

BOOK EXCERPT

At 99 Ben Hamilton (26-28) is the second oldest OP. Recently his memoir "Ben's Yarns" was published privately. It includes a chapter about his time at the Nautical College from which the edited excerpt below is taken. Ben lives in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Life at Pangbourne was very different from life at King's School Canterbury (where Ben previously studied). It was not until after I left Pangbourne that I began to understand why. It lay in the attitude of the College, staff and cadets towards training and learning. We, the cadets, were all (or nearly all) destined to become officers in the Merchant Navy. The passing of exams for Second Mate was the first major hurdle in our lives. We wore the uniform of cadets in the Royal Naval Reserve and we were addressed as cadets, individually and collectively. The standard of our technical training in seamanship and navigation was that of the Board of Trade and we aimed at that specific standard. So we no longer wasted time debating our future nor were we subject to sermons and lectures on what our aims should be or given the line that learning for learning's sake was all that mattered.

A word or two about how the College was organised. Two years at Pangbourne, or one year on a training ship, counted as a year sea time for the four years needed to sit for the Second Mate exam. Most cadets at Pangbourne started in the year that they became 16 but the College did take younger lads. As the Board of Trade required all candidates for Second Mate to be at least 21 years of age, coupled with the need to have three years' sea time and allowing for time between voyages, the result was that most cadets left the College between their 17th and 18th birthdays.

We were organised on a term basis meaning that one was with the same term group for most activities. Terms were named after sailing ships once operated by Devitt & Moore. Originally I was part of the Parramatta term but then was moved to 4th Illawarra. The 4th designation indicated that there had been three other Illawarra terms since the college started in 1917. Each term had a dormitory and its own table in the dining room and for almost all lessons we remained together. This meant that as part of a term you became part of a specific group. We became interdependent and helped each other unlike the 'each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost' attitude at my previous school.

Arriving at Pangbourne at the age of nearly 16 I was a year or more older than most of my term. As my cadetship from the Union Castle Company was only for two years, in the first week I moved up one year and was put in a term (4th Illawarra) that was starting its second year. I was surprised at the easy way I was accepted into this group, helped along and frequently saved from ignorant blunders.

Each term was under the direction of a Cadet Captain assisted by a Cadet Leader. They were drawn from other terms that were nearing completion of their time at the College. Each group of three terms was under a Chief Cadet Captain and the whole was under the CCCC (Chief Cadet Captain of the College). The powers of these cadets were strictly

controlled by the Chief Executive Officer and were in the main of an advisory nature and referral to the next in the chain of command – similar to the limited powers given to leading hands and petty officers in the Royal Navy. Each of the Cadet Captains was judged by the way he handled his term, particularly with respect to turnout at parades (of which there were plenty), orderliness of the dormitory and behaviour at mealtimes. A general sense of not letting our term leaders down prevailed – again unlike my previous school where prefects constantly looked out for, and punished, the least transgression.

Staff organisation was functional. At the top of the tree was the Captain Superintendent, Captain A.F.G. Tracey RN – and don't forget the RN! He was a figurehead, referred to by us cadets as 'The Bloke'. He seldom appeared except arrayed in a frock coat at Sunday Morning Divisions. Next to him was the Chief Executive Officer, Commander J.H. Blair DSC, RNR – known to the cadets as "Jackie" or "The Wee Mon." What he lacked in physical stature, Blair more than made up for by his forthright, tough presence and character. In truth he was the backbone of the College. He had been the navigator of the *St. George*, the ship that located and mapped the southern magnetic pole, and had been awarded the Polar Medal. He won his DSC in the Great War as navigator of the submarine *MI* which went up the Baltic, mostly submerged, and torpedoed two Russian battleships in Kronstad Harbour after they had joined the Bolshevik revolution.

There were three Instructors, all former Chief Petty Officers RN. Bill Stamper taught seamanship and parade training. "Rubberneck" Martin ran physical training, gym and swimming. Charlie Sewell looked after signals and allied subjects. They were dressed similarly to CPOs in the RN but had cap badges and buttons of the old Devitt & Moore design. On the academic side someone who stood out was the Padre, Minifee Hawkins. He had been a lieutenant in the Great War and lost a portion of the back of his head. He had an original approach to the teaching of English: "We cannot give the time in two years to teach you a great deal about English literature, but we can introduce you to some of the better books and maybe teach you something about writing letters and reports." Thanks to him, I discovered the wartime poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

The expression, "You'd better smarten up!" was used frequently at Pangbourne. Indeed, we were kept to a high level of smartness at all times. Parades preceded most activities. We marched from place to place instead of shambling. We soon learned not to place our hands in our pockets. Punishments were infrequent and consisted chiefly of extra duties or drills. There was not a single case of corporal punishment being administered during my two years at the College. This confirmed a belief I had acquired at my two previous places of learning that there are better ways of promoting discipline.

A normal day consisted of turn out, lash up and stow hammocks, showers and an activities' parade at which the order given was "Off caps and coats. Go." Ten minutes of physical training exercises followed, then a run and deep breathing, then "On caps and coats. Go" and off we marched to breakfast. After this we had time to ourselves, a good deal of which was spent polishing boots and brushing coats prior to Divisions, prayers and then school till noon with a ten minute break about eleven. Before lunch - the food was good compared to what I had been used to - we had wash-up time followed by

another parade and a march to the dining hall. In the afternoon there was a stand easy period before games involving most of us each day. In the winter we had evening school whereas in summer we had games after school. Then we had an evening parade followed by tea (supper).

In school, because there was relevance between what we were learning to our future needs, I did much better in class and even won a few prizes. Gone were the days when I spent hours learning Latin or reading chapters from the Old Testament. And I made real friends - the sort of friends that one saw from time to time during the holidays and even kept up with after leaving the College.