

Don't Ask Me and I Won't Tell You

by Lesley Dawson

Why do we never ask our parents and grandparents about their lives before they took on these family roles? When we are younger, we take them at face value and assume they have always been like they are now. Especially if asking questions provokes their irritation or even anger.

When I was a child my mother and father both worked full time so the constant person at home was my maternal grandmother. She obviously had to leave me at home alone for short periods if I was sick or on school holidays. It was during these times that I explored hidden places in our house. Places I didn't usually have access to. One such place was an old wardrobe that nobody ever seemed to use.

I began to unpack the contents of this wardrobe and discovered much of my father's life and history that I had probably known about but not concerned myself with before. I knew that he had been in the Royal Navy during the Second World War and that he hadn't met me until ten months after I was born.

Looking through folded and yellowed papers, I discovered that my dad had been at the British occupation of Narvik, a port in northern Norway early in the war. Sadly, they had to withdraw because of superior forces, but were able to evacuate King Haakon, his family and government ministers to the UK. My mother had kept an old copy of the Yorkshire Post with a faded photo of a young sailor who looked remarkably like my dad. I didn't realise the importance of Narvik to Norwegians until on a visit to Bergen twenty plus years later. On mentioning my father's involvement in the Navy and links with Narvik, my host's eyes lit up, and I didn't pay for many drinks after that.

I also discovered receipts and medals that showed he had been part of the North Sea Convoys, protecting merchant ships carrying food and supplies to Murmansk from German U boats. I could just remember my dad bringing home unusual presents for me, that must have come from Russia, particularly a beautiful dolls house that was the envy of my friends, but not much more detail.

You might ask why I had not asked my dad about all the things I had discovered at the time. I kept quiet about my explorations, partly because I felt guilty about rummaging in places where I felt I had no right to be, but also because my father was not very patient and could be quite angry about topics he didn't want to discuss.

As I grew up and eventually left home, all this filtered to the back of my mind and almost forgot about the fun I had had trying on my dad's navy uniform and reading his naval strategy books.

Like many men who returned home after war service, he wanted to forget what he had seen and done and get on with normal life back in the UK. My father never went to any reunion of shipmates and only kept in touch with Uncle Bill. We would sometimes visit him and his wife in London.

Fast forward thirty years. I am working at Bethlehem University, and my father has come to visit me. We are having dinner with the De LaSalle Brothers who run the university and dad is well into his cups with a British Brother called Tom. They are having a wonderful time talking about the Second World War, as Tom was evacuated from London and his father had also been in the Royal Navy.

That night I found out so much about my father that helped me make more sense of the man he was. It explained why he had put such constraints on my time and activities. He was a man who had seen too much danger himself and wanted to protect his daughter from making the same mistakes. Also, I understood better why he could forgive me for turning over many new leaves and then spoiling each of them.

Tom grinned at me.

"Your father had such an interesting war. He and my father would have got on famously."

I had to admit that most of the stories he had told Tom, I had never heard before. Walking, arm in arm, down the hill from university to my flat I ventured to ask.

"Why have I never heard any of this before, Dad?"

His answer was very much to the point.

"Because you never asked."