

Bourne toWrite...

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Early Days

by Richard Lewis

Life at St Vincent was hard but it wasn't all bad. Stephen made good friends and there was a strong sense of comradeship. They were of course all in the same boat, even if it hadn't yet set sail. He and his bunk mate Nobby Styles, a jovial character with piercing blue eyes, hit it off straight away. They both shared a love of music and Nobby was envied for his portable Phillips record player and collection of 45's. The Yardbirds, Roy Orbison, Jerry and the Pacemakers, Stephen loved them all. His own contribution to sweetening the airwaves in that warehouse of a dormitory being a Sony transistor radio, able to pick up Radio Caroline, the pirate station broadcasting off the Essex coast.

Drill practice was an integral part of life and was designed to instil discipline and subordination into trainees. This took place in a courtyard at the back of the block, away from the captain's critical eye. A place where petty officer Jackson came into his own, exercising his lungs and bullying anyone unlucky enough to attract his attentions. Wally Pearson stood out like a sore thumb. At six foot five, his uncoordinated frame invited trouble. It was hard to imagine Wally ever passing muster. His arms refused to cooperate, swinging the opposite way to everyone else as he struggled to keep in step.

Almost immediately Jackson smelt blood, closing in like a wolf to the kill. He seemed to think Wally was deliberately getting it wrong and took it as a personal insult. Barking menacingly, as a punishment he made Wally stand holding his rifle held above his head, as if this might solve the problem. It was a hot day and after half an hour Wally passed out, falling flat on his face, breaking two front teeth. It was going to be a long year for all of us but this was particularly true for Wally.

Three months later, after Jackson had kicked some semblance of order into us, marching back and forth like clockwork soldiers, we entered the main stage for Sunday's parade. We spent what seemed like an age wrestling with steam irons, spit and polishing boots and adjusting our uniforms until finally emerging like a raft of penguins, all turned out in our feather best kit.

Dressed and pressed, our steel capped heels crunched over the tarmac, keeping time as crisp as a metronome. Eft, eft, eft right eft, eft, eft, eft right eft.

The military band however was the star of the show, with its rasping crash of symbols, and hollow rumble of drums, supporting the high brassy notes of trumpets and trombones, striking up to 'Heart of Oak' and 'Sons of the Brave.'

So this is how we presented our poor selves for inspection to the captain, all swallowed up by pomp and circumstance,

On the subject of music or rather noise, we were treated to the penetrating tones of reveille which reverberated in our ears at five in the morning. This racket shattered our dreams even before Jackson had entered the stage with his own rude performance. After a month of this annoying interruption to our beauty sleep, Ackers, a grouchy northerner decided he'd force the bugler to put a sock in it. We all huddled round to witness the spectacle as Ackers picked up a boot and with an almighty swing, hurled it out of the upstairs window at the unsuspecting bugler. It was a fine shot, catching him nicely on the back of his head, knocking off his cap and causing the instrument to fall from his hands and clatter across the parade ground.

Fortunately the bugler wasn't physically hurt, though it must have put quite a dent in his ego. When reported to Jackson there was hell to pay. The 'screaming skull' was beside himself with rage. His grey stony face flushed as he jumped up and down like a demented ape. Stephen almost burst out laughing but managed to keep a lid on it. When no one owned up to the prank we were all threatened with punishment but eventually Ackers stepped forward to receive the dressing down. He was awarded fourteen days 'nines' and having taken much credit, probably felt it had been worth it. The early morning clarion call never seemed quite so assured after this.

Nights were the worst time for Stephen though, just before drifting off, when it would hit him, 'you're in the navy now,' and he'd feel its long shadow resting firmly on his soul, holding him captive. The navy fed and clothed him and like a mother the navy owned him.