

Jack Speak

by Richard Lewis

The navy, having a language all of its own is awash with sayings, many of which are in common use, such as: Pull your finger out, let the cat out of the bag, toe the line and many others. One thing Stephen did enjoy about St Vincent was collecting nautical terms and sayings, often picked up during seamanship classes. He had a little black note book and once back at the mess would carefully enter the newly acquired sayings and interpretations with a short stubby pencil.

One of his favourites, often heard on a winter’s parade ground at six in the morning was, it’s enough to ‘freeze the balls off a brass monkey.’ In the day of sailing ships a monkey was a brass tray where cannon balls were stored. In cold weather the brass contracted and the cannon balls fell off.

‘Bullshit baffles brains,’ was another one. The navy is paved in bullshit and fed it to new recruits by the bucketful. It was also something Stephen’s father, who was a military man, possessed in spades. He was the type who liked to present things in a rosy manner when reality would suggest otherwise. Anyone pointing out something negative would be redirected to more favourable facts. It was his father’s bullshit that was responsible for Stephen ending up at St Vincent in the first place.

Colourful language also extended to nicknames. A month after his arrival, Jackson informed Roger Harris, an infuriating Jordie who always seemed to be winding someone up, that from now on he’d be known as Bomber, after the notorious WW2 air marshal Sir Arthur Harris, responsible for the bombing of Dresden. Bomber had been a sea cadet before joining and thought he knew it all. The seamanship instructor Petty Officer Rhodes, nicknamed ‘Dusty,’ decided Bomber had come in too full of himself, was sailing too close to the wind and was in need of adjustment.

New recruits were vulnerable to being on the receiving end of practical jokes and Dusty decided to apply one to Bomber. It was a common thing for nozzers (new boys) to be sent off on pointless errands, such as to the stores for a skirting ladder and a tin of tartan paint, or a sky hook and a long wait.

So Bomber, having been told to fetch a long weight, sat down in the corner of the storeroom, having asked for the said item. The storeman then disappeared out back only to return half an hour later saying, “OK you’ve had your wait, off you go.”

Bomber was furious that he’d fallen for it and arrived back at the mess cursing Dusty, he took it out on his locker, putting a dent in the door with his size tens. Stephen tried to calm him down saying, “it was only a bit of fun, no need to get so upset.” But Bomber just snarled back, “it’s OK for you, you’re not the one made to look a complete eejit,” giving the metal locker another crunching kick just for good measure. To add insult to injury, when Jackson spotted the dent in the door he did his usual, ‘going ballistic’ routine and put Bomber on a charge for damaging Her Majesty’s property. Bomber had to be up at 5am for two weeks cleaning the ‘heads’ (toilets), doing extra kit musters and also lost a week’s pay. It was a chastening experience which took the wind out of his sails. Some of us felt sorry for Bomber but others probably thought he had it coming.

There were more brutal, practical jokes that Stephen had heard of. One was called the BT punch; onboard, the unwary sailor who’d unintentionally stirred up the displeasure of his senior would be sent down to the engine room, report to the Boiler Technician and collect a BT punch. It was pretty straight forward, anyone asking for one got punched, usually hard in the chest and sent gasping on their way. Though apparently back in the day, asking for a BT punch could lead to a punch in the face.

Jack Speak and practical jokes could be funny but humour so often had its dark side. The navy was a man’s world and violence, never far away. It lurked beneath the surface like a submarine shadowing its prey. Crowding young testosterone fuelled men into small spaces was always likely to generate aggression. Stephen learnt early on to keep his head down, tried to avoid getting caught out and adhered to the golden rule. Never volunteer for anything.

Putting a man in uniform and giving him power over others could so easily lead to a loss of humanity in a way rarely seen in civvy street, where at least the unfortunate individual had the option of leaving the job. Lower ranks were easy targets waiting to be picked off and bully boy tactics invariably went unchecked.