

HMS RELENTLESS



1951-1953

RECOLLECTIONS

DENNIS ROBINS

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Recollections from Dennis (Robbie) Robins CKX 897782. 1951-52.

National Service.

Having a naval family background - my Dad, an Uncle and Cousin all served in the RN throughout World War 2 - I requested the Navy for my 2 years National Service and was delighted when I received my call-up to the Senior Service.

I joined HMS Raleigh at Torpoint as a National Servicemen in January 1951 and whilst I will never regret that decision, I was unaware the Navy were opposed - in principle - to short term 'weekend sailors'. As a result we were treated as second-class citizens throughout our service. I must stress though, not by the Skipper or the crew, but by the Admiralty.

Our pay, at 28 shillings a week, was less than half that the regulars received. We were allocated NS Ships Book numbers (SB Nos.) ensuring we were always last in the pay queue, for leave or any other activity. If recently recruited regulars joined the ship their SB No. was always ahead of National Servicemen..

After pay stoppages for a small allocation home, payment for a new 'tiddly suit', Mess Manager's charges etc, I received £2 one fortnight and £1.10 shillings the next. Just about enough for one run ashore every two weeks. However, during the last 6 month of service it was increased to regulars pay, That was viewed as an inducement to sign on for a further 7 years but few were tempted.

During the three-years following Demob, every NS sailor had to return for 3-weeks Reserve Training to qualify as an Auxiliary Watch keeper (AWK). This also included an additional star. Big deal! Returning for three weeks generally meant taking special leave from work and going back on NS pay. The NS pay was well below my Fire Service pay and I was in need of a loan to survive as I had married a year after Demob.

These comments are not a gripe but an explanation how the Admiralty looked upon short term National Servicemen.

The Ship

Following basic training at HMS Raleigh and Stoker qualification, I was drafted to Portsmouth Barracks in readiness for HMS Relentless re-commissioning.

We settled down quickly as a new ships company enjoying a fair social life with plenty of sport on a ship with good camaraderie.

I played soccer for the Stokers team, not always making the ship's team & also took up Whaler Boats rowing including a great win in Derry when we won the flotilla cup.

On demob I was fortunate on joining London Fire Brigade to find they had a whaler boat crew, being invited to join them & rowing in several events over the next five years.

Our Stokers mess comprised a very mixed bag with a few who had served during the war and included a three-badge Killick in charge of our mess, Eddie Greenwood, who was good leader and season sailor. There were only a few NS stokers aboard but I never detected any animosity or untoward attitudes from any crew member during my two years.

Shortly after commissioning, we slipped from Portsmouth Dockyard to Spithead for anchor trials. It was our first day at sea and it turned out to be one of the most embarrassing early episodes for the Skipper and the Ships Company.

On that summer's day in July 1951, every eye in the dockyard and ashore was focussed on this 'secret', 'first to be reconstructed' Type 15 Frigate but in addition, we were Chatham ship operating out of Portsmouth!

During the trials, when the anchor was on the sea bed, it was established that all the feed tanks and main feed water tank were empty and therefore no steam could be produced to raise the anchor. It turned out a Dockyard matey had placed a temporary bung in the Main Feed Tank and because he had forgotten to remove it, it resulted in all the ships feed water being drained down and into the bilges.

As a result, two tugs had to be deployed to tow the ship back to the dockyard after an embarrassed and red faced crew had had to hoist the anchor aboard by hand.

The ribbing we took on our first time ashore, wearing our new 'HMS Relentless' cap tallies, never stopped from the Pompey matelots and umpteen Punch-ups ensued.

Among the many ship and port-division insults the obvious ones were, "Did you see the new secret Chatham ship? "It has no engine power and needs to be towed around by tugs" etc etc.

Although it was a day to forget, the insults lasted much longer.

Londonderry

After our initial trials we joined the Londonderry flotilla as 'Sub Chaser' joining a few fairly ancient Loch Class frigates. Within a short time we become flotilla leader with 'Captain D on board.

Londonderry was the base for our Third Training Flotilla and we spent a fair bit of time there in between activities in the North Sea and around Scotland. It was a good run ashore with plenty of pubs, cinemas and an occasional dance at the Guildhall.

But while there was not the violence the City experienced in later years, one had to be very careful, avoiding conversations or activities associated with religious sectarian activities, or else you were quickly in trouble.

We soon established the 'Orange & Green pubs' to avoid and patriotic songs not to sing but it was an education we never forgot.

The only night of the year we were banned from going ashore was March 17th, St Patricks Day, the Skipper knowing well there would be trouble if we ventured into the pubs that night. Instead we had a few days at sea and though disappointed at the time, in hindsight it was a good idea.

Being very close to the Irish Free State we could easily get across the border with Muff or Buncrana just a short journey on the bus.

Many items of food were still rationed in the UK and N Ireland but Eire had no such problem and I still recall, with relish, having ham egg and chips the first time for many years and before the war. Although still on basic pay I enjoyed that treat in Buncrana several times.

Another bonus was the ability to bring over the border a small amount of rationed food, including tinned fruit and other delicacies. I remember my Mum's delight when I took a few tins of pears, peaches and other goodies when I was next home on leave.

In 1952 we were part of a huge NATO exercise in the North Sea, if I recall rightly, it was named 'Mainbrace.' I think we were the only British ship in the American flotilla, which included a Carrier with an Admiral on Board.

Having excellent Asdic equipment one of our main tasks was obviously the detection of any submarines in the area.

Part way through the exercise rumour suggested we had a contact, a suspected submarine. The skipper immediately advised the Carrier about the loud pings only to be informed they were already aware of these and had identified it as a fishing trawler.

'Relentless' continued to prosecute the contact and again informed the Carrier we were still to receiving strong pings from what we believed to be a submarine, but again they were ignored.

However, shortly afterwards the American Carrier sent a message to 'Relentless' stating that, "we have just been sunk by the 'suggested' Fishing Trawler"! I was only a lowly stoker but I understand this was true and it could not have happened to a more deserving Admiral.

The final episode of the lengthy exercise was a two-day stopover in Bergen to relax after about three weeks at sea.

The Port Watch had the first shore leave but unfortunately I was Starboard Watch. That first night, with many other ship companies including other nations ashore, several 'punch ups' occurred and several bars being wrecked. The upshot was that shore leave was cancelled that second day and I didn't manage to get ashore in Bergen for another 50-odd years when on a Baltic Cruise!

Key West & Devonport

Being the First Reconstructed Type 15 we were earmarked to make a courtesy visit to in January 1952 Key West to demonstrate our Asdic and Sub Detecting skills.

However, whilst turning round in Loch Foyle we sustained serious boiler damage when an experimental water gauge, an Igema, failed.

The "Igema" (I'm confident that was the name but not the spelling) allowed the leading hand, the water tanky responsible for maintaining water levels, to carry out the task from the plates rather than the gratings, whilst still carefully watching the gauge on the top drum from below.

The failure of the Igema meant there was no water in the top drum and with numerous oil burning sprayers in use the result was catastrophic. The top drum collapsed, the boiler was beyond repair and the duty boiler room crew who were in serious danger had to carry out an emergency evacuation. A subsequent enquiry apportioned blame to most of the engine room duty watch.

Resulting from this damage we steamed immediately to Devonport for repairs, leaving our sister ship, 'Rocket', taking our place in Key West. That was a trip we had all dreamt about and I can still recall many years later the feelings and disappointment from all the ship's company.

During our unfortunate and lengthy stay in 'Guzz' King George VI passed away on the 6th February after a long illness. While we all had different opinions at the time, quite correctly all leave was cancelled but as I was due a long weekend in the 'smoke' that Friday it was a very sad day all round.

All thoughts were obviously with the Queen, the Royal Family and in particular Princess Elizabeth, who was on a visit to Kenya with Prince Phillip, when she had to immediately return to London immediately to carry out her official duties.

Within hours most of our ships company were dispatched to Plymouth Hoe with crews from several other ships, the Army and RAF to prepare a fitting tribute to the late King.

I can't remember the numbers present but I can remember it was a huge turnout although I can recall the drilling and subsequent march past before parading in three ranks to fire a Volley of Shots from 303 rifles. Whoa betide the cretin who fired out of turn, I doubt he was ever seen again, probably on draft to a coal burner! Marching and firing was quite a daunting task for a Stoker but another memory was a sore shoulder from the 303 recoil!

That about concludes my recollections as later that year having completed the requisite time in the RN, my 2 years was up. Thanks for the memories, it was an experience and without doubt, it helped make a man of me.

Dennis (Robbie) Robins.
17th June 2013.

PS. I can't be sure my informal recollections from 60+ years are factually correct so my apologies if there are a few discrepancies!

FOOTNOTE from Sam185

Dennis' memories of RELENTLESS' first day at sea are spot on as the (rather starchy) Ship's Log entry shows:

Saturday 16th July 1951

0900 Left A Lock proceeded to sea

0928 Fort Blockhouse abeam

0940 OSB abeam a/c Co 275° Sp 5

1231 Came to stbd anchor in 6 fathoms at 4 shackles

1250 Lowered whaler

1345 Clear lower deck of seaman

1355 Away motor boat and skimmers

1300 Hands piped to bathe

1330 Cleared water of bathers

1500 Clear lower deck raise anchor by hand

1600 Hands to tea

1620 Clear lower deck raise anchor by hand

1625 Tug VOLATILE alongside port, Tug TID50 standing by

1635 Tug TID50 took tow wire for'd.

1640 Under tow

1700 OSB abeam

1708 Hands prep to enter harbour