written off planes. Whereas the ship's naval crew were fully occupied running the ship and the Fleet Air Arm fully engaged with their aircraft we The Royal Marines were monstrously scrubbing decks, standing guard and operating some of the guns. There was absolutely no point in us being there - firing the guns to give the aircrews a taste of attacking through simulated ack-ack fire - this practice firing could have been performed equally well by naval ratings. As for scrubbing decks these, we had to make-do with hand scrubbers only and take up water with cloths - long handled brooms and squeegees banned. At one stage, we took onboard some new replacement Royal Marines who had flown back to the UK after having just come out of the jungles of Malaya fighting terrorists. Now it was their turn to scrub decks and paint ship. What a waste of experienced fighting men by the military planners.

Whilst onboard I struck up a friendship with another Marine who had his coxswain's ticket for dinghy sailing he asked me if I would crew for him. Thereafter, wherever HMS *Illustrious* entered port - if suitable harbour facilities - we would launch a General Purpose [GP] 14 dingy and have a sail. This we did on many occasions becoming quite expert at launching and coming into position to be hoisted inboard.

To launch we had to arrange for a forklift driver to carry the boat out of the hanger onto the lift and deposit it under the crane. Then the crane driver would drop the boat over the side and we would pick it up after guiding it under the gangway ladder.

Anything under a force five wind which was not about to increase we could sail. If a gale was imminent, a cone hoisted. This warning had to be obeyed - return onboard immediately. On one occasion in Belfast, we went out on a lovely day in a force three wind and sailed for over an hour testing ourselves on going about and close hauling into the wind. By this time, we were quite some way from the ship and did not notice that the wind was rising. When we thought we ought to return we looked to the ship and saw that they had hoisted a cone. We set about returning onboard only to

discover the wind and tide against us, coming onshore - into Belfast Bay, and the sea starting to get up, making a return trip more lengthy. We started tacking furiously trying to make headway. By this time, even we could see that the waves were beginning to be considerably fiercer and I do not think we needed to look at each other to realise that we had ourselves into quite a pickle.

At last we began to get sufficiently near to the ship to see that she was streaming before the wind and tide, which did not allow us any lee to shelter - we could then sail to either side for hoisting inboard. The officer of the watch was there as well as the guards and duty crane driver. The side of an aircraft carrier is I suppose as high as a five-floor block of flats, the sides curve upwards and outwards - overhanging anything beneath... all accentuating height, weight and mass... is intimidating!

This was all becoming decidedly embarrassing and we knew that the flight deck personnel would be attending the steam catapult gear for repairs for they had been there when we left. There were times in my life when I wished I were many miles away from where I was at that moment and this was one of them. What was needed now was a very slick pickup of the hook and speedy exit from our embarrassment.

As we came up to the extended boom which was projecting out from the ships side, [these booms, perhaps two or more on either side of the ship, had trailing ropes for small boats to tie-up to and rope ladders for boat exit and entry], we got into a position for the crane driver to lower the pulley and hook. We could see that the chopiness of the water which by this time had a four to five foot rise and fall.

Now, if you can imagine the scene: a large pulley block and hook about the size of a small car wheel and weighing about a hundredweight, with four pieces of spliced wire each with their spliced eyelet - for attaching to the dinghy, and all swaying about above your head - whilst you are rising and sinking with the waves.

Now all that is bad enough if there is just you, your mate, and the crane driver in attendance. In this case, all our antics observed with great interest by a gathering group of well-wishers and an even greater group of loafers who had had up to then a boring day - wanting to be entertained - watch somebody else in trouble.

It was very difficult to stay up with the trailing rope ladder - to grab hold of it without being plucked-out of the dinghy. For the umpteenth time we tacked into position only to be forced back. At onetime we ended up with our mast under the boom and as the wave jerked us up the mast caught under the boom and released it from its cradle. [These booms were about twenty feet long and over two feet in circumference]. It swung round and smashed against the ships side that bought a muted cheer from the onlookers. I say muted because that crash heralded the irate face of the Commander peering over the side and a stream of shouts emanating from his now reddening face.

We had to make our way to the next forward boom with a trailing group of watchers, both official and some, frankly, stirrers of the spilling pot. Here the trailing rope and rope ladder were adjacent. I managed to mount the ladder whilst this time holding onto the bowline. With this, I could let it out or pull it in so that the pulley was directly over the dinghy. My friend shackled on and the crane took up the weight. Now he and the boat hoisted up onto the deck with a loud cheer from all the faces filling the portholes all along the ships side. We were ever so careful after that.

During my time aboard ship, The Captain of Marines asked me what my job was before joining up. When he heard I was a trained artist, he lost no time in asking for a picture of his wife to be sketched. This soon brought in many other requests which although bought me in much wanted cash it prevented me from going ashore. However, what it did do is to have me transferred to the painting stores section where I placed under the chief petty officer whose part time job was painting ships crests. These ships crest is made of moulded, painted and gilded Plaster of Paris, ordered by the ships captain to present to visiting dignitaries or similar officials, when the ship put into dock

home or ports abroad. Our presentation plaques were extremely well made and finely decorated – no expense was spared to ensure that they were perfectly produced. Any gilt was in gold leaf and the final operation was a coating of varnish. The rest of my time spent aboard served in the paint store except when detailed off for watch keeping - corporal-of-the-gangway; first making sure that a store of plaques had been put by - ready for issue. My other call to fame was when the ship called at Trondheim, Norway, and a ships band was called for. As I had been a drummer in the Boys Brigade, I found myself roped into this scratch band to augment the ships Royal Marine buglers who were also drummers. Thankfully, this was a one off and my skills were not called for again.

