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British Broadcasting Corporation

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Born Leeds in 1924

Brought up in Hawick in the Borders of Scotland.

My father was a cloth designer, a Scotsman from Peebles, my mother came from the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Attended Ashville College, Harrogate.

I Left there in 1942.

Attended Galashiels Textile College, for 3 months then joined the Royal Navy.

Part 1.

I joined under an Admiralty scheme called the Y scheme, which was for 18 year olds with a sort of a secondary school education. Under the scheme there was the prospect that they might possibly be officer material, but there were no promises. You had a special medical, which I had in Edinburgh and you joined up as a rating like everybody else, as an Ordinary Seaman. Then you went to sea for a minimum of 3 months, I actually went to sea for 6 months, and then I went down to Portsmouth. There I was interviewed and I passed the interview board and was appointed to the naval RNVR Officers Training College, which was HMS King Alfred, based in Brighton and Hove.

There was Moden School in Brighton, then Lancing College in Shoreham and afterward at King Alfred Baths in Hove. You were there for 10 weeks as a cadet, then 2 weeks as an Officer under training. The navigational training was quite ingenious, on the cricket field at Lancing College it was laid out with sort of white markings, showing rocks, Lighthouse's, buoys and various navigational hazards. We were supplied with 'Walls' ice cream 'Stop-me and buy one' barrows, upon which the top of it was a chart of this field and a boat's compass. There were two of us per barrow, one pedalled it the other one acted as Navigator and that was how we learnt our pilotage and coastal navigation.

It was a very effective method of training actually, we also did fleet manoeuvres where you would have 4 ice cream barrows peddling round in line ahead and someone would say alter course, and we would alter course to another formation. It was a most effective way and a very simple way of training. It always struck me as being quite amusing ending up as I did working for Unilever, that I had peddled one of their 'Walls ice cream barrows!

I think the naval training was brilliant, ratings training at HMS Ganges, it was 12 weeks, and the Officer training was also 12 weeks but you learnt an enormous amount. In fact I have often thought since that the education authorities could have learned an awful lot from the Admiralty method of training it was very good.

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I met one or two of my school contemporaries there, I even met a chap with the same picture of a girlfriend as I had whom he ultimately married. In December 1942 I finished my ratings training then I went to sea in HMS Cumberland a County Class Cruiser of 10,000 tons and spent most of my time in the Arctic, including Iceland, Murmansk and Spitzbergen. Then I went down to HMS King Alfred in July 1943 and was commissioned in September 1943. Then I was a Temporary Acting Sub Lt, RNVR at age 19 and a half, if I had been under 19 and a half then I would have been a Midshipman, which in the navy was always known as the lowest form of humanity — commonly known as a Snottie!

Luckily I was just over the 19 and a half limit so I became a sub-Lt. Next I was appointed to HMS Western Isles in Tobermory, where the base was run by the infamous Commodore 'Monkey' Stevenson, who organised the training of escort vessels, Corvettes, Frigates, Destroyers and Trawlers in the art of sinking submarines. I was there as an Officer under training for 3 months, and 'Monkey' had a nasty hobby of sacking officers of visiting vessels. HMS Pickle a Fleet Minesweeper came in during December 1943 and he sacked the Asdic Control Officer so I had to replace him and this was how I started in my Minesweeping career. The 'Pickle' was an Algernine class Fleet Minesweeper of about 1,000 tonnes, with a complement of 8 officers and 110 ratings.

My first experience of minesweeping was off the east coast of England we were based in Harwich and during the war there was a swept channel all the way from the Thames up to the Forth. This channel had to be kept open and so we used to sweep part of it, up off the coast of Norfolk, and also we would escort east coast convoys there as well. It was better known as 'E-Boat' alley because the 'E-Boats' used to come out at night and lay magnetic mines by the buoys that marked out the swept channel.

You had two basic types of mines, there was the old fashioned sort the type you see at the seaside as a collecting box, which was a moored mine. This was anchored by a cable and floated just below the surface of the water, it had horns on it and if a vessel hit one of these horns it went off. The method of detonation was quite simple, the horns were soft and they contained a file of acid and when they were hit the acid file would break. It would then form up in a primary cell which created a current, which worked the detonator. The other type of mine was known as a 'ground'-mine, that was used in relatively shallow water and lay on the seabed. It was activated either by magnetism or by sound. In the case of the moored mine we had a serrated wire which we towed behind us, on our quarter. This cut the mooring wire, theoretically, the mine would float to the surface and then it would be sunk by rifle fire or exploded, whichever happened first.

In the case of ground mines, with magnetics we had what was known as the 'Double L' sweep. It consisted of two cables fastened together one was 500 yards long the other 300 yards long and on the end of each cable was an electrode. This formed a magnetic field behind the ship, as the ship was de-guassed in theory we would go over the mine and wouldn't detonate it but the magnetic field astern of us would! So of course you got this violent explosion behind you with no warning, it

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did sort of shake you up a bit.

With the acoustic mines you had a large bucket shaped container and inside which was a Kango-Hammer, the sort that chaps dig holes in the road with. It used to make this God-Awful clatter and this was lowered under the ship and you hoped it made a lot more noise than the ship, and would put the mine out before you got there!

Towards the end of the war the Germans became quite ingenious, they would fit these ground mines with an actuation mechanism, which could be anything up to 1 to 15, in other words they wouldn't go off until the 14th ship had gone over or the 10th ship or whatever. So of course you never really knew when an area was clear you had to continually sweep for magnetic mines because you probably might have to go over one 15 times before the thing would explode, so it was very difficult to declare an area as safe.

Then, during the Normandy invasion the Germans introduced what was know as the Oyster Mine and this had a sort of little set of bellows in it and when the ship passed over the displacement of the ship altered the pressure on the sea-bed and this activated the mine, now these, we couldn't sweep. The only protection was to move very slowly and the speed depended on the depth of water and the displacement of the ship. For example a 1,000 tonne Minesweeper was allowed to do 7 knots in 10 fathoms a Battleship was only allowed to do 3 knots. Other complications were, when the Germans in the moored mine fields used to put sweep-cutting devices, so we'd end up loosing our sweeps, all making it rather difficult.

When you swept a channel we had trawlers what were known as Dan Layers and they left little bouys rather like the bouys you see on lobster pots, which would mark the swept channel.

Training for D-Day

We were based at Harwich until the spring of 1944, then we went round to Portsmouth for various exercises prior to the Normandy operation. Exercises included sweeping at night particularly crossed tide, because when you are sweeping you have to be sure you know the exact piece of seabed that you have gone over. So if you are sweeping with the tide either coming from either the starboard or the port side you will drift with it so your course had to be altered to allow for this.

D-Day Sweep

In the case of the D-Day sweep, which was a night sweep, these bouys had little lights on them and they marked the swept channel, acting as a guide for vessels following the sweepers. On completing the sweep you could see the windows of the houses, we were perhaps 3 or 4 miles off the beaches, but then the inshore minesweepers went in further, the little motor minesweepers went right inshore.

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Also some motor launches were converted for sweeping, in-fact on D-Day we had two Motor Launches ahead of us to sweep before the Fleet sweepers came in, because they only drew about 4 feet of water so if there were any mines anywhere near the surface they would cut them before we came along.

Part 2.

To follow of D-Day and later service in the Far-East, including minesweeping off the Nickabar Islands.