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Biding His Time

by Richard Lewis

On the day of Stephen's enlistment, he arrived at the main gate of the naval college HMS St Vincent, carrying a battered leather suitcase of belongings and a heart full of trepidation. He was led across the vast parade ground by a senior trainee to a meeting room with a group of lads from all parts of the country; many of whom unlike Stephen, actually harboured a desire for a life at sea.

Having signed up for the dreaded twelve, they were escorted to the stores to take charge of a bewildering collection of kit. The list was endless - Oilskin, Singlet, Drawers, Handkerchief, Cap, Cap Box, Lanyard, Stockings, No 6 jumper, No 6 trousers, on and on it went.

They lugged their gear in a kitbag slung over their shoulders, to the dormitory that would be their home for the next year. The 'five star' accommodation was on the second floor of an austere, brick building. The block, one of three, had apparently been built by prisoners during the Napoleonic wars. Its dormitory consisting of a huge, high ceilinged room with bunk beds on either side of a highly polished wooden floor.

With their kit neatly folded away in a steel locker, it was off to the ship's barber for a short back and sides, the emphasis being on short. Stephen had already had a haircut before leaving Bristol and felt indignant at being subjected to the special attentions of "the Waltzer," nicknamed due to the way he spun himself from one side of the chair to the other, deftly twirling over the cable as he went. The Waltzer took great pleasure in seeing the shock on the tender faces of new arrivals, having been sheared to an inch of their lives. Any special requests would result in being given a 'coconut head.'

The next port of call was a classroom where they were given a demonstration in the gentle art of chain stitch. All clothing came stamped with their name and had to be embroidered over with red embroidery thread. A task that would take many days.

On the first morning, Stephen's dormitory woke to the clattering sound of a steel bin being kicked down the stairs by petty officer Jackson, a peppery old bastard who ruled with a lot of knuckle and a little kindness.

He thought it an amusing way of prising everyone from their sheets. Other early morning favourites included a tour of the dormitory with a broom stick, whacking each iron bedframe in turn, shouting something mindless like,

“Rise and shine, morning’s fine, don’t forget your raincoats.”

Jackson, who was referred to as the ‘screaming skull,’ had a keen interest in fast dressing. Any trainee arriving late for parade ground exercise at 6am would be treated to the nines, (the punishment involved jogging nine laps of the parade ground, shouldering a heavy Lee Enfield rifle.) This knacker activity left trainees with a nice bruise on their shoulder as a reminder of where the rifle had bounced up and down.

Petty officer Jackson stood as straight as a ramrod and appeared to lean backwards as if in danger of falling over. His craggy face and grey beard gave him a severe look, always seeming angry about something. He’d served in WW2 as a warrant Gunner and was probably only dishing out what he’d received himself on enlisting. He was never happy. If a trainee walked he’d tell them to run. If they were running, he’d tell them to walk. He was one of those people who was always trying to get away from any given situation. He didn’t like to be alone. Even more, he didn’t like being with people.

The navy had a devious plan to reduce the effects of homesickness. Keeping everyone busy and tiring them out. Stephen always seemed to be on the move. From general education classes and seamanship, parade ground drill, all manner of sports including rowing, sailing and athletics, as well as climbing the dreaded mast to conquer fear of heights. However, for some this manic activity wasn’t enough. Some boys ran away, only to be picked up by the military police and slung in the glasshouse, (military prison.) The term dates back to 1844 when the first military prison had a glazed roof.

There were stories of others who went further. One poor sod had become severely homesick and been on the trots for three weeks. No longer able to stand it, he’d removed his pinkie with a small knife. This earned him his discharge papers.

Stephen had strong misgivings over what he’d got himself into but wasn’t about to do anything drastic. He was biding his time.