During one of my leaves from the National service, my father's lodge held its annual dance. He invited me along. Therefore, making up a party of three, including my mother, we made our way to the Kensington Lodge where we met up with my father's friends, Nobby Clarke his wife and daughter at whose table we sat at. Naturally, I danced with the daughter who told me that she worked as a legal secretary in London. How I came to pluck up sufficient courage to ask her out I do not know, but I did and so a relationship blossomed even after her telling me that she was unofficially engaged to a chap who was in Australia.

That year Stan got married to Jean after courting her for over a year. He was twenty and Jean 18 - the marriage conducted at the Methodist Church, North Harrow. Stan was not sure that getting married at such an early age was both sensible and wise but continued with the inevitable course. I was the best man and to match the groom remember buying my first charcoal grey suit. They both settled down to married life in rented accommodation, in walking distance from his old home. I was still doing my National Service and Derek was twelve. My relationship with Barbara continued for a few more months. I mentioned to her about getting engaged - trying to put a more committed basis into our friendship. I am sure my brother's wedding and my mentioning 'engagement', prompted Barbara to make a choice. Within a short period, she broke off the friendship saying that she was going to marry the chap she was engaged to...

I was so annoyed and could not believe that someone could be so deceitful - being led to believe that the other fellow was but a memory. We were so near to announcing our engagement. I think the Clarke's were upset and annoyed with their daughter. I remember being so miffed that I told my mother and that her reply was that I should not to let it upset me... a fat lot of good that was for I was hopping mad!

My second flirt with the opposite sex occurred later when I went out with a girl that I had met at the dance studio in Wembley. Janet lived in Sudbury Hill and was a local beauty queen. We went out together for some months and over Christmas, invited to our family's festivities. She wanted to dance and through a total lack of understanding on my part, I thought it silly to dance in our front room. I was still utterly unsophisticated - lacking social graces - subtleties of courtship - showing romantic feelings and desire.

Once again, my dealings with the opposite sex were short lived, plagued by misunderstandings and lacking sexual awareness - regarding what to do and when to do it! I had to do a lot better than this or I was going to be destined for the shelf ...?

In 1954, after a visit to Aberdeen in June Illustrious was taken out of service – destined for the breakers yard! Again, I had to choose where I would like to go within the Corp. A chance offered to go to the Amphibious Wing in Poole, Dorset, which was now the main school for Infantry Landing Craft, Breach Control, Small Boat Section and Raiding Parties. My request was accepted and so off I went to Poole to do a Landing Craft Stokers Course, the aim of which was to produce engine room mechanics. I learnt all about Ford Marine Engines trained to occupy the engine compartment, maintain the engines and drive the craft. The stoker of an infantry landing craft sits between these two in line engines with the two propeller shafts spinning either side of you, two levers engage the drive for forward and reverse and the throttles connected to the carburettors determine the

revolutions. The telegraphs are placed on the bulkhead either side of the armoured door in front of you which is clamped shut during a landing so too the round hatch above your head. Its top speed was about eleven knots. However, the craft was extremely active in rough water and because of its slab-side easily affected by a strong wind blowing on the crafts quarters during a landing. I suppose that as an analogy you might imagine going to sea in a tin bath. It was not something you would wish to be in when landing on an enemy shore covered by well dug in heavy machine guns when occupied kedging off whilst worrying about the thirty or so troops waiting to land. It was equally difficult to disembark or embark troops from a heaving troopship, which towers above your head with a choppy sea running.

With just four months - before demobbed, I was asked to present myself to the Beach Control Section - to join their small team. Now all my days taken up signalling, sorting out beach signs and learning how to set up a beach landing position on an enemy shore. These were probably my most interesting days spent during my national service. Days were spent discussing various beach conditions which might have to be dealt with - to allow 'entry over', trying to visualise for every possible attack. Eventually my time was up and I had to report to Eastney Barracks for discharge.

Joining the Royal Marines had been a serious mistake... I was not considering the corps as a full-time career. I should have completed my apprenticeship, and City and Guilds course. My knowledge of the industry - other processes and trades, unknown to me; I was ignorant of the advances taking place in technology...

I should have instead, applied to join the Royal Engineers, who had within their service, a mapping section - the Survey Section catered for all the army's printing and pre-printing processes. It was an allied trade - would help me in civilian life - keep me in touch with other printing trades and techniques.

After leaving my National Service, I had to do a further six years in the volunteer reserves. After the first camp - a two-week camp in Malta, on landing craft, I did not show my face again until I handed in my kit five years later.

About 160,000 men were called up each year beginning in 1948. By the time I served the Malaya conflict was the main drain on these resources. The NS was much to do with social control as to provide a defence force. It broke up family links, disrupted apprenticeships, imposed harsh anti social training and became a political tool. NS preserved the status quo for a martial, class ridden, society